

# Columbine, Beslan and Beyond: Preparing for the No Win Scenario

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## *Abstract*

*The public expects law enforcement to intervene in acts of violence as part of our duties. Increasing numbers of attacks on schools gave rise to the need for immediate response by better-equipped and tactically trained officers. Prior to the Columbine Massacre, officers were trained to secure a perimeter and wait for the SWAT Team. Increased casualties were attributed to the lack of rapid intervention at Columbine H.S. in 1999. The incident Beslan School massacre in Russia in 2004 further increased the need for a change in tactics and mental preparation. Information was obtained through interviews, surveys, seminars and readings to address the current tactics, mindset, and the possible future threats. This information offers suggestions and a course of action for preparation for the “no win” scenario.*

## Introduction

Law enforcement response to acts of violence has dramatically changed since the attack at Columbine H.S. An adaptation of immediate response policies, active shooter programs replaced the old way thinking of hold a perimeter and wait for SWAT. The public not only expects intervention but demands action on behalf of Law Enforcement.

Somehow over the years we have fallen asleep in to this mindset. Columbine changed the way we think and the way we respond. The massacre at the Beslan School in Russia further changed the way we think and respond, as the violence was far greater and more devastating than Columbine. The face of the enemy has changed with the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. It is only a matter of time before we could face a similar attack on our soil.

The growing threat of suicide bombers, the actions taking place in Iran, the Hezbollah government in Palestine all lead towards future acts of violence against the west. Are we ready to face a new, determined and deadly adversary on American soil? What preparations are we making? What mind set do we have? To what extremes will we go to save lives to minimize casualties? We will no longer be able to save everyone but will be forced to react swiftly and decisively to MINIMIZE human loss only to be judged by those we serve and protect. Are law enforcement officers themselves prepared to face this new challenge?

## Methodology

This study was prompted by a debrief I attended at the NTOA (National Tactical Officers Association) in Las Vegas, NV in September of 2005. The debrief was conducted by John Giduck, author of *Terror at Beslan*. The information shared on the Beslan School massacre, casualties, tactics used and problems faced by operators encouraged me to look into our current practices and philosophies in response to active shooters. Granted we have not been faced with the magnitude of the attack on the Beslan School but continued violence and attacks on schools is escalating and can we afford not to prepare? As a member of the tactical community, I wanted to know how prepared are we to face the possibility of a seemingly no win scenario in an extreme act of violence such as the Beslan School massacre. I formulated a written survey containing the following questions to be answered by my associates in law enforcement. The questions were generic but offered opportunity for expression of personal beliefs in response to this extreme scenario. The questions were as follows;

1. Does your agency currently have an active shooter policy, program or training?
2. How often are you required to participate in this type of training?
3. Do you believe that public perception helped shape the direction of law enforcement response tactics?
4. Do you believe we could be faced with a "minimize the casualties" scenario?
5. Should law enforcement be immune from prosecution in these types of scenarios?
6. Do you think that a Beslan School type of incident could happen here?
7. How can we best prepare for this type of crisis?
8. Are you prepared to take a life to save a life in the line of duty?
9. What if this life were a child?
10. Would you risk the life of an innocent victim to save 30?
11. Do you carry a weapon off duty?
12. If not, why not?

Rather than mail the surveys to individual agencies, I handed them out at a Florida SWAT Association Conference in Orlando, FL in June of 2006. The Florida SWAT Association is an international association of law enforcement SWAT operators with members in several countries. I also posted the surveys on the website of Snipers-on-line (a nationwide forum for active police and military snipers), and distributed them to my fellow classmates of SLP Class 11.

I also had the opportunity to interview John Giduck (author *Terror at Beslan*) in Las Vegas in 2005 and Lt. Col. Dave Grossman in Orlando, FL in 2006 regarding current response tactics. Their lectures and input were invaluable. One of the strengths of proceeding in this manner was the return of surveys and the broad base of recipients. Another asset was being able to speak with the





agency responsibility to respond to such events. This does not alleviate the agency from public expectations and intervention in crisis situations.

*Question 2.* How often are you required to participate in this type of training?

Of the 39 responses with programs in place, the training was varied from adequate to non-existent. For any program to be successful and operationally efficient, the training should be realistic and frequent. One response advised that once the member attended the initial training, it was no longer a requirement. Another response advised that although there was a policy in place, there was no training available.

This type of posture is an invitation for failure and liability. It emphasizes that although an agency may have the forethought to address an issue it may be failing to adequately prepare by training its' members to respond, thus incurring unnecessary liability. Budget concerns and the availability of experienced instructors may be a factor in the lack of training.

Those agencies with bi-monthly, quarterly, annual, or bi-annual training are far better off in preparation provided the training is realistic in scope and current on tactics.

*Question 3.* Do you believe that public perception helped shape the direction of law enforcement response tactics?

47 of the response felt that the public perceptions did in fact help shape or direct law enforcement response tactics. 3 responses did not agree.

Historically, some of the highly publicized critical incidents have stirred and often led to the development of new equipment and improved tactics, training and legislation. The Texas tower incident in Austin, Texas on August 1, 1966 demonstrated the lack of adequate equipment as did the North Hollywood Bank shootout in Los Angeles, CA on February 28, 1997. Tactics that were utilized at the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, CO on April 20, 1999 were criticized by the parents of several of the victims and the lack of immediate response was speculated as being the reason for the number of casualties. Brian Rohrbough, father of victim Danny Rohrbough accused law enforcement on scene of being cowards. He believes that most officers wanted to go in (referring to the school)" but became cowards" (Pratt, 2003). There was an initial confrontation between the perpetrators Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold and police outside of the school. The killers retreated back into the school and the officers on scene failed to pursue which left the two to kill at will. Their actions soon became the orders and ultimately from the Sheriff himself. There was approximately seven minutes before the killers killed anyone inside the school even though two had been killed outside, including Rohrbough's son Danny. It is quite apparent that if the officers had gone into the building immediately, there is a great likelihood that many lives could have been saved because the hunters would have become the hunted. It should be noted that the officers at Columbine acted as they were trained. Somewhere over the course of the years and the development of SWAT teams, law enforcement and the mission was convoluted into holding a perimeter and waiting for SWAT in extreme crisis scenarios.

Officers not trained in entry tactics and close quarter battle would contain the incident until the arrival of the more skilled and trained SWAT officers. The Columbine incident demonstrated by the sheer violence of the incident that these practices were now obsolete in the face of this new and more violent threat.

Post Columbine has seen the development of Active Shooter response tactics developed and implemented in agencies nationwide. No longer are we training to sit and wait but to immediately take action to neutralize the threats and save lives. This in itself is a paradigm shift in that part of this training regimen is to move with speed to the threat and effectively neutralize it, often bypassing wounded or injured civilians. The public perception of police is that of a crisis intervention specialist and that danger goes with the job and the public demands action on the part of the police in such cases. Lack of action can be equally damning and just as costly in liability suits. According to the American Bar Association, lawsuits that are pending from wrongful death suits after the Columbine massacre currently exceed \$400 million dollars.

*Question 4.* Do you believe that we could be faced with a “minimize the casualties” scenario?

48 responses believe we can face this type of scenario with 2 responses didn't think it possible.

This question was posed to provide food for thought on does the possibilities exist that we in law enforcement could face a situation where we may not be able to save everyone. Traditionally, we place the expectation on ourselves to “save the day” and by saving all of the innocent persons. Prior to September 11, 2001 we probably all thought that flying jets into buildings was quite unlikely.

*Question 5.* Should law enforcement be immune from prosecution in these types of scenarios?

40 responses were in favor of immunity from prosecution in such cases whereas 7 responses were not. 3 responses stipulated that it depended on the circumstances based on whether the agency trained its members in the proper tactics for the specific response. In such cases, it was in their opinion the agency and officer should be immune from prosecution in a “minimize the casualties” approach.

*Question 6.* Do you think that a Beslan School type incident could happen here?

47 responses believe that a Beslan School type incident could happen here in the United States. 2 responses believe that it was not possible and one response believes it is possible but not of the magnitude that occurred in Russia. There have been approximately 100 school shootings since the Columbine High School tragedy of 1999. One hundred school shootings in seven years is not a series of isolated events. The perpetrators of the Beslan School massacre were Chechnyan rebels with terrorist ties to Al Qaeda. The scale of violence was like nothing previously seen.

Last year U.S. Intelligence agents confirmed at least 20 Chechnyan nationals illegally crossed over into the U.S. through Mexico avoiding detection, for unknown purposes. A large portion is believed to be Islamic extremists.

Computer hard drives have been recovered by the U.S. Military in Iraq with floor plans for schools in Southwest Florida. We must ask ourselves, "Why"? For what purpose would they want floor plans to schools in Florida? We must prepare now and learn from the mistakes made in the past. Our world has changed forever and we cannot afford to maintain an ostrich mentality or live in denial. In the book *Innocent Targets* by Michael and Chris Dorn, Lt. Col. Dave Grossman (ret.) writes in the forward, "When someone says do you really think there will be a terrorist act or a school shooting here? I just point to the fire exit and say, "Do you really think there will be a fire here?" he further states that it would be statistically unlikely there will be a fire but it would be "morally, criminally negligent if we did not prepare for the possibility. And the same is far, far more true of school violence." (Grossman, 2005, Forward xix).

*Question 7.* How can we best prepare for this type of crisis?

The responses to this question addressed obvious concerns and individual suggestions were combined to address similarities. The suggestions were; proactive intelligence, aggressive community policing, realistic multi-agency drills, active shooter training, media exploitation, high profile weapon deployment on high risk cases, more knowledge of explosives and IED's, learn from the past, proper equipment, adopt military style options, face the fact of LEO no win scenarios, amendments to immunize police from liability, planning, build off of what is foreseeable, stop living in denial, educate the public, stay away from it can't happen here mentality.

Most of these suggestions are addressed and so stated in *Terror at Beslan* by John Giduck. Giduck further elaborates on tactics and mental preparation that should be developed by U.S. law enforcement. Giduck recommends development of a response policy and be prepared to deal with the consequences as the American public may not be ready for the suggested violent resolution.

Development of necessary training will be affected by budget concerns, inter agency cooperation and an overall acceptance that the training is essential.

*Question 8.* Are you prepared to take a life to save a life in the line of duty?

All 50 responses were yes as anyone in law enforcement should have decided this at the onset of their career. Anyone not prepared to face this situation should seek another vocation.

*Question 9.* What if this life were a child?

47 of the responses were yes they could take the life of child in the line of duty. 2 responses were no and 1 response was undecided. The question may have been vague in that it did not provide enough circumstances surrounding a confrontation involving a child perpetrator, the age of said perpetrator or any number of mitigating factors. As numerous school shootings were in fact

committed by juveniles, law enforcement officers need to come to terms that a deadly encounter with a child is highly possible and that the child will kill you just as dead as an adult.

*Question 10.* Would you risk the life of an innocent victim to save 30 (lives)?

49 responses were yes and 1 response was no. Again, the question may have been vague as it does not specify the circumstances of the encounter. It presents a tactical decision that must be made in an extreme scenario that operators faced in the Beslan School massacre. Operators on the Russian Special Forces teams of Alpha and Vypel were placed in the most violent of events. 11 members lost their lives in the siege at Beslan. Some used their bodies to shield children in open air engagements with the terrorists; one lost his life diving on a grenade to save three children. At the 2005 NTOA Conference in Las Vegas, NV author John Giduck spoke of one operator who was facing a terrorist using a child as a shield and blocking a doorway. The operator could see another terrorist behind the one in the doorway preparing an explosive charge to kill a room full of children. The shot was taken through the child and terrorist to clear the doorway to engage and stop the explosives from being detonated. This tactic is incomprehensible by our standards but is a grim realization of what could happen if we fail to prepare. Must we now apply questions of bio-ethics to our response tactics? To this extreme it must be considered.

*Question 11.* Do you carry a weapon off duty?

47 responses were yes and 2 responses were no. 1 response was yes and no. I found these answers to be somewhat shaded and not quite truthful based solely on observations. At the 2005 NTOA Conference, the 2006 Florida SWAT Association Conference and recently the 2006 NTOA Conference in Las Vegas, NV I noticed that about one third of the officers present were not armed and they were on duty! These are SWAT operators who are unarmed.

*Question 12.* If not, why not?

Of the 2 truthful responses received, the reasons were quite frank; simply laziness and just don't. Both were honest reasons. Whether we want to believe it or not, we are gunfighters and we are sworn to protect and to serve. We are just as likely to encounter a deadly force situation off duty as we are on duty.

## Conclusion

I have attended several lectures given by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman (author *On Killing, Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*) and Director of Killology, Inc. He also serves on the Advisory Board for the American Sniper Association on which I also serve. He breaks society into three categories; wolves, sheep and sheepdogs. The wolves, being predators (criminals), the sheep (being the unaware public masses) and law enforcement (as the protective sheepdogs). We as the sheepdogs are charged with the protection of the sheep and the

preservation of peace. Our failure to prepare to fulfill this role puts us in the category with the sheep. The majority of my fellow classmates are not armed in class or afterwards.

It was my intent in this study to bring about an awareness and motivation to prepare for what is to come or the possibility thereof and to bring a realization to my peers that we are still vulnerable. While the attacks at Columbine and the Beslan School have past, violence against our schools continues. If we fail to acknowledge the existence of violence we will become its victim. If we fail to train, educate and prepare our agencies and members we are setting ourselves up for failure that may equate to a greater loss of life should the unthinkable occur.

John Giduck's closing in *Terror at Beslan* left with me a profound sense of urgency. He writes "So, to an America tucked comfortably into beds at night; sleep well. Close your eyes and go quietly into each gentle night, refusing to acknowledge the danger that lurks outside your doors. But before you do, get down on your knees and pray for protection by those men and women who have already heeded the call, who stand ready to do violence against those who would do you harm. For the day is coming when they, even with their tremendous courage, will no longer be enough. Then the battle will fall onto the shoulders of each and every one of us." (Giduck, 2005 p.425).

Preparation is not paranoia. We cannot afford to become complacent.

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