

Many in media quickly cite 'gun culture' to explain the 'why' of the tragedy

Journalists arriving in Jonesboro seemed bent on seeking quick, tidy explanations for the shootings. Many reporters settled on "Southern gun culture," linking the incident to similar crimes in West Paducah, Ky., and Pearl, Miss.

The weekly newsmagazines played the gun culture theory extensively. On their covers, *Time* and *Newsweek* each ran a different photo of one of the suspects holding a firearm. *U.S. News & World Report's* Jonesboro subhead asked, "Is there ... a virulent culture of violence in the rural South?"

■ *U.S. News & World Report*, in its April 6 issue, reported that Andrew Golden "was learning about guns practically before he learned to walk." The magazine said that as the shootings began, the boys "were picking off children as if they were passing deer on the first day of hunting season." The article cited a "Southern subculture of violence" that leads to higher rates of gun ownership.

In the final three paragraphs of the article, other possible motivations were mentioned, including misogyny and the glamorization of violence in movies, television and video games. The article also noted that one wrinkle in the "gun culture" theory was that one of the suspects grew up in Minnesota. But other possible causes were not explored.

■ *Newsweek*, in its April 6 issue, said that the "senselessness" of the killings "created a vacuum that both experts and people on the street were happy to fill with theories. ... A widely disseminated photo of a 6-year-old Andrew Golden squinting down the barrel of a very businesslike-looking pistol gave rise to much derisive speculation about the rural Southern culture of guns and hunting. ... Arkansans, predictably, rejected the idea that the familiar pastime of shooting could have contributed to the tragedy."

■ *Time* magazine seemed to chide Arkansans for their naiveté about guns in its April 6 issue. "Jonesboro is hunting country, so people there bridle at any suggestion that the simple availability of guns, especially long guns, had anything to do with the killings." The story said that "most of recent school shootings" have been in rural areas where people hunt. According to The National School Safety Center

at Pepperdine University, Malibu, Calif., multiple school killings in 1997-98 occurred in Pearl, Miss.; Norwalk, Calif.; West Paducah, Ky.; Hoboken, N.J.; Jonesboro; Pomona, Calif.; and most recently, Springfield, Ore.

Major newspapers and The Associated Press gave less emphasis to the gun culture angle. AP mainly stuck to the straight recitation of the unfolding facts, rarely delving into possible reasons for the shootings. *The Washington Post* noted on March 28 that Jonesboro residents were angry that people seemed to think they were "crazy about guns." A *New York Times* editorial a day earlier pointed out that the gun culture speculation was permeating discussion of the shootings but said, "the societal sickness the shootings exemplify — children with easy access to guns and ammunition — is not confined to any one region of the country."

National television news accounts, and accompanying commentary from journalists and other experts, also focused on the region's acceptance and use of guns.

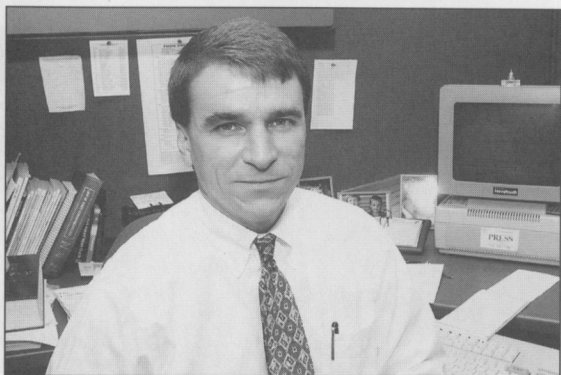
■ CNN correspondent Martin Savidge, on the day of three of the victims' funerals (March 28), speculated about the thoughts of mourners: "It's also being questioned this morning as to whether ... a culture that teaches young people how to handle guns and puts those guns in their hands at a very early age may have had something to do with this." In his recorded voice-over, Savidge continued: "Some might find it strange that a community so recently ripped apart by gunfire embraces a culture in which rifles play such an integral role. ... [But] this week's school massacre hasn't changed minds here that there's anything wrong with that."

■ "NBC Nightly News" reporter Bob Dotson said on March 25 that the nearby area of Bono has "world-class hunting" and kids as young as 6 have rifles. "Neighbors say the younger boy (Andrew Golden) is a crack shot. He perfected his skills in this gravel-pit shooting range last summer, then bragged about his large collection of guns."

■ ABC News' Michele Norris said on the day of the shootings that while violence in schools has "leveled off," "what worries educators are incidents like today's shooting — the growing number of multiple homicides in rural and suburban areas where schools are less likely to use security measures."

■ NBC "Today" show host Katie Couric questioned a sociology professor from Auburn University, Greg Kowalski, about the shootings: "Are you a proponent of the theory that somehow the fact that these school shootings have taken place in the South is indicative of a Southern culture that might, I don't know, be more permissive of this kind of activity or somehow encouraged by the acceptance of guns and hunting?"

Kowalski responded, "There is certainly a rite of pas-



Stan Mitchell, a reporter for *The Jonesboro Sun*. "I don't care for them referring to us as all 'gun toting.'"