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CASE STUDY 9

Introduction

As Dr. Garnett's essay stresses, for public administrators today, internal and external communications are central to influencing their work, both in terms of helping to set the agenda for what they do and then decisively shaping public opinion about how well or poorly they perform their roles. External media such as radio, TV and newspaper coverage, its volume and content, as well as various "internal players," help to create the issues public agencies address, how they perform or fail to perform their tasks, and then largely determine public perceptions of what they accomplish. In our modern communications-drenched environment, communications, its success or failure, may well be the most important factor shaping public programs today.

Possibly the most glaring recent instance of communications breakdown at the local level occurred during the tragic shootings at Columbine High School, Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. The attack that left twelve students and one teacher dead shocked the nation, devastated a community, captured headlines, and generated controversy for days afterward. For many, the inconceivable happened: Two heavily armed teenagers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, from quiet, upper–middle class suburbia, deliberately prepared and executed the mass killings. Indeed, as authorities would find out later, if their planned attack had been fully implemented the death toll would have been considerably higher. The shooters had scattered seventy-six bombs through the school, two in nearby fields, and thirteen in two cars inside the parking lot, for a total of ninety-nine bombs. If the two twenty-pound propane tank bombs they set to detonate at 11:17 a.m. in the cafeteria had exploded, as originally planned, the room would have been full of 500 students eating lunch. As one sheriff's deputy observed afterward, "Bad bomb makers made for a lot of live kids. . . ."

Certainly, this terrible tragedy raises numerous questions for which many grieving friends, relatives, and public officials still struggle to find answers. However, from an administrative perspective, at the heart of law enforcement's combined response to this new sort of homegrown terrorism lay a crucial problem of poor communication. From the first Jefferson County sheriff dispatcher's call "female down" at Columbine at 11:23 a.m., a series of administrative communications flaws unfold. The following story by Susan Rosegrant, written for the Kennedy School of Government Case Program, focuses upon many of the communication breakdowns that took place throughout all phases of the emergency response to the shootings.

As you read this thoughtful, retrospective study, try to look specifically at how ineffective communications influenced the decisions that the responders made.

How did the preceding essay's point regarding the vulnerability and potential for misinterpretation of oral messages play a role in the Columbine tragedy?

What effect did the unavailability of up-to-date floor plans for Columbine High School have on police choices? Why were current maps not readily on hand?

Why did ultimately a thousand law enforcement officers arrive at Columbine from surrounding metro-Denver jurisdictions? What were the effects upon those already there attempting to cope with the emergency? What accounted for such ineffective coordination among various units?

How did the perceptions of each type of emergency responders—for example, SWAT teams, bomb experts, and medical crews—shape their communications, both what they saw and how they related what they saw to others at the scene? Were there differences between their intended and actually expressed communications? If so, can you cite examples?

What caused the delay in setting up a central command post, and how did that add to the confusion of operational communications and decision making among law enforcement personnel?

How did the management style of Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone complicate and confuse communications at Columbine? What assumptions did Stone make about the situation, and what would you recommend that he should have said or done differently during the crisis?

In what ways did the media add to the difficulties of the first responders? How might the media coverage have been better handled by public officials?

What lessons can law enforcement and emergency responder agencies learn from the ineffective communication at Columbine?

Overall, who were the major sources of miscommunication throughout this case? Can you generalize about the overall impacts of flawed information upon the effectiveness of law enforcement during the emergency? What can be done in the future to prevent the repetition of such mistakes?

The Shootings at Columbine High School: The Law Enforcement Response

SUSAN ROSEGRANT

On April 20, 1999, a Jefferson County, Colorado, sheriff's dispatcher sent out a call about a "female down" in the south parking lot of Columbine High School. The radio message at 11:23 a.m. that Tuesday morning was the first official word alerting area law enforcement to the fact that something had gone very wrong at the large suburban school about eight miles southwest of Denver. By 11:32, a deputy on the scene had called for mutual aid, and within a half hour, hundreds of emergency responders were arriving to help stop a bloody siege at the school by an unknown number of gunmen—gunmen who were said to be armed with automatic weapons, bombs, and grenades.

The chaotic scene that law enforcement and emergency medical personnel faced, however, seemed designed to frustrate their best efforts. Witnesses were providing conflicting reports about the number of armed attackers, their location in the building, and their ages. The commanders who had rushed to the scene didn't have and couldn't find an up-to-date map of the school's sprawling maze of rooms and corridors. By the time the first Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team entered the school shortly after noon, the gunmen had grown quiet—removing the clear objective of an active target. As SWAT members moved cautiously through the school, the piercing sirens of fire alarms triggered by bombs made it almost impossible to communicate. Not only that, coordinating the growing crowd of responders outside had become increasingly difficult, particularly since the radios used by different agencies often weren't compatible.

Over the next few hours, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies first secured the perimeter of the building so that the shooters could not escape, then struggled to evacuate students, teachers, and staff—particularly those who had been wounded—and to apprehend the killers. Not until almost 4:00 p.m. would SWAT members discover that two student gunmen, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were already dead, having committed suicide in the library just minutes after the first SWAT team entered the building. Horrified SWAT members also discovered the ten students that Harris and Klebold had executed in the library about a half hour before killing themselves. In all, the two had killed or fatally, wounded 12 students and one teacher and injured 24 others in the span of 16 terrifying minutes.[1]

Before the week was out, the deadliest school shooting in US history would spark impassioned debates across the nation about such issues as school safety, gun control, the impact of violent video games, and the pressures of suburban life. Within the emergency response community, the attack also spurred a crucial question: Could law enforcement and emergency medical personnel in the Columbine area have done anything better in responding to the terrorist act or in reducing its grave toll?

The Jefferson County Sheriff's Office

Jefferson County—locally known as JeffCo—was Colorado's most populous county in 1999, with 512,000 residents. Twelve police departments operated within the county's towns and cities, but the JeffCo Sheriff's Office provided law enforcement for the 173,000 residents in unincorporated areas of the county, including Columbine High School, where a JeffCo deputy was on duty every day as the school community resource officer.[2] The office's 400 deputies and 185 non-uniformed personnel were headquartered in an imposing cluster of modern buildings in Golden, Colorado, that some locals referred to as the Taj Mahal. JeffCo had its own bomb squad and a part-time SWAT team, whose 12 members worked as regular members of the force unless called in for a tactical emergency.[3]

In April 1999, the JeffCo Sheriff's Office was in a period of transition. John P. Stone, who had served as a county commissioner for 12 years, had been elected to a four-year term as sheriff the previous November, and

Exhibit A: Cast of Characters

Jefferson County Sheriff's Office
John P. Stone—Sheriff
John Dunaway—Undersheriff
Dave Walcher—Lieutenant
Terry Manwaring—Lieutenant and SWAT commander
John Kiekbusch—Lieutenant
Steve Davis—Public information officer
Phil Hy—Sergeant
Barry Williams—Sergeant and SWAT team leader
Allen Simmons—Deputy and SWAT team leader
Neil Gardner—Deputy and school community resource officer
Paul Magor—Deputy
Scott Taborsky—Deputy
Paul Smoker—Deputy

Littleton Fire Department
William Pessemier—Chief
Ray Rahne—Battalion Chief
Chuck Burdick—Division Chief
James Olsen—Paramedic Captain
Wayne Zygowicz—Division Chief for emergency medical services

Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office
Patrick Sullivan—Sheriff
Robert Armstrong—Captain
Mark Campbell—Captain
Bruce Williamson—Lieutenant and SWAT commander
Louis Perea—SWAT team leader
Joe Dempsey—Deputy Inspector and bomb squad team leader
Dan Davis—Deputy and bomb squad member

Littleton Police Department
Bob Brandt—Commander
Bill Black—Sergeant

Arvada Police Department
Ron Sloan—Chief
Daryl Hoffman—Sergeant and member of the Jefferson County Regional SWAT Team
A.J. DeAndrea—Officer and member of the Jefferson County Regional SWAT Team

Denver Police Department
Gerry Whitman—Division Chief
Vincent DiManna—Captain and SWAT commander

Golden Police Department
Russell Cook—Chief

Columbine High School
Frank DeAngelis—Principal
Chris Mikesell—Dean of students
Peter Horvath—Dean of students

had assumed office in January, at the same time bringing on board a new undersheriff, John Dunaway (see Exhibit A for a partial list of individuals involved in the response to or aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings). Although Stone had been out of law enforcement for more than a decade, earlier in their careers both men had been patrolmen for the Lakewood Police Department—the county's largest police department—and Dunaway, who had risen to police captain at Lakewood, had most recently served as director of the JeffCo Public School District's Risk Management Department, responsible, in part, for physical security in the schools.

While Stone was new to the Sheriff's Office, though, he was well acquainted with the county's overall emergency response capabilities. Outside of routine SWAT team training, the Sheriff's Office hadn't invested significant time or resources over the years in pre-incident planning—for example, for hostage situations in major public buildings. But both the Sheriff's Office and the

county had extensive experience in coordinating disaster and emergency responses because of the regular incidence in the region of major brush and forest fires, often in difficult and mountainous terrain. In addition, in 1997, while still a commissioner, Stone had helped organize a trip to Emmitsburg, Maryland, for county representatives and local organization leaders to attend a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster training course.

The four-day session, which FEMA designed specially to address the needs of Jefferson County, Stone says, included training and "tabletop" exercises that had improved the county's implementation of "incident command"—a clearly defined incident management structure designating, among other things, command roles, tasks to be accomplished, and a system to assign responsibility for each task. According to some law enforcement officials, the county's focus had paid off. "JeffCo is one of the most interactive places I've ever worked, in terms of people working together," says Ron Sloan, chief of the Arvada Police Department, "and that's not only the law enforcement agencies, but all the human services agencies."

Nevertheless, like most other law enforcement agencies in the area, the JeffCo Sheriff's Office rarely held inter-jurisdictional exercises with the police or fire departments in the county, other than an occasional natural disaster response exercise. Joint exercises were even rarer with agencies outside of the county. In addition, while the Sheriff's Office often helped out police departments within JeffCo, it had not often had to call on other agencies for mutual aid. Criminal responses and investigations, in particular, Stone says, were almost always handled with the county's own internal resources.

The Initial Attack: The JeffCo Sheriff's Office Responds

On Tuesday morning, April 20, 1999, JeffCo Sheriff's Deputy Neil Gardner, the school community resource officer assigned to Columbine High School, was eating lunch in his car near an area northwest of the school known as the Smokers' Pit. Just minutes earlier, a sheriff's dispatcher had reported a brushfire and explosion in a field about three miles south of Columbine, but that wasn't Gardner's concern. At 11:22, however, Gardner got a call over his school radio from an alarmed custodian, saying he needed Gardner in the school's back parking lot. One minute later, a sheriff's dispatcher, responding to a 911 report of a "paralyzed" girl in the south lower parking lot of the school, radioed Deputy Paul Magor, who had been heading towards the brushfire, and directed him instead toward Columbine, saying, "Female down in the south lot of Columbine High School." Gardner, who was already driving toward the school, heard the message and turned on his lights and siren (for a chronology of events, see Exhibit B).[4]

Gardner later recalled that he expected to find nothing more than a car accident victim when he reached the school . . . . But the reality was far grimmer. Two Columbine seniors, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, had just launched a brutal armed attack on their fellow students. When students and staff first heard shots at 11:19 that morning, many assumed it was part of Senior Prank Day, or that the two, who were toting guns and wearing long black dusters, were filming a video. By the time Gardner arrived five minutes after the shooting began, however, Harris and Klebold had already shot at 11 students on the west and southwest side of the building, killing two and injuring six.[5]

As Garder pulled to a stop at 11:24, he saw students running from the school and smoke rising from the south parking lot's west end, and heard explosions and gunfire. The next several minutes would seem horribly unreal. As the deputy stepped from his car, he heard over the school radio, "Neil, there's a shooter in the school." Almost at the same moment, a gunman, who had been firing into the west entrance of the school along with a second shooter, turned and shot at Gardner from about 60 yards away with a semi-automatic rifle. Gardner, armed only with a 45 semi-automatic handgun, returned fire. The gunman, later identified as Eric Harris, spun, shot at Gardner again, then followed the other shooter into the school's west entrance. The two would never emerge from the school again alive.

Inside Columbine, the chaos worsened. At 11:25, Patti Nielson, a teacher hiding in the library who had been sprayed with glass and metal fragments when Klebold and Harris shot at the west doors, called 911 on a cell phone to report shooting outside the library. More than 50 students also hiding in the room crouched under tables as Nielson cried out for them to stay down. A minute later, William "Dave" Sanders, a teacher who had run upstairs after heroically warning students in the cafeteria to escape, was shot in the hallway outside the library and critically wounded. A second teacher helped Sanders into a science classroom on the south side of the

Exhibit B: Chronology of Events

April 20, 1999

11:19 a.m.	Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold begin shooting at fellow Columbine High School students after bombs planted inside the school fail to explode.
11:21	A Jefferson County Sheriff's deputy heads towards a reported explosion in a field about three miles from Columbine High School.
11:22	A Columbine custodian radios Deputy Neil Gardner, the school community resource officer, for help.
11:23	A JeffCo dispatcher sends an alert about a "female down" at Columbine High School.
11:24	Deputy Gardner exchanges gunfire with Eric Harris outside the school.
11:26	Deputy Gardner calls for reinforcements.
	Deputies exchange shots with Eric Harris, who is just inside the school.
	Teacher Dave Sanders is shot and critically wounded.
11:29	Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold enter the library and during the next seven minutes kill ten students, wound 12 more, and shoot out the windows at students and deputies. Deputy Gardner calls for emergency medical help.
11:32	A JeffCo Sheriff's Office deputy broadcasts a call for mutual aid.
11:52	JeffCo Undersheriff John Dunaway appoints JeffCo Lieutenant Dave Walcher as incident commander.
12:00 p.m.	Local television stations begin full-time live coverage of shootings at Columbine.
12:02	Littleton Fire Department paramedics rescue three student shooting victims from behind the school.
12:06	A first SWAT team led by JeffCo Deputy Allen Simmons enters the east side of Columbine as JeffCo Lieutenant Terry Manwaring leads a second group around the school.
12:08	Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold commit suicide in the library.
12:10	Littleton Fire sets up the first of four medical triage sites.
12:25	Leawood Elementary is established as the primary debriefing site.
12:34	Lieutenant Manwaring's SWAT team rescues one shooting victim outside west end of school.
12:40	Incident command post begins operating out of JeffCo's mobile command bus.
1:09	JeffCo Sergeant Barry Williams leads SWAT team into west side of school.
1:26	SWAT team led by Williams evacuates large group of students from kitchen area.
1:30	JeffCo Public Information Officer Steve Davis holds his first hourly news conference in Clement Park.
1:57	SWAT leader Sergeant Williams hears first accounts alluding to critically injured teacher Dave Sanders.

Exhibit B: (continued)

2:15	Rooftop sniper radios SWAT leader Williams about "1 bleeding to death" sign in window.
2:17	SWAT leader Williams splits his team, putting one half under Deputy A.J. DeAndrea.
2:24	Deputy DeAndrea and his team locate and evacuate some 60 students. Soon after, they evacuate an additional 60 students.
2:42	SWAT leader Williams and his team reach Dave Sanders and 60 students and call for medical help.
3:07–3:17	A Denver paramedic declares Dave Sanders dead.
3:22	Williams's SWAT team enters the library and finds twelve students dead, including Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. SWAT members call paramedics to rescue one injured student.
4:45	SWAT teams complete a second search of the school and bomb technicians begin their search.
10:30	New SWAT teams launch a third sweep of the high school as bomb technicians continue their search.
11:30	Parents of missing children are told to go home for the night after bomb experts suspend search until morning.
April 21	
7:30 a.m.	Investigators return to Columbine and identify the victims.

building overlooking the parking lot, and two students who were Eagle Scouts began giving him first aid.

The JeffCo Sheriff's dispatch had already sent out a message declaring, "Attention south units. Possible shots fired at Columbine High School." At 11:26, Gardner called for reinforcements. Panic-stricken students were running from different sides of the building, and two JeffCo deputies, Scott Taborsky and Paul Smoker, arriving from the northwest discovered a student who had been shot in the first phase of the attack lying behind an athletic shed on the west side of the school. Another badly wounded student lay nearby. As the two deputies went to help the second student, Gardner, who was just down the hill from them, spotted a gunman inside the west doors and shouted, "There he is!" The gunman, Harris again, shot through the opening of a broken window at Gardner as first Gardner, and then Deputy Smoker, returned fire. As the gunman retreated, and Gardner radioed in a "Code 33" for emergency assistance, the deputies heard more gunfire from within the school.

Over the next few minutes, the already desperate scene degenerated. Teacher Patti Nielson, who was under a counter just inside the library, reported over her cell phone that there was smoke drifting in and shots right outside the door. Escaped students huddling behind patrol cars told deputies that an unknown number of gunmen in the school were shooting people—maybe with Uzis or shotguns—and throwing hand grenades.[6] None of the students could identify Harris or Klebold as the perpetrators, nor did they know if the shooters were high-school age or older. Gardner, who could see four victims lying injured, including the girl originally reported as "down" in the parking lot, radioed for emergency medical assistance. Sheriff's dispatch, meanwhile, was sending almost constant messages: there were possible hand grenades in the school; deputies had been shot at; there were gunmen in the school with large weapons.

At about 11:30, the gunmen shot out some of the west windows of the library, aiming at escaping students and the handful of deputies who had arrived. Although teacher Patti Nielson had stopped talking on her cell phone when the gunmen entered the library, over the next several minutes, the dispatcher could hear numerous gunshots, and a person shouting,

"Yahoo!" Investigators would later discover that Harris and Klebold had killed ten people and wounded 12 in the seven-and-a-half minutes they spent in the library.[7]

Outside, meanwhile, a deputy began loading students hiding behind a patrol car into a separate sheriff's car and driving them to safety, three or four at a time. The dispatch center called in off-duty dispatchers, and switched to 12-hour shifts to increase available personnel. At the same time, the media, which had heard of a shooting incident at Columbine, began calling the JeffCo Sheriff's Office for information. Less than ten minutes had passed since the first dispatch alert about an injured student in the parking lot of Columbine High School. At 11:32, Deputy Paul Magor, who was guarding the entrance to the south parking lot, radioed for mutual aid.

The Growing Response: Reinforcements Arrive

Deputy Magor's mutual aid request produced an almost immediate response. In fact, since agencies in the area had been monitoring the JeffCo dispatches, dozens of responders were already on the way, and would soon transform Columbine into a major multi-jurisdictional response. This kind of "self-dispatching" to a large incident was not uncommon. Moreover, because Columbine lay near several law enforcement jurisdictions, a number of responders had personal reasons for wanting to arrive quickly. . . . A student hiding in the school kitchen with 17 others had already called the Denver Police Department, hoping to speak with his police officer father, and several of the first Denver and Littleton police officers to arrive had children in the school.

When Lieutenant Terry Manwaring, JeffCo's SWAT commander, arrived at 11:36, law enforcement representatives had already begun to congregate a couple of blocks north of the school on Pierce Street, the north-south access road that ran along Columbine's east side . . . . Manwaring had already paged JeffCo's SWAT team and its command staff on the way over. Now, as JeffCo's first command level representative present, Manwaring told dispatch that the command post and SWAT staging area would be placed at the point where officers were already gathering, the intersection of Pierce and Leawood.

A JeffCo sergeant who had arrived minutes earlier, Phil Hy, sat in his patrol car monitoring radio traffic, while Manwaring and others desperately tried to piece together how many gunmen there were, what they looked like, and where they all were located. The information coming over the radio was sketchy and often inconsistent. Dispatch had reported a possible suspect on the football field, as many as six to eight gunmen in the school, shooters in paramilitary garb, and the possibility of hostages being held inside. Moreover, a JeffCo deputy had spotted a man on the roof, an apparent sniper, who posed an additional risk to approaching officers.[8]

Most of this information, though, was dead wrong. As Manwaring arrived, Harris and Klebold—still in the library—had just shot the last person they would kill other than themselves. The two gunmen would spend the next half hour, investigators later concluded, wandering through the school, firing at random targets, and throwing bombs. The two returned to the cafeteria, at one point, and shot at two large bombs in duffel bags they had placed there earlier that had failed to explode, hoping—but failing—to trigger an explosion. They wandered back upstairs to the main office area and fired shots into ceilings and walls. Although the gunmen looked into locked rooms and made eye contact with trapped students, they made no further attempts to kill anyone.

Outside, though, none of this was clear. At 11:38, a pipe bomb thrown by the shooters blew out windows near the cafeteria, and students hidden inside ran to a nearby deputy in the parking lot, and ducked behind cars. The student holed up in the kitchen with a cell phone told the Denver police officer on the line that he could hear a gunman nearby with school keys and a walkie talkie.[9] At 11:40, four minutes after Harris and Klebold left the library, some 30 students ran out from the school's west side, including many who had survived the shooting spree in the library. Based on student accounts, a deputy reported that one of the gunmen might be a student named "Ned Harris," and that he might be wearing bulletproof armor.[10]

Meanwhile, law enforcement personnel continued to arrive. According to Captain Mark Campbell, commander of the patrol division of the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office, the corner of Pierce and Leawood was already congested with patrol cars and emergency response vehicles by the time he got to Columbine at 11:45. "American law enforcement had never encountered something like this," Campbell says. "I'd seen a lot of stuff, and when I turned the corner, I was flabbergasted. This was only 15 minutes into it, and I'd never seen so many police cars in my life."

Amidst growing fears that the gunmen might take advantage of the confusion to sneak out of the school,

at least eight JeffCo deputies—who already had been assisting escaping students, driving injured students to medical attention, and blocking access roads—stationed themselves around Columbine, forming an inner perimeter to watch the building's 25 exterior doors. Captain Robert Armstrong, the on-call commander for the Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office, and perhaps the most experienced commander on scene, stepped in and directed Denver police and the Colorado State Patrol to form a second perimeter away from the school to further secure the area, limit traffic access, and keep press and parents from approaching.[11] Anxiety that the shooters might have associates outside the school, or plans to launch attacks elsewhere, increased when firefighters reported that the brushfire a few miles south of the school that morning had been triggered by bombs, and could be related to the attack on Columbine. Bomb squads from the JeffCo and Arapahoe County Sheriff's Offices already had been told to report to the school.

At 11:45, JeffCo Lieutenant Dave Walcher drove up, followed soon after by five members of Denver's Metro SWAT team, including SWAT Commander Captain Vincent DiManna, who had a son and niece at Columbine.[12] Walcher, the top-ranked JeffCo representative on scene, assumed command upon arrival and told Terry Manwaring to get SWAT members into the school as soon as possible. A few minutes later, JeffCo Undersheriff John Dunaway arrived. Dunaway officially appointed Lieutenant Walcher as incident commander, and authorized an ad hoc SWAT team comprised of Denver, JeffCo, and Littleton Police members to enter the building as soon as it could.

Inside the school's science wing, meanwhile, the teacher who had helped Dave Sanders into a room had placed a hurriedly written sign in the window reading, "1 bleeding to death." A second teacher in the classroom contacted a dispatcher by cell phone, and tried to describe how to reach the room where Sanders lay, an area which was in the most isolated part of the building with no exterior door nearby. When a dispatcher contacted Sergeant Phil Hy just before noon to ask whether someone could get to the injured teacher, however, Hy replied that there was not yet a secure entry point for attempting such a rescue. Soon after, the dispatcher warned those in the room with Sanders not to break out a window because it might alert the shooters to their location.

The number of gunmen in the school was still unknown. Minutes before noon, though, dispatch radioed the command post with its first suspect description: "Eric Harris, 5'10", thin build, shaved blond hair, black pants and white T-shirt, light blue gym backpack."[13]

The Emergency Medical Response

As law enforcement struggled to make sense of what was happening at Columbine, fire and emergency medical resources had also arrived, and faced a similarly disorienting scene.

Littleton Fire Department Battalion Chief Ray Rahne, the shift commander, had driven over to Columbine on a whim after hearing the first report of a female down, thinking that—unlikely as it seemed in that area—there might have been a drive-by shooting. Littleton Fire's eight stations in the Littleton area handled fire fighting and emergency medical services for about 190,000 people, and although the high school wasn't in Littleton, the fire department's service area included Columbine. When Rahne pulled up at the school's main entrance on Pierce Street at 11:34, though, he had heard nothing beyond the initial report. Although Littleton Fire and the JeffCo Sheriff's Office both had VHF radio systems, JeffCo was just one of 16 different law enforcement agencies in Littleton Fire's service area, and the two agencies rarely worked together and weren't using the same channels. As a result, Rahne was completely unaware that deputies had had firefights with gunmen on the other side of the school, and he had not heard about Neil Gardner's 11:29 call for medical help.

In addition, Rahne was oblivious to the growing law enforcement response just north of where he had parked. Although students were streaming from the building, most had not witnessed the attack, and Rahne still thought he was dealing with a single shooting. "We did not realize for about the first 20 minutes that an exchange of gunfire had taken place between the school resource officer and Harris and Klebold at the back of the school," says Littleton Fire Chief William Pessemier, who arrived about 20 minutes after Rahne. "We didn't have JeffCo's channels on our radios, and they didn't have ours."

According to Rahne, he soon spotted a girl sitting on the corner across the street from the school who had been shot in the ankle, and took her to a private ambulance.[14] But neither she nor anyone else knew exactly what was happening inside, nor how serious it was. "I stayed in front of the school, set up command, and said, 'I need police officers for command in front of the school,'" Rahne recalls, "and nobody came."

Shortly before noon, Rahne finally heard that there were victims down behind the southwest side of the school, and sent two Littleton rescue units that had been waiting nearby to respond. As paramedics approached the back of the school, however, they hit an impasse. While some police officers and deputies who were crouched behind cars were waving them on, others motioned for them to stop. Despite the mixed signals, the paramedics parked as close as they could to four students lying on the ground outside the cafeteria, and rushed out to examine them. The first student they checked was already dead.[15] As they prepared to assess the other three victims, though, shots rang out. Gunmen in the school were firing down from the second floor—from what officers would later learn was the library—and police officers and deputies on the ground, including Neil Gardner, returned fire. "They just literally took two bodies and threw them in one rescue, basically right on top of each other, and then took another one and put it in another rescue and just got out of there," reports Rahne. The student who was already dead was left behind.

Rahne, meanwhile, had been summoned to the JeffCo command post about two blocks north on Pierce from where he had been waiting. Arriving at about the same time as Fire Chief Pessemier, the two men discovered a scene of turmoil as fire engines, ambulances, and police cars converged at the intersection.[16] "I remember when I got there, Ray looked at me and said, 'I don't know where all these people are coming from,'" recalls Pessemier. "'I didn't call them.'" Adds Rahne: "I finally just started screaming, 'Who's in charge? Who's in charge?' But nobody would say. We had no staging, we had no base, because I hadn't called for anything, and we were getting all these self-dispatched people coming to the scene."[17]

As Rahne began to transfer command of the incident to Pessemier, the ambulances that had sped out from behind the school pulled up, and the paramedics jumped out screaming for help. "They opened up the back of the ambulance and the blood was just running out of it," Rahne says. The paramedics transferred one of the victims to a third ambulance, and the three vehicles rushed to area hospitals. Anne Marie Hochhalter, one of the first people shot, was estimated to have been just minutes away from death when she reached the emergency department. "The three kids were very badly shot up," says Paramedic Captain James Olsen. "One was barely alive, and another had half of his face shot off." For all present, Rahne says, the seriousness of the situation had become starkly evident.

Once Fire Chief Pessemier had assumed incident command for the agency, he appointed Rahne operations chief for fire and emergency medical operations. At 12:10, Pessemier and Rahne set up two medical triage sites; one on the east side near the school's main entrance, and a second a few blocks west of the school at the intersection of two small residential streets, Yukon and Caley. Yukon/Caley had already become a de facto triage site, since deputies who had evacuated students from the grounds west of Columbine early on had brought injured students to the intersection and laid them down for treatment in one homeowner's front yard. When Rahne sent a lieutenant to Yukon/Caley to investigate, the lieutenant promptly called for ten more ambulances and a helicopter to transport eleven shooting victims, four of them critical.

The fire command staff also established two medical staging areas near the command post, and a fire staging area a few blocks south of Columbine on Pierce. . . . With staging and triage in place, the fire and emergency medical operation began to flow more smoothly. Littleton Fire still couldn't communicate directly with the JeffCo Sheriff's Office, however, nor could it communicate with most of the engines and ambulances reporting from other jurisdictions because of radio system incompatibilities. In order to ensure the ability to talk, Rahne says, he sent at least one Littleton Fire representative with a radio on all emergency medical or fire teams that he dispatched.

Chief Pessemier and JeffCo Lieutenant Dave Walcher, meanwhile, set up a unified command—incorporating both the medical and the law enforcement response. "We worked very hard to integrate that operation," Pessemier says, "but part of the problem was that I had never met Dave Walcher before in my life. We didn't have a real strong relationship with many of the law enforcement agencies in the local area." Despite limited experience in coordinating or participating in such a complex multi-agency response, however, personnel from all agencies strove to cooperate, according to those at the scene. "Maybe it was Lance [Kirklin]," one of the critically wounded students whose ambulance had briefly stopped at the command post on the way to the hospital, explains Littleton Fire Department Division Chief Chuck Burdick, who served as the department's law enforcement liaison. "A lot of people saw Lance come through, and the magnitude of it was such that people realized this is too big to have petty issues between us. We've got to get through this, and the only way we're going to get through this is with the support of each other. I think we all knew that."

SWAT's First Entrance

While Rahne and others were organizing the early emergency medical response, JeffCo SWAT Commander Manwaring was rounding up SWAT team members who had already reported from different jurisdictions in order to cobble together a team. Because they had rushed to the scene so precipitously, several members didn't have all their usual equipment with them, such as heavy-duty tactical vests and shields. Just after noon, as the rescue units raced from the back of the school with the three student shooting victims, Manwaring asked to borrow a Littleton fire engine to use as a shield, and 12 SWAT members from the JeffCo Sheriff's Office and the Denver and Littleton police departments approached the east side of Columbine, sheltered by the slow-moving truck with a SWAT member at the wheel.

When they reached the school, Manwaring broke the group in two. One half, led by Manwaring and Denver Commander Vincent DiManna, continued around the north of the building—still crouching behind the fire truck—towards the west side, where the shootouts had occurred. The other half, led by JeffCo SWAT Deputy Allen Simmons, prepared to enter the east side just south of the main doors.

What the SWAT teams would confront was a sprawling 250,000-square-foot building on two levels, containing 75 classrooms, many smaller rooms and closets, and such large gathering areas as the gymnasium, cafeteria, and auditorium. The school had been significantly updated and expanded in 1995, including the addition of a new cafeteria and library. Unfortunately, the SWAT teams didn't have an updated map of the school among the emergency resources they kept on hand. Although Littleton Fire had begun running off copies of its Columbine "pre-plan," a simplified room plan that showed where to go for alarm and sprinkler shutoffs, for example, Manwaring hadn't received a copy. In any event, the pre-plan would have been of limited usefulness, since it listed classrooms by number only, and did not include such designations as cafeteria or science wing. Instead, Manwaring had only a sketch drawn hastily by a student. In fact, when he sent the first team in, the SWAT commander thought the school's cafeteria was still on the east side, its location before the remodeling four years earlier.

At 12:06, slightly more than a half hour after Manwaring first paged the JeffCo SWAT team, Simmons's group entered the east side of Columbine. According to many observers, forming an ad hoc, multi-jurisdictional SWAT team and sending it into a critical tactical situation that quickly was almost unprecedented. Normal operating procedure, by contrast, was for a team to wait until all its members had arrived, to deploy as a team, and to receive a detailed explanation of what was happening before entering. "It was very, very fast for everything up to that point," says Lieutenant Bruce Williamson, SWAT commander for the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office, who would arrive about 40 minutes later. "Columbine High School broke all the molds."

Inside the building, beneath wailing fire alarms, the six SWAT team members began to move slowly from room to room. The team, which split in two to cover more territory, soon found one teacher and two staff members as it advanced carefully through the warren of classrooms. Arvada Police Department Chief Ron Sloan, whose department had two officers on JeffCo's SWAT team, says members were undoubtedly trying to figure out what kind of situation they were facing: hostage-taking, barricaded suspects, a mental health situation, or some type of terrorist act. "I'm sure it was in the minds of people, 'Are they going to flee the scene now that the police are here, or are they going to secrete themselves somewhere and level some kind of demand?'" Sloan says. "For it to continue on after the initial police presence, and for homicides to be taking place indiscriminately after that, particularly by young people in a school, was almost unheard of."

SWAT members were also straining their senses to try to detect a sound or motion that would reveal the presence of one or more shooters. In fact, however, almost from the moment the first SWAT team entered, the actual targets were gone. Reports from inside the school and from escaping students of shooting and of bombs exploding dropped off sharply after noon—though such accounts did not stop entirely. Investigators later determined that Harris and Klebold had killed themselves in the library at 12:08, shortly after firing at the paramedics rescuing victims below. Responders, however, had no such information at the time to guide their actions. "You cannot assume anything, yet you have to assume something, so what you assume is the worst," explains Chief Sloan of Arvada. "And the worst case scenario is that the bad guys are secreting themselves, they're taking hostages, and they'll shoot you as soon as the door opens." He adds: "You can't assume that they've committed suicide. You can't assume that this room does not have suspects in it. You have to assume the worst."

With the first SWAT team inside, those in charge outside continued to try to organize the flood of incoming

information into a coherent account. At 12:14, although in reality Harris and Klebold were already dead, students on a cell phone in the school reported to 911 that the shooters were nearby. A few minutes later, police detained a young man approaching the school carrying an unloaded rifle and a knife who was dressed in clothes similar to those reportedly worn by the gunmen.[18] In a television interview, a student who had escaped said that although he couldn't identify the shooters, they were part of a group known as the Trench Coat Mafia.[19]

Troubling news had also come in from the site of the earlier brushfire. Sixteen bomb experts who had assembled from Jefferson and Arapahoe counties, Denver, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation had spread out to advise SWAT teams before they entered the school; search the house of Eric Harris, who had been formally identified as a likely suspect; and evaluate the bombs that had sparked the fire earlier that morning. The two bomb technicians examining the refuse from the fire had quickly discovered the remains of an alarm clock—evidence not only that the gunmen had probably planted the bombs as diversionary devices to draw responders away from the school before the attack, but, even more disturbingly, that the shooters were capable of making timed devices.[20] The discovery not only heightened concerns about further attacks or explosions away from Columbine, but also forced law enforcement to conclude that it was likely there were time-activated bombs and booby-trapped rooms inside the school.

Establishing Incident Command

By 12:40, JeffCo's mobile command bus had arrived, and instead of grouping around Sgt. Phil Hy's patrol car, the command post operation moved inside the bus.[21] In addition to JeffCo's incident commander, Lieutenant Dave Walcher—who was often joined by Undersheriff Dunaway, and sometimes by Sheriff Stone—command level representatives included Captain Robert Armstrong from Arapahoe; Division Chief Gerry Whitman from the Denver Police; Major John Wise from the Colorado State Patrol; Commander Bob Brandt from the Littleton Police; and either Chief Pessemier or Division Chief Chuck Burdick representing Littleton Fire.

According to Sheriff Stone, JeffCo established incident command using the same basic management model that the JeffCo representatives had studied and trained on during the four-day FEMA workshop a year-and-a-half earlier. "My position in this thing was almost like a symphony director," Stone says. "You're watching every one of these things going on, but you have to make sure every instrument's playing properly." With Walcher handling incident command, Stone says, Dunaway took charge of operations, while he, himself, was "trying to do all the support stuff, get the investigation going, get the county involved, the media, and all these other support things that you have to do."

But for some others on the scene, the division of responsibilities wasn't always obvious. Virtually all law enforcement officials involved with the Columbine response say it was the kind of emergency that would have been difficult for any single agency to coordinate. Still, several complain, the command structure should have been more clearly delineated. "Everybody asked questions like, 'Who's actually in charge?'" recalls one command level officer. "Well, quite frankly, I couldn't tell you. If I had to guess from being around the command post, I would say it was a combination of Gerry Whitman, Robert Armstrong, John Dunaway, and Walcher. Those would be the key four." Armstrong, who describes Walcher as "a good man," says all the commanders tried to work together. "What we did is we'd say, 'What about this? What about that?' So we could play off each other. So you had more than one mind making those decisions."

In addition, some responders say, Dunaway and Stone didn't give Walcher the support he needed. Walcher, who had previously spent seven years with the JeffCo SWAT team, had only recently been promoted to lieutenant, and had no experience managing a major incident. While it wasn't necessarily preferable for a sheriff or undersheriff to be the incident commander during such an event, the top law enforcement officials—presumably the agency's most experienced people at managing an emergency response—would generally remain available to serve as sounding boards, ask questions, and make suggestions. Dunaway, however, spent a lot of time outside of the command post talking with school administrators, law enforcement and county officials, and others who had come to the vehicle. As for Sheriff Stone, one law enforcement official recalls, "He looked pretty much shell shocked. If I was a brand new sheriff and was going through some administrative changes, trying to reorganize my department, and this thing hit me a few months into my term, I probably would have looked just like him."

Walcher, however, says he had all the support he needed, particularly given the collaborative effort that quickly coalesced among the experienced command staff at the post. "No one agency by itself could handle

this," he contends. "With all those agencies there, we had the people that we could immediately task to do the things that had to be done. People that day stepped up to the plate and tried to make a difference." And although Dunaway confirms that he frequently went outside the command vehicle to talk, he says the conversations served the dual purpose of helping coordinate the broader operation and shielding those inside from unnecessary interference. "As people came to the command post, the last thing I was going to have any of them believing was that I was disinterested in their presence or in their offers of assistance," Dunaway explains.

Still, some claimed the response to the shootings was more disorganized than it needed to be. "Even with full incident command in place, it'll look chaotic," says Arapahoe Sheriff Patrick Sullivan. "But at least you're getting things done better, and people are communicating, and those who need to get information are getting information." At Columbine, though, incident command seemed to have slipped. There was no formal staging area for law enforcement, for example, which added to the confusion in the streets around the school and near the command post. And although Dunaway was in charge of operations for the incident, neither he nor anyone else appeared to have assumed full responsibility for assigning jobs such as traffic control, logistics, communications, and officer relief—all key pieces of incident command.

While Walcher and Dunaway both readily concede that the response did not meet a textbook case of incident command, however, they question whether a more formalized structure would have been appropriate. The fast-evolving demands of the situation, the number of responding officers, and the need to hand off tasks to individuals from many agencies and jurisdictions argued against imposing a rigid structure under one lead agency, they say. "I don't think incident command was ever intended to be used for combat operations," says Dunaway, "and that is basically what we were dealing with there." Moreover, given the enormity of the undertaking, says Walcher, some tasks necessarily fell to the wayside. "The last thing on my mind was, 'Gee, where's our staging area going to be?'" he recalls. "The street was filling up so fast with cop cars that I had no clue where we could have a staging area, whether we could even have access to it, nor did I care, because I was too busy worrying about kids who had been shot and getting a SWAT team in there that could end the situation." He adds: "It wasn't a traditional incident command, but the system in place accomplished what really needed to get done."

As Walcher and the other commanders prioritized and delegated jobs, some agencies simply tackled tasks that needed doing, rather than seeking direction from the command post. Captain Mark Campbell, for example, who was deploying officers from the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office as they arrived, had noticed that the northbound lanes of Pierce Street were clogged with haphazardly parked patrol cars, blocking the passage of emergency vehicles. To free the lanes, Campbell called on several early-arriving members of the Arapahoe SWAT team, who either contacted the vehicles' owners, Campbell says, or simply lifted the cars out of the way.[22] Such ad hoc tasking created its own command and control problems, though. One suburban SWAT team, for example, never even checked in with the command post, but simply deployed itself around the school.

Communication Breakdown

While the somewhat haphazard command approach may have complicated the Columbine response, though, a far bigger impediment was the inability of different agencies to talk. Indeed, responders say, the absence of linked communication systems greatly increased the difficulty of establishing and maintaining effective incident command—particularly given the many departments and jurisdictions on scene. Had all responding agencies been using compatible systems with a databank of channels to choose from, for example, the command post could have allotted a channel for each major task or area of responsibility, such as traffic control, SWAT, logistics, emergency medical, and perimeter control. Such a system, a regular feature of incident command, would have simplified both the division of the response into manageable pieces, and the management of each of those pieces. "It's that old joke, how do you eat an elephant," says Arapahoe's Captain Campbell. "In little bitty bits. You kind of break things down."

As it was, as additional agencies continued to arrive, the ability of all those involved to communicate deteriorated significantly. While the JeffCo Sheriff's office still used a VHF radio, for example, many other responding agencies, such as Denver and Arapahoe, had either analog or digital 800 megahertz (MHz) systems, neither of which could communicate directly with a VHF system, nor with each other. "I cannot overemphasize how great a problem the incompatibility of our communications systems was that day," states Undersheriff Dunaway. "What that presented was almost unmanageable."

Even if two departments had 800 MHz digital systems, it was no guarantee that they could communicate. Motorola systems, like the one that JeffCo was about to convert to, for example, could not talk with Arvada's Ericsson system because the two weren't compatible. Similarly, although the JeffCo Sheriff's Office and Littleton Fire both had VHF systems, they couldn't communicate during the early hours of the incident because they were using different channels. "If the officer doesn't ever flip that switch and practice talking to that agency," notes Littleton Paramedic Captain James Olsen, "he's not going to know how to do it when the incident comes down."[23]

Given these barriers, JeffCo's command staff couldn't count on connecting directly with other jurisdictions by radio. Instead, it pieced together informal links, placing a JeffCo Sheriff's Office representative with a radio on every team, or passing messages through its own dispatch center to a different center, and then back to the field. Even this last method, however, often broke down. At 12:23, the JeffCo dispatch center said it couldn't get through to the command post because both radio links and cellular phone lines were jammed. Indeed, the center was so overloaded that calls were going instead to dispatchers in Littleton, Denver, and other municipalities, who then had to relay messages back to JeffCo. "Radios and cell phones and everything were absolutely useless," declares Steve Davis, public information officer for the JeffCo Sheriff's Office, "they were so overwhelmed with the amount of traffic in the air."

Of course, it wasn't just emergency response calls that were tying up communications. At 11:47, a local television station ran the first report of possible shootings at Columbine High School. By noon, area TV stations had switched to full-time live coverage, and parents and relatives were besieging school, law enforcement, and county officials for information about their children and loved ones.

Lieutenant John Kiekbusch of the JeffCo Sheriff's investigation division had established four debriefing areas where officers could question students and staff about what they had seen. By 12:25, the JeffCo Sheriff's Office and school administrators had settled on Leawood Elementary School, less than a mile from Columbine, as the primary debriefing site. Counselors from the Victim Services Unit of the JeffCo Sheriff's Office had already been sent to the elementary school to talk with students and parents, and the dispatch center began specifically directing parents there. "Where the media was very helpful was in continually broadcasting that information very early on so we wouldn't have a mass of parents running down to Columbine looking for their kids," says Sheriff Stone.

Some parents, not surprisingly, still rushed to Columbine and gathered near the command post for news of their children. For their part, many students and staff who had escaped the school never went to Leawood Elementary for questioning, and did not reunite with parents or relatives until hours later. Although JeffCo assigned officers trained in crowd control to escort students from safe areas near Columbine to buses that would take them to the elementary school, scores of students simply headed home or to the houses of friends. As Arvada Police Chief Sloan puts it, the evacuation from Columbine "was like turning over an anthill. Whoosh . . . they were out of there."

SWAT Approaches the West Side

As the command staff struggled to bring order and efficiency to the overall response, SWAT Commander Lieutenant Terry Manwaring continued his efforts to insert teams into Columbine and apprehend the killers. Almost a half hour after leaving Deputy Allen Simmons and his team on the east side of Columbine, Manwaring and his group of five finally worked their way around to the upper west entrance of the school at 12:34, still using the fire truck as a shield.[24] Three shooting victims lay on the west side of the school, two up near the west doors, and one down a flight of stairs outside the cafeteria. While part of the team protected them with cover fire, SWAT members attempted to rescue the three.[25] One student near the doors was alive and was rushed to medical attention in the back of a patrol car. The other two, however, were already dead.[26]

After dealing with the victims, Manwaring had hoped to send a SWAT team directly into the building through the upper entrance. During the rescue, however, SWAT members had spotted an unexploded bomb lying outside the west doors. Manwaring had heard there could be time- or motion-activated bombs in the school, and he didn't want to risk sending SWAT members past a device that might be triggered at any point. Instead, the SWAT commander decided to drive the fire truck over the bomb and straight through the doors into the school—assuming that the vehicle would absorb any blast. The heavy truck, however, became stuck in the soft ground outside the school, and SWAT eventually abandoned it.

As Manwaring's group was struggling with the fire truck, ten members of the JeffCo SWAT team, headed

by Sgt. Barry Williams, arrived at the command post. Over the next 20 minutes, Williams led the team around to the school's west end—using a front end loader they had commandeered as a cover—while two SWAT snipers broke off from the group and stationed themselves on roofs south of the school and opposite the library windows and science wing.

A. J. DeAndrea, an officer with the Arvada Police Department and member of the JeffCo SWAT team, had been having a family picnic with his wife, who was nine months pregnant, when he was paged and told there had been a shooting at Columbine. DeAndrea, who approached the school's west end behind the front end loader, recalls the scene at Columbine as "surreal." First, he saw one of JeffCo's SWAT members driving a fire truck. Then he noticed one of the early students to be shot and killed, Rachel Scott, on the ground nearby—his first realization that there had been fatalities. Farther down the hill was the body of Daniel Rohrbough.

Manwaring gave the newly arrived team a terse summary. It still wasn't known how many suspects were inside, although there were estimates of as many as eight gunmen in the building—conceivably some kind of terrorist group. Because of the bomb outside the west doors, the SWAT team didn't enter there. Nor did it go through the open emergency exit door leading straight to the library, out of which a number of distraught students had escaped about an hour-and-a-half earlier, because there was a bomb visible there. Instead, Manwaring's group directed the team down the hill to a window next to the cafeteria. Although the entry point was a floor below where deputies had last spotted the gunmen, shooting from the library windows, Manwaring had no reason to believe the two had stayed in that area, says Lieutenant Bruce Williamson, SWAT commander for the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office. "The team going into the school had no idea where the last known location of these guys was," explains Williamson. "They were shooting all over."

Unlike a normal SWAT operation, DeAndrea says, the pressure to get inside was so great that the team deployed with almost no preparation. "As we entered, we were told all kinds of things," DeAndrea recalls. "We were told, 'Last seen in the business area. Last seen in the science area. They are possibly in the air ducts moving around. We've got somebody on the roof.' I remember the Channel Four news helicopter coming in real low trying to see what they had up there." The team did not know there had been a massacre in the library, though, nor was it told that there was a report of a badly injured person in the science wing. Neither Manwaring nor DiManna, apparently, had been given that information. In addition, Manwaring still didn't have a map of the school, and most SWAT members had never been in the building.

On the other side of the school, meanwhile, SWAT Deputy Allen Simmons had called for assistance with the grueling and time-consuming process of breaking down doors and searching rooms for suspects and victims. Although Harris and Klebold had been dead for more than a half hour, the command post was still receiving regular cell phone reports of gunshots and explosions from students and staff hidden throughout the school, which further complicated the search.[27] Shortly before 1:00, a SWAT team from the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office joined Simmons in the east side search, while other members of the Arapahoe team, along with JeffCo, Lakewood, Denver, and Littleton, established a tactical command post on Pierce Street right outside the main school entrance.

In Manwaring's absence, JeffCo had named Commander Bob Brandt and Sergeant Bill Black of the Littleton Police to coordinate the SWAT deployment. Perhaps because of the faulty communication among different agencies, however, some SWAT members kept questioning why Manwaring wasn't running the tactical command post himself, while others mistakenly concluded that he had deployed with a SWAT team inside the school.[28] "We kept asking where he was, because all the commanders need to get together and formulate a tactical plan together," says Arapahoe SWAT team leader Louis Perea. "That wasn't happening."

At about 1:00, a school staff member gave an Arapahoe deputy a Columbine yearbook from the previous year with the photos of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold circled. Captain Campbell sent plainclothes officers to make copies of the pictures and distributed them to the command and tactical posts. By 1:15, investigators had gone to both students' houses.

West Side SWAT Enters

The eight members of the JeffCo SWAT team led by Barry Williams, along with a few Denver SWAT members, broke a window and climbed into the school at about 1:09. Had shots been fired shortly before or as the west side SWAT team arrived, DeAndrea says, the team's goal would have been simple: respond to the shots and stop the threat. Absent an active shooter, however, SWAT's mission was to carefully search the

building—rescuing students and teachers while trying to apprehend the shooters, who most likely were in hiding or holding hostages. "With shots fired, we're going to do a rapid and immediate deployment with an assault team, and we're going to take care of the shots being fired," DeAndrea explains. "Without that, we're not going to run haphazardly anywhere."

Once through the window, team members found themselves in a teachers lounge, standing in about three inches of water that had accumulated from the cafeteria sprinkler system, activated by bombs thrown earlier by Harris and Klebold. The group was immediately bombarded with sounds and smells. "You've got the school bell going off, you've got the fire alarm going off, you can smell gun powder in the air, and there's an overwhelming noise from the sprinklers made by the water coming down," DeAndrea recalls. While some members were particularly disconcerted by the alarms, DeAndrea says, what bothered him most were the alarm system's flashing strobe lights, which chillingly mimicked the flash of a gun, and which also created sudden shadows that forced him to recheck areas repeatedly to ensure there was no one hiding or preparing to attack.

Looking into the cafeteria, DeAndrea recounts, was an otherworldly experience. "We don't hear shots fired," he says. "We don't see kids running around. There's nothing. It's like this place is locked down. It's eerie. First thing in my mind, I'm thinking ambush. Where are they? They've got hostages. We're going to find them here somewhere, and they're hunkered down." Carefully picking their way past exploded and unexploded bombs, the team scanned the cafeteria and headed into the kitchen area.

Almost immediately, DeAndrea says, the team heard movement behind a door. "We'd shout, 'Police department, open the door! Police department, open the door!' Expecting for that door to open, and we're going to engage in gunfire," he recalls. No one, however, opened the doors. There were no gunmen hidden in the school's rooms, and students, traumatized by what they had already witnessed or heard, would not undo the locks.

DeAndrea, the designated breacher for his team, had made a conscious decision not to bring his usual 55-pound ram into the building, because carrying it would hinder his ability to wield a gun. Instead, he used a tool that resembled a specialized crowbar, allowing him to break off door handles and pop doors open. A number of doors in Columbine were difficult to breach, though, since students hiding inside had piled furniture or other objects against them for further protection. "We're busting down doors wholeheartedly thinking we're going to go through that door and we're going to engage somebody," DeAndrea says. "Do we think that we might get shot? Absolutely. Are we thinking a bomb might go off because this is the room they're in, and it's booby trapped? Absolutely. But we still have to get through the door."

Instead of gunmen, the team found 20 to 30 students hidden in the kitchen area, as well as two male staff members hiding in the walk-in freezers. The team began to evacuate students and staff, even as Williams passed on a report that the shooters might be in the library or the science area. JeffCo had been joined by more SWAT members from Denver, and the team passed small groups of students from one member to another and then out the same window through which they had entered. Once outside, students were directed up the outside stairs to be driven to safety. Since the path took them past the bodies of both Daniel Rohrbough and Rachel Scott, officers told students to focus only on the person immediately in front of them.

Away from the building at last, SWAT members took students to the east side, where law enforcement personnel quickly searched them, not only looking for injuries, but trying to ascertain that the attackers were not among the escaping students. To help, deputies had recruited Columbine's two deans of students, Chris Mikesell and Peter Horvath, stationing them near the tactical command post on the east side of the school. Mikesell and Horvath scanned passing students, searching not only for Harris and Klebold, but also for students who were thought to be associates of the two, and who might be accomplices in the attack. Once checked, students were supposed to duck through a hole cut in the fence and board buses waiting on an adjacent residential street. Because of a lack of communication, though, Arapahoe's Captain Campbell says, a Denver officer down the street was stopping buses at first and wouldn't let them pass. "By the time the buses came down to pick these kids up and transport them over to Leawood, the kids had already said, 'Screw this, I'm out of here," says Campbell.

With the two SWAT teams in the building, meanwhile, SWAT commanders Manwaring and DiManna had returned to the tactical command post on the east side of the building. Manwaring, who finally had gotten a current floor plan for the school from school administrators, sent in some additional SWAT members after the original two teams to help secure the evacuation routes. He did not, however, send new teams into

other parts of the school, fearing that too many SWAT teams inside would add to the confusion and unacceptably increase the risk of friendly fire.

Managing Information

Although communications at Columbine were patchy and unreliable on April 20, due to overloaded cell phone systems and incompatible radios, information continued to pour into the JeffCo Sheriff's command post. Despite periodic breakdowns, the three dispatchers in the mobile command bus were receiving messages from the JeffCo dispatch center, other regional dispatchers, county officials, school officials, the tactical command post, and officers responsible for the different aspects of the response. In addition, messages were being relayed in regarding cell phone calls made to families, police, and even television and radio stations by students trapped in the school. Finally, there was a constant stream of reports, queries, and requests from people—official and otherwise—who had gathered around the command post. "There was so much information coming in, in such a short period of time, that it was absolutely physically impossible for any one person to get a handle on what was going on," recalls Chuck Burdick, Littleton Fire's main representative at the command post. "At one point in time, I remember very vividly my brain just saying, 'Absolute overload.' I got to the point where I didn't hear anything. Not even gray noise—it was no noise at all. It was the strangest experience I've ever had."

The volume of information wasn't the only problem, Burdick says. Because it sometimes took a long time for messages to get through, he says, many accounts were outdated, leading to a skewed understanding of what was happening inside the school. Early on, for example, reports of gunfire in one area of the building were sometimes received along with later accounts of shots and explosions in other parts of the building, leading responders to assume that there were more than two gunmen at work. "That's what led law enforcement to think there were six or more shooters in the school," Burdick explains.

SWAT member DeAndrea, who recalls being peppered with information as he was first working his way through the high school, says he had great sympathy for those on the outside trying to unravel conflicting accounts. "Go back and look at the hundreds of people who are around that command post with information," he says, "on top of the hundreds of phone calls that are coming in to a very small number of people. If I call in and tell you one thing, and somebody else calls in and tells you another thing, who knows whose information is more correct? We're not computers to process all this information and get it all out accurately." He adds: "I'll tell you, I was happier to be inside the school than to be at the command post."

Much of the crush of information was unavoidable. But, according to some responders on scene, commanders could have eliminated a portion of the extraneous input. Although it was standard practice among law enforcement to cordon off a command post during a major incident, JeffCo had not stationed officers around the mobile command trucks, and didn't isolate the vehicles with crime scene tape until later in the afternoon. As a result, people came and went relatively freely. "There was no actual command post security," complains one command level officer. "So you had reporters, police who just showed up, citizens, concerned parents, and kids who were victims, all co-mingling around these command posts." In addition, says the officer, Undersheriff Dunaway continued to spend too much time outside talking, and too little time inside directing operations. "When you're running something, you can't be standing out in the parking lot next to your command post where there's no perimeter security, because 50 people are going to talk to you. He needed to be in somewhere, sitting down, getting fed information, and he didn't do that."

Dunaway and some others, though, dismiss the charge that students or parents came close to the command posts. Moreover, the Undersheriff says, his conversations outside the post, which included periodic meetings with Sheriff Stone and chief investigator Lieutenant Kiekbusch, were a necessary part of the effort to learn more about Harris and Klebold, to search for additional suspects, and to ascertain whether the attack was going to spread beyond the high school. "I needed to retain a certain distance from the operational aspects of it in order to contemplate the policy-level issues that we might face that day," Dunaway says.

Managing the Media

Just as Columbine was the biggest and most complex incident that most local emergency responders had ever confronted, so it was the biggest event most local media had ever covered, and quickly became a leading national and international story as well. When Steve

Davis, public information officer (PIO) for the JeffCo Sheriff's Office, first left for Columbine at about 11:30 that morning, though, he had no idea how important the event would become.[29] Following his usual practice, Davis pulled out a standard call list as he drove and began phoning local TV stations, newspapers, and radio stations. "I told them I've got a report of shots fired, explosions at the school, I'm on my way down there, and I'll try to pick a place to meet," Davis recalls.

By the time he got to Columbine at about 11:45, Davis says, there were at least two television crews and a radio station on scene, as well as a few PIOs from other jurisdictions who had reported in case Davis needed help. Already it was clear that the incident was going to be too large to handle by simply traveling from one media representative to another. Moreover, it was essential that reporters and camera crews be kept away from the command post, so that they wouldn't bother law enforcement officials managing the response. Accordingly, Davis, with the help of the other PIOs, told reporters that all interviews would take place at a designated media center in the parking lot at the northeast corner of Clement Park—a recreational area which abutted the high school's north side. Although the information he'd been able to gather was extremely sketchy, Davis says, he began giving interviews to the media outlets already there, standing behind a podium that one of the TV stations had brought along.

As the seriousness of the attack at Columbine began to emerge, however, and as news operations flocked to the scene, Davis soon realized he could not satisfy the barrage of requests for individual interviews. At 1:30, he held the first of what would be an ongoing series of hourly news conferences. Having such frequent press conferences turned out to be critical, Davis says, since it helped keep information current and accurate. "There were so many rumors and myths getting started, it gave me a chance to confirm stories or chop them off right at the root immediately, instead of letting them fester all day," he explains.

On the other hand, the hourly updates made it almost impossible for Davis to stay abreast of the latest developments himself. "Most of the news conferences would run 30 to 40 minutes with questions and answers," he recounts. "When I ended that, I would start to walk out and was just mobbed by media wanting an individual interview. By the time I got done doing that, it was time for the next news conference. I would literally have to run over to the command post, stick my head in, and say, 'OK, what's new? What's changed?' Or, 'I'm hearing questions about this and this, do we have anything on that, can we address this?' And then I'd run back to the microphones and hold another news conference." Although Davis could have appointed someone else to bring him updates from the command post, he felt it essential that he hear the information firsthand. "There were so many concerns about what was going out and the accuracy of what was going out," he notes, "that I wanted to hear it straight from those people before I turned around and went to the microphones."[30]

Despite his efforts to keep the press cloistered in one area, Davis says, some media representatives sought out more dramatic stories and footage. Several journalists got near to the command post, and a TV reporter at the Yukon/Caley triage area interviewed wounded students, even though families had not yet been notified of the students' injuries. Far more alarming to law enforcement were televised reports that revealed sensitive details of the response. Helicopter news footage early on, for example, showed Manwaring's SWAT team making its slow approach to the school behind the cover of the fire truck. "Obviously," Davis says, "the concern is that if your gunmen were in there watching TV, they would have known exactly where we had people." Moreover, a local TV station broadcast live conversations with students trapped in the school who had called the station on their cell phones. "The kids are saying, 'I'm holed up in the science room with 23 other kids and we've got the door barricaded,'" recalls Davis. "And we're thinking, 'Get that off the air!" Now we're telling the gunmen exactly which room to go to in order to find 23 more hostages." Even the helicopters, themselves, posed a problem, kicking up dirt that in some cases temporarily blinded the rooftop snipers, and making it harder for responders outside the building to hear.[31]

Members of the JeffCo Sheriff's Office also had to be vigilant in restricting the press to a media area outside of Leawood Elementary. As the afternoon wore on, more and more panic-stricken students and parents were gathering. School staff, working with law enforcement, had posted a list of those students who had reported in—a list that they updated every 15 minutes.

The SWAT Response Continues

The efforts by the command staff and by Steve Davis to digest and act upon incoming information were mirrored inside Columbine by the intensive efforts of the SWAT teams to understand what they were seeing and

hearing and to make appropriate decisions. At 2:17, JeffCo SWAT leader Barry Williams, in charge of the west side team, divided his group in half in order to move more quickly through the lower level of the school. The sense of urgency driving the team had only increased. Shortly before 2:00, Williams had received the first reports from dispatch alluding to the critically injured Dave Sanders, one alerting him to an injured teacher in the science area, while another—later found to have identified the wrong room—said a male was doing CPR on a victim in the library, and that a blue and white shirt was hanging from the door knob to signal the victim's presence. In addition, one of the two snipers on the roof radioed Williams at 2:15 to report the sign in the second-story window reading, "1 bleeding to death." Although Williams had asked dispatch for directions to reach the victim, though, his connection with dispatch was erratic, and he apparently was never given a clear description of where the science wing or the library were located. From the reports he had received, it wasn't even clear whether there was just one victim, or a few in different parts of the school.

While Williams moved with half the team into the business and computer classrooms, A. J. DeAndrea took a team of three JeffCo deputies and a Denver officer and headed into the auditorium, where they had been warned shooters might be concealed on the catwalk. Alarms and strobe lights were still assaulting their senses, DeAndrea says, making it extremely difficult for members of even the same team to talk. "You can't hear anything," he remembers. "Basically, everything is hand signals, because unless I'm in your face yelling, you're not going to be able to communicate." DeAndrea also had trouble hearing dispatch reports, he says, and couldn't communicate well with the other half of the JeffCo SWAT team, let alone Simmons's SWAT team on the other side of the school, because the line-of-sight radios didn't receive well within the core of the building. "Barry [Williams] and I communicated very rarely," he says. "I was getting some transmissions, but I'm sure that I missed a lot."

After checking the auditorium, which was empty, DeAndrea's group emerged on the upper level of the school, where a dispatch report had indicated there might be students hidden nearby. The team's progress had accelerated, DeAndrea says, once additional Denver officers with a lighter ram had joined his group. In fact, one of the few encouraging aspects of the response was the ease with which members of the two teams interacted, despite the fact that SWAT teams rarely worked with other jurisdictions.[32] "There was not a glitch," DeAndrea says. "There were no egos that day. There was no posturing. It was a total team effort."

In addition, although there were now a couple dozen SWAT members working their way through the school—including some who had become separated from their teams, and who had only irregular radio contact with other officers—no SWAT members mistakenly shot at each other. "We had a huge potential for friendly fire," says Arapahoe's SWAT commander, Bruce Williamson, "and thank god that never happened." Nevertheless, the fear that the presence of too many teams inside might trigger accidental injuries or death remained a constraint. According to one report, the Lakewood SWAT team, which had positioned itself south of the school, volunteered to try to rescue the bleeding victim upstairs, having seen the sign in the window. But incident commander Walcher vetoed the attempt, claiming there would be too much risk of surprising teams already inside and precipitating dangerous crossfire.[33]

Upstairs at last, DeAndrea says, SWAT members could see motion in a room close by, off of the choir room in the music section. When the team breached the door of the room at 2:24, DeAndrea says, they found 60 students crammed into one small space. "They're terrified," he says. "I've never seen fear like this before. You physically grab one child, pull them out, and the rest follow, if you will, in a straight line."

DeAndrea had been told there could be a shooting victim nearby, he says. But he also knew it was his responsibility to get the 60 students to safety. "Now we have a problem," he says. "We've got 60 kids. It's negligent for us to leave them in there knowing that there are bombs inside this school. Do we know if any bombs are on a timer? Is the whole school going to blow up? We stop everything, and we need to get these 60 out, and we're in the dead center of the school."

DeAndrea's team set to work, hurrying students in groups of ten out the west side of the school along the exact route SWAT had used to enter, with a SWAT member at the head, middle, and end of each cluster. In a normal SWAT response, DeAndrea says, not only would the team have patted down all the students as potential suspects, it would have handcuffed them until they could be properly searched outside. But given the pressure to get the students out of the building safely, DeAndrea simply ordered them to keep their hands on their heads until an officer told them to take them down. The news helicopter footage of students existing the school with their hands on top of their heads became an enduring image of the *Columbine* tragedy.

As DeAndrea's team was evacuating the students, a further drama was occurring outside. A deputy who had spent the previous two hours conducting air surveillance from a news helicopter radioed dispatch that someone was trying to climb out a broken window on the school's southwest side.[34] The Lakewood SWAT team, which had been checking the parking lot for vehicles belonging to Harris and Klebold, convinced an armored car company to loan them a bulletproof car. Just after they drove the armored car to the side of the school, SWAT members managed to catch the seriously injured student, Patrick Ireland, as he fell from the library window.[35]

The Final Discoveries

Between 2:30 and 2:45 that afternoon, the three main SWAT teams searching and clearing Columbine High School began to converge. After removing the 60 students from the choir room, DeAndrea's team found two more groups of about 30 students each in two nearby rooms and handed them to Simmons's team, which had just worked its way down the southern east-west hallway, to escort out the east side of the building. The group led by Barry Williams, meanwhile, had finished its search of the business wing downstairs, and had mounted the stairs by the cafeteria—coming up just down the hall from the other two teams and heading into the science wing. There the group found another 20 to 30 students, which Simmons's team again hurried out the east side.

At 2:42, Williams's team finally reached the critically injured teacher, Dave Sanders, as well as about 60 students in that and an adjoining classroom. Williams radioed for medical help and a member of the team stayed behind as the others escorted the traumatized students from the building. Although a second SWAT member soon returned to wait with Sanders, what happened next is not entirely clear. Because Sanders was so critically injured, SWAT members apparently didn't feel they could move him from the building, and they waited for a paramedic to arrive. At the same time, however, paramedics continued to hover outside the east entrance, expecting that the injured party would be carried out to them. Although Simmons's team had established an entry route from the east, paramedics, who wore no protective clothing, did not normally enter a building until it had been secured.[36] After the two SWAT members waited for about 20 to 30 minutes, a Denver paramedic finally arrived from the west side of the building. Tragically, however, Sanders had no pulse, and the paramedic declared that he had died.[37]

The horror of the day had not yet ended, though. Williams's SWAT team finally entered the library at 3:22, the last area of the school to be searched. Immediately, Williams radioed to dispatch. "Barry Williams is a very calm, cool, collected man," DeAndrea says. "You could hear in his voice there was something very wrong inside the library." The scene inside, DeAndrea says, was shocking and terribly sad. Although one girl with several gunshot wounds was still alive, twelve other students in the room were dead, most huddled under tables where they had tried to hide. Two, however, surrounded by weapons and bombs, matched the description of the gunmen, and appeared to have committed suicide with gunshot wounds to the head. Despite the apparent suicides, law enforcement still had to operate under the assumption that there might be accomplices in the building or already outside.

Given the many bombs visible in the room, SWAT moved as quickly as possible, radioing for paramedics, and evacuating four staff members found hiding in rooms off the library, including teacher Patti Nielson, who had climbed into a cupboard following the shooting spree almost four hours earlier. As two paramedics removed the wounded student via the library's emergency exit—walking around bombs in the hallway—the SWAT team called for the bomb squad to take over.[38]

Back in the hall outside the library, DeAndrea says, the three SWAT teams studied a map that Williams's group had torn from the wall, and concluded they had searched the whole school. Even now, though, they didn't quit. The teams returned to the main lobby on the east side of the building, regrouped with reinforcements along normal jurisdictional lines, and went back through the building for a rapid second sweep—this time, finding no one alive.[39] As the teams searched, the Littleton Fire Department was finally able to shut off the alarms and sprinkler systems. Outside, meanwhile, Sheriff Stone and Steve Davis held a news briefing at which Stone announced the possibility of "up to 25 dead" as the result of the attack.[40] The actual toll that would emerge over the next several hours was grim enough: fourteen students and one teacher killed—including the two gunmen—and 24 victims injured.

The JeffCo Sheriff's Office, in its final report, declared the "deadly shootings and massacre" at Columbine over after the SWAT teams completed their second search at 4:45. More than 160 victims had been treated at four

triage sites for maladies ranging from shock to gunshot wounds, and 24 students had been transported to area hospitals. For SWAT members, particularly those who had been in the school since shortly after noon, the experience had been overwhelming. "Typically when we do a tactical operation and we make an entry into a high-risk situation, two minutes is a very long time," notes Williamson, the Arapahoe SWAT commander. "This went on for hours. So the adrenaline dump and the noise and the screaming kids and the dead children and the blood and the carnage and the signs of the explosions from the devices that went off in the school—they were dealing with that for a long time." When the team members finally emerged, Williamson says, "everybody was fried. That's emotionally the worst day I've ever dealt with. I've got four kids of my own. I went home and hugged them all."

By the end of the first day, almost 1,000 representatives of area law enforcement and emergency response agencies had reported to Columbine. While the Denver Police had provided the most aid to JeffCo during the shootings, followed by the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office and the Littleton Police, responders came from half a dozen sheriff's offices; 12 fire and EMS agencies, employing 46 ambulances and two helicopters; 20 area police departments; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; the Colorado Bureau of Investigation; the FBI, and the Colorado National Guard.

The Bomb Squad and Investigators Take Over

If Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold hadn't scattered explosive devices around Columbine High School, investigators would have been able to conduct an immediate crime scene analysis, which in all probability would have allowed the coroner to identify the victims and remove their bodies from the school the night of the attack. As it was, the location and removal of bombs forced a delay in the identification of victims that was a final cruel twist for both families and responders.

Although the 16 bomb technicians originally assembled, joined by evidence collection experts from the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, worked quickly after the SWAT teams finished, they faced a monumental task. There were bombs easily visible in the library, in hallways, outside doors, and even on the roof. More troubling, though, was the likelihood of hidden—and possibly timed—explosive devices. In the cafeteria alone there were more than 400 unsearched backpacks, and the school had 1,952 lockers, any one of which could contain a bomb.

Technicians first disposed of all the bombs from the library that they could retrieve without moving any of the bodies, including those of Klebold and Harris, since the victims had to remain undisturbed until investigators had completed their initial crime scene analysis. Late that afternoon, as bomb experts discussed which part of the school to clear next, though, Deputy Inspector Joe Dempsey, team leader of the Arapahoe County Sheriff's bomb squad, along with a Denver bomb squad detective, spotted the top of an alarm clock poking out from a large, blanket-covered mound in the back seat of a car identified as Klebold's. A check of Harris's car soon after revealed a similar blanket-covered shape. Given the danger posed by the large bombs, experts had to clear the cars before returning to the building. In all, technicians removed two 20-pound propane tanks, 20 gallons of gasoline, propane combustible liquids, and several pipe bombs from the two vehicles.

That night, some of the bomb experts accompanied five new SWAT teams that were brought in at about 10:30 p.m. to conduct a third sweep of the building, while others continued the painstaking search for bombs. Bomb squad commanders called off the clearing process, though, after an overly tired technician lowering a pipe bomb into a special disposal trailer at about 10:40 p.m. bumped the device into the side, setting off an explosion that threw 15 live bombs out of the trailer. "We were getting a lot of pressure because the evidence people and the command staff and the families—everybody wanted into that school," explains Deputy Dan Davis, a member of the Arapahoe bomb team. "But we couldn't say that it was safe for them to go there." Parents who were still waiting at Leawood Elementary for word of their missing children were advised by 11:30 p.m. to go home for the night.

At 7:30 a.m. the following morning, April 21, the coroner and a team from the JeffCo Sheriff's Office returned to the library, followed by two forensic teams, to collect evidence, identify the deceased, and take videos and photographs of the crime scene. Investigators, relying primarily on physical descriptions provided by waiting parents the previous night, identified all the victims by noon, and officials notified the families soon after.[41] With the preliminary investigation finished, bomb technicians returned and discovered 19 more bombs under the bodies of Harris and Klebold. The bodies were finally removed from Columbine late that afternoon. "If it ever happens to anybody again, I would

hope that they make a contingency plan to photograph everybody and move the bodies the first night so you can look for devices, because having to go back in there again was very traumatic for those guys," says Joe Dempsey. "We would have felt better had we known that we were able to take the kids out of the library that first night."

Before a full-fledged investigation of the incident could begin, the bomb squads still had to clear the rest of the school, including the backpack-strewn cafeteria, where technicians had already found a large propane tank bomb that had failed to explode. Given the enormity of the task, and the desire to move forward quickly, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms brought in dogs trained to sniff out explosives, and took them through as the experts in the library were finishing. That afternoon, after the dogs completed their work, officials declared the building safe enough for investigators to enter. But perhaps due to sensory overload from all of the ammunition, detonated bombs, and other explosive materials in the building, the dogs missed one of the two largest bombs in the school—a second 20-pound propane bomb with a timer hidden in a duffel bag in the cafeteria. After a technician spotted the bomb Thursday, he ordered everyone from the building, and bomb squad members returned for a meticulous backpack-by-backpack search.

According to plans and homemade videotapes later uncovered by investigators, Harris and Klebold had timed the two propane bombs to explode in the cafeteria at 11:17, when the room was likely to be teeming with almost 500 students. The two then planned to shoot those students who tried to escape.[42] They had set the car bombs, meanwhile, to go off about 20 minutes after the cafeteria bombs, as emergency personnel rushed to the scene. Had the plan worked as envisioned, bomb experts say, the exploding tanks and ensuing giant fireballs probably would have killed or injured many of the students in the area, and might have caused parts of the library to collapse into the cafeteria. "The good Lord was looking after this school and all those kids because neither one of those bombs went off in the cafeteria," says Robert Armstrong of Arapahoe. "That's a big thing. Bad bomb makers made for a lot of live kids. We've got to be thankful for that."

In all, bomb technicians found 76 explosive devices at the school, as well as two bombs in the field, 13 in the two cars, and eight more at the two students' houses, for a total of 99. "Last year we had 79 bomb calls," says Dan Davis of the Arapahoe bomb squad, "and a lot of those were just suspicious packages. This was well over a year's worth of devices in one night." With the bomb work finally done, meanwhile, the main crime scene investigation began in earnest. When completed in mid-June, seven teams had collected more than 10,000 pieces of evidence, taken some 10,000 photographs, and conducted about 5,000 interviews. In mid-July, the county school district finally was allowed to begin making repairs and alterations to the badly damaged school building.[43]

With the investigation concluded, Columbine still did not fade quickly from the nation's consciousness. Over the following months, commentators, politicians, and others—backing a range of causes from gun control, to curtailed violence in movies, to increased parental involvement—pointed to the shootings at the high school as a poignant and powerful symbol of the need for change in American society. While residents in the Columbine area also mulled these issues, for many, an examination of the emergency response, itself, became the primary focus. Newspaper articles critical of law enforcement actions appeared within days of the shootings, and several months later, the families of victims brought lawsuits against emergency responders, the school, and even the parents of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

Even without this outside scrutiny, though, the shootings at Columbine would remain etched in the minds of all those who were there on April 20, 1999, whether students, teachers, or SWAT members. And for many, the questions raised by the experience would never be easily answered. "I think about this thing every day of my life," says JeffCo SWAT member A.J. DeAndrea. "I have to read about it every day in the newspaper. I see those kids lying there every day. I've soul searched, what could I have done differently? What could I have done better?" He adds: "The only way I could have changed it is to have been right there, to know it was going to go down, and to have been able to engage them the second that they started. And lives still would have been lost."

Notes

1. It would be months more before some investigators accepted that the carnage unleashed that day had been the work of just those two.
2. Though the school had a Littleton address, it actually lay about two-and-a-half miles outside the city border.
3. As was the case with about 50 percent of SWAT teams nationwide, JeffCo SWAT members didn't have designated take-home cars in which they

could keep their tactical equipment. As a result, when paged for a SWAT response, most members headed first to the Sheriff's Office to gather their equipment and then drove together to the scene. Full-time urban SWAT teams, by contrast, typically kept their equipment with them at all times, and could report directly to a developing incident.

4. In addition to original interviews, this account relies heavily on the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office Report in CD-ROM format, titled, "Columbine High School Shootings: April 20, 1999." Due to legal proceedings related to the shootings at Columbine, many law enforcement responders declined to be interviewed for this case study.
5. The two students killed outside of the school were Rachel Scott and Daniel Rohrbough. The student first reported as injured in the parking lot, meanwhile, was Anne Marie Hochhalter, who survived the attack, but whose injuries left her paralyzed.
6. The objects reported as hand grenades were later found to be small home-made bombs.
7. Thirty-four students who were also in the library were uninjured.
8. The man was later discovered to be a heating and air conditioning repairman who was there to fix a leak. He was removed from the roof shortly after noon.
9. According to the JeffCo Sheriff's Report, instead of a gunman, the students were hearing custodians with keys and school radios.
10. Harris's nickname was "Reb," which may have aggravated confusion over his first name.
11. Although Columbine wasn't in Arapahoe County, several members of the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office command staff reported before JeffCo because their headquarters was only a few miles away, while it was about 15 miles to JeffCo's headquarters in Golden.
12. DiManna was off duty when the shooting broke out, but drove directly to Columbine when he heard the report on his radio.
13. Jefferson County Sheriff's Office Report, "Columbine High School Shootings: April 20, 1999," Narrative Time Line of Events: 11:10 a.m. to 11:59 a.m.
14. Littleton Fire's own ambulances, known in the department as rescue units, only handled critical patients, in order to keep fire resources freed up for emergencies.
15. The victim was Daniel Rohrbough, one of the first students to be killed by the shooters.
16. The congestion was worse than it might have been, Rahne says, because Denver police didn't trust the capabilities of outlying agencies and had called for their own fire department and paramedics to report. "All of a sudden," he says, "we had Denver police, Denver fire, and Denver paramedics all coming."
17. Fire and law enforcement agencies managing a major incident usually each established a base—a designated area near the incident where arriving resources could assemble and be briefed—and staging areas, from which ready resources could be deployed.
18. The individual was questioned and later released. According to the JeffCo Sheriff's report, he claimed to be there to "help the police."
19. Although law enforcement and the media initially seized on the Trench Coat Mafia angle, students identified with this set were later found to be so loosely organized that they didn't constitute a real group, and Harris and Klebold weren't even members of that crowd.
20. The bomb that initially exploded in the field was inside a backpack, and detonated after a road worker picked up the bag and tossed it aside. A bomb in a second backpack nearby exploded soon after, probably ignited by the fire. Bomb technicians were never able to determine whether the device functioned as planned, or was simply triggered when thrown.
21. Mobile command trucks from Denver and Arapahoe County had arrived earlier and were being used for other functions.
22. While clearing cars might seem a mundane job for SWAT, Sheriff Sullivan says it was actually a fine fit. "Number one, they're a team. Number two, they're very healthy, very strong individuals."
23. Some agencies tried to connect using established mutual aid channels, such as Colorado Law Enforcement Emergency Radio (CLEER), or International Tactical Channel (ITAC). Even these, however, had frequency constraints, with CLEER being a UHF channel, and ITAC only available to users of 800 MHz systems.
24. The group had to move slowly, observers say, because the fastest and most direct route to the west entrance went right by the school, within easy shooting range of any gunmen who might be inside.
25. After shots were exchanged during the initial medical rescues on the south side of the school,

Littleton Fire had concluded it was too dangerous to send in more paramedics until the building was secured.

26. The deceased students were Rachel Scott and Daniel Rohrbough, the latter being the student already pronounced dead by the paramedics more than a half hour before.
27. Investigators later speculated that those hidden were actually hearing the sounds of SWAT teams breaking down doors.
28. Unlike many SWAT commanders, Manwaring often deployed to the site with the team instead of remaining at a tactical command post, although he didn't enter the building.
29. Davis had been with the Sheriff's Office for 20 years, eighteen-and-a-half of them in uniform before becoming the PIO.
30. Among the breaking stories Davis had to deal with early that afternoon was the apprehension by officers of three young men dressed in black who were walking near the school. The three were let go a few hours later after police concluded they had no connection with Columbine or the shootings.
31. The JeffCo Sheriff's Office eventually asked the Federal Aviation Administration to impose temporary flight restrictions over the school to clear the airspace.
32. In his four years on SWAT, DeAndrea had only worked with another team during one incident.
33. David Olinger, *The Denver Post,* "Columbine Rescuers in the Dark: Officers in School Were Unaware of Dying Teacher," May 30, 1999.
34. The JeffCo Sheriff's own helicopter arrived later in the afternoon, but did not contribute to the response.
35. Ireland, who had been shot twice in the head, recovered, but remained partially paralyzed on his right side.
36. By this time, Littleton Fire had established two additional triage sites to treat the injured, including one right outside the main east entrance.
37. Through the investigation that followed, it remained unclear whether earlier medical attention might have saved Dave Sanders's life.
38. The injured student, Lisa Kreutz, survived her injuries.
39. Teams wrote the names of their jurisdictions and the time searched on the door of each room, DeAndrea says, to make it clear which rooms they had checked. The only untoward occurrence of the second sweep was when a SWAT team used frangible slugs fired from a shotgun to blow the hinges off a locked door without warning the other teams in advance, sparking a short-lived armed response.
40. Stone was roundly criticized for releasing such an inaccurate figure. According to Davis, though, the number was not far out of line, given the conflicting reports they'd received from inside the school, and the number of critically injured students already rushed to hospitals who were not expected to survive.
41. Although the coroner wanted to withhold notifications until after a formal identification, District Attorney David Thomas and a few associates broke the news to families still waiting at Leawood, as well as to those who had returned to their homes.
42. Although Joe Dempsey says one of the timed pipe bombs intended to trigger a propane tank did go off, either because the timer worked or because a pipe bomb tossed near it set it off, it didn't detonate with the force necessary to puncture and ignite the propane tank.
43. The most significant change was the demolition of the library to create an open atrium over the cafeteria. The school also added an emergency exit door to the science wing.

Chapter 9 Review Questions

1. According to James Garnett, why do public administrators need to keep in mind the centrality of communications? How does one find out about the key players and processes influencing communications both inside and outside an organization and learn to deal with them effectively? Do you concur with Garnett's thesis about the professional centrality of information networks? Why or why not?

2. What problems of communication are illustrated in the Columbine shooting case? Which were the most important ones in creating the dilemmas that officials faced?
3. What types of communication issues discussed in the Garnett reading are illustrated in the Columbine case? How, in retrospect, would Garnett advise local law enforcement to deal with those issues?
4. What does the case study tell us especially about the communications between governmental jurisdictions, as well as between the media and public agencies today? Are there any enduring lessons for public administrators?
5. How do communications systems make or break an administrator's ability to control and direct the policies of his or her organization? As an administrator, what techniques would you utilize to ensure that the information you receive is accurate, timely, and *not* distorted by preconceived personal or institutional biases?
6. Can you generalize about the ethical dilemmas created by communications processes for those who work for a public organization, especially for those who value truthfulness and open communications in performing their work? What risks are apparent within the organization when people are not able to communicate *everything* or are not *told* everything necessary to perform their work? Can you identify your own ethical standards concerning communications in a public agency?
7. What does this case suggest about the role of the media in the workings of public agencies? In bounded rational decisions in your opinion, should public officials do more to forge relationships with the media, particularly in times of crisis?

Key Terms

internal versus external communications processes
communications players
government communication
newsmaking process
managerial communication process
barriers of language
groupthink
interorganizational communications
the credibility conundrum
the propaganda paradox
"tell and sell" communications methods
the two-way symmetrical model
ethical communication
frames of reference
status distance

Suggestions for Further Reading

The importance placed on communications processes in shaping governmental and organizational decisions was largely the result of several seminal works. These writings of the following key theorists should be studied with some care: Chester Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938); Herbert Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization,* 4th ed. (New York: Free Press 1997); Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government* (New York: Free Press, 1950); Norbert Weiner, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1948). For a useful study of Herbert Simon and his contributions not only to this area but the entire field of public administration, see the whole issue *Public Administration Quarterly* (fall 1988), especially the opening interview with Simon. One should also read Simon's autobiography, *Models of My Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). For an evaluation of Barnard's contributions, see the entire issue of Jack Rabin and Thomas Vocino, eds., "Special Issue: Papers

in Honor of Chester I. Barnard," *International Journal of Public Administration,* 17 (1994) as well as William G. Scott, *Chester I. Barnard and the Guardians of the Managerial State* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994). Harlan Cleveland, *The Knowledge Executive: Leadership in an Information Society* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1985), presents a lively study of this topic from a leadership perspective.

For more pragmatic works on the subject, review Herbert Kaufman in collaboration with Michael Couzens, *Administrative Feedback: Monitoring Subordinates' Behavior* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1973); Hindy Schachter, *Public Agency Communication* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983); and Doris Graber, *Public Sector Communications* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1992). The best practical textbooks on this topic are David S. Arnold, Christine S. Becker, and Elizabeth K. Kellar, *Effective Communication: Getting the Message Across* (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1983); James L. Garnett, *Communicating for Results in Government: A Strategic Approach for Public Managers* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1992); and P. V. Lewis, *Organizational Communications: The Essence of Effective Management,* 3rd ed. (New York: Wiley, 1987).

General handbooks provide useful overviews of this topic. See C. C. Arnold and J. W. Bowers, eds., *Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1984); C. R. Berger and S. H. Chafee, eds., *Handbook of Communication Science* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1987); and James L. Garnett and Alexander Kouzmin, eds., *Handbook of Administrative Communication* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1997). For a recent synthesis of this literature, read Janet D. Weiss, "Public Information," in Lester M. Salamon, ed., *The Tools of Government* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), pp. 217–54. Much of contemporary discussions about administrative communications center on issues of e-government. Two recent handbooks provide helpful summaries of these issues: Jack Rabin et al., eds., *Handbook of Public Administration,* 3rd ed, (Boca Raton, Fla.: Taylor & Francis, 2007), unit 11, pp. 767–822 and Guy Peters and Jon Pierre, eds., *Handbook of Public Administration* (London: Sage, 2003), chapter 29, pp. 366–75; as well as the recent cluster of four essays, "New Perspectives on E-Government" in the *Public Administration Review* (May/June 2008), pp. 523–675.

The crisis of war can illuminate problems of administrative communications with unusual clarity. For some excellent examples, see Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981); E. B. Potter, *Battle for Leyte Gulf: Command and Communications* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Inter-University Case No. 126); John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); Sam Adams, "Vietnam Cover-up: Playing War with Numbers," *Harper's Magazine* (May 1975); Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993); and from the Gulf War, in Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991). Perhaps the best of such military studies are Douglas S. Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants,* 3 volumes (New York: Scribner's, 1944) and John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking, 1976). More recent books on 9/11, the Iraq War, and the Katrina tragedy underscore these communications issues, for example, see the entire 2007 Special Issue, *Public Administration Review* devoted to analyzing administration the lessons from Katrina.