Wednesday, March 25

The New York Times

5 Are Killed at School; Boys, 11 and 13, Are Held

IN UGANDA, CLINTON EXPRESSES REGRET ON SLAVERY IN U.S.

MANY GREEN CARDS DELAYED BY 'BUGS' IN A NEW MACHINE

Snipers Ambush Pupils in Arkansas Town — 11 Wounded

Patients' Lives on the Line In Battle Over Transplants

New Proposal By Netanyahu For West Bank

A More Flirtation For Great Champion

C.O.P. Donor Won New York Contract As His Gifts Soared

A Carrot-and-Stick Plan for Indonesia Aid

were just four suicides and no homicides at more than 1,200 public schools sampled in a survey conducted by The National Center for Education Statistics. One of the authors of the report, Edith McArthur, was quoted as saying, "The numbers seem to be pretty flat. ... As a statistician, I'd have to say that there's no data showing an increase [in school violence]."

Coverage in the regional newspapers was much heavier. Both the Memphis and Little Rock newspapers ran secondary stories about the shootings on Page One and on two inside pages. The *Democrat-Gazette* also chose that day to run a sobering 2,000-word feature article, "Bang! Bang! Parents, watchdog groups debate effect of guns, other violent toys on children," which had been distributed by The New York Times News Service several weeks earlier.

Both regional newspapers joined *USA TODAY* in publishing articles that made slapdash attempts to link the shootings to broader social issues, such as movie and TV violence.

The Commercial Appeal, for example, offered a piece called "Why Do Children Kill? Think Gangs, Family Decline, Violent TV, Movies." Buried in the article was a quote from a University of Tennessee psychiatry professor that should have been taken to heart before the article was printed. Resisting the impulse to offer a hypothetical answer to the question of motive, the professor said simply that it was too early to speculate on whether the shooting was a copycat crime.

Meanwhile, the *Democrat-Gazette* weighed in with a piece headlined, "Experts speculate on motives; Movie violence, availability of guns among factors questioned." It was in this article, appearing in a Southern newspaper, that the question of the influence of a "Southern gun culture" was raised. Later, the news media would come under fire from some who suggested that they had recklessly advanced that hypothesis.

All four newspapers made reference to three earlier school shootings in the previous six months — in West Paducah, Ky.; Pearl, Miss.; and Stamps, Ark. But the careful reader of each newspaper would have come away with four distinctly different impressions of whether these incidents were indicative of a growing trend in school violence.

The New York Times, as noted, went to some pains to counter the notion that school violence was on the increase. In addition to its separate article on the Department of Education study that noted no "big rise" in school crime, the *Times* said in the body of its main article on the shootings that "statistically, violence is decreasing in public schools in the United States, according to The National School Safety Center."

The Commercial Appeal, though, left its readers feeling slightly more alarmed. At the end of its article on President Clinton's reaction to the "horrifying" news, it reported that "just last Thursday, Clinton presided over the release of an Education Department survey that found 20 percent of America's middle and high schools had reported at least one serious violent crime during the last school year."

Citing yet another statistic from the same study, *USA TODAY* made the situation seem even more dire. The final paragraph of its cover story on the shooting read, "The shooting comes a week after a survey on school violence reported that 57% of 1,200 schools reported crimes."

To its credit, the *Democrat-Gazette* merely recounted the main facts of the three previous shootings and did not attempt to characterize those incidents as part of a growing trend of school violence.

Although each of the statistics from the Department of Education study cited by the *Times*, *The Commercial Appeal* and *USA TODAY* seemed to paint a different picture of the prevalence of school crime, each technically was correct. The problem was that each statistic was measuring a different aspect of school crime.

The seemingly most alarming number — 57% of schools reporting crimes — referred to all crimes reported, both violent and non-violent, at all public schools, including elementary schools. Isolating violent crimes only, that figure drops to about 10% of all public schools (including elementary schools) reporting at least one "serious violent crime." Among middle schools and high schools, that number was about 20%, the figure reported by *The Commercial Appeal*.

While the *Times* refrained from speculation about trends and social factors that may have influenced the shooters, it hesitated for only a few sentences before revealing the names of the juvenile suspects. In the eighth paragraph of its main article on the incident, the *Times* reported that "officials would not release the names of the boys because they were juveniles." But in the next paragraph, still in the middle of the front page, it said, "But students at the school identified them as 13-year-old Andrew Golden and 11-year-old Mitchell Johnson, both students at Westside."

The *Times* was the only one of the newspapers to name the two boys on that first day of coverage; others followed suit the next day. The careful reader will notice, however, that the boys' ages mistakenly were transposed in the *Times*' account.

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All four newspapers largely were in agreement as to the relevant subjects for coverage on the second day after the shooting. Each essentially retold the story of the ambush with greater attention to details that had emerged in the first 24 hours. Each provided profiles of the young suspects and their families. Each eulogized Shannon Wright, the teacher who died protecting a student.

An image that would come to be seen by many as emblematic of the tragedy was published in three of the four newspapers – an outtake from a home video taken of Andrew Golden at age 6, brandishing a pistol. (It also appeared in the