

## CULTURE

# The Revenge Of The Lost Boys

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What's going on with young American men? Another mass shooting has led to another round of social and political recriminations. A young man—a “loner” and “adrift,” as usual—seizes a vile cause and attacks innocent people. Amidst the wreckage, we look for reasons that already fit our preconceptions about violence, and we blame racism, guns, unemployment, drugs, a bad family, or whatever else helps us to make sense of the tragedy.

But the truth of the matter is that Dylann Roof (at least from what we know) isn't that different from so many other young, mostly white men over the past 30 years or so who have lashed out against their society in different ways. Although mass killers understandably seize our imaginations and dominate the media, and not all dysfunctional young males are violent and not all of them gain the publicity they crave. Some are terrorists, others are murderers, and some are merely vandals. A few are traitors and deserters.

What they all have in common is their gender (male), their race (most are white), and their youth (almost all under 30 at their peak destructiveness). Beyond this, they seem to share little beyond a stubborn immaturity wedded to a towering narcissism. In almost every case, they dress their anger in the clothes of ideology: white supremacy, jihad, **hatred of abortion**, or anti-government paranoia. Stuck in perpetual adolescence, they see only their own imagined virtue amidst irredeemable corruption. In a typical sentiment, Roof wrote before his rampage that “someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.”

## The Lost Boys Arise

This is the battle cry of the narcissist, and we've heard it before. Western societies are producing more and more of these Lost Boys, the fail-to-launch young men who carry weighty social grudges. Some of them kill, but others lash out in other, more creative

ways: whether it's Edward Snowden deciding only he could save America from the scourge of surveillance, or Bowe Bergdahl walking away from his post to personally solve the war in Afghanistan, the combination of immaturity and grandiosity among these young males is jaw-dropping in its scale even when it is not expressed through the barrel of a gun.

Obviously, I am not suggesting that Snowden or Bergdahl are killers. If anything, these lost young men seem to be impossibly sensitive souls. (I will leave aside the actions of Chelsea Manning in this context, whose story is more complex than I can comprehend.) Yet all of them committed immensely destructive acts, and for reasons that were as rooted in their own failed manhood and maturity as Roof's. There are others: John Walker Lindh, "the American Taliban," spent his teen years hanging around in Internet chat rooms before became a jihadi at 20. Timothy McVeigh, a bullied little boy, planned his terrorist attack on a federal building after quitting the Army in his twenties. John Salvi, another loner, shot up an abortion clinic at 22. The list could go on. These young losers live through heroic fantasies and constructed identities rather than through work and human relationships: on the Internet, Snowden was "Wolfking Awesomefox," which almost defies parody, while McVeigh thought of himself as a modern Paul Revere. Their lives, until the moment of their individual tragedy, are full of desperate attempts to spackle over the gaping hole of insecurity that should have been filled by the arrival of manhood sometime after high school.

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## Deep Frustrations about Sex and Identity

Make no mistake: this is almost exclusively a masculine phenomenon. Women, especially in the West, are not usually the perpetrators of massacres or other spectacular anti-social acts. This is not a novel observation, but it's worth remembering the important role sex and masculine identity—or the lack of one—play in the life of dysfunctional young men. In many cases, these man-boys are confused about their sexuality and frustrated by their own social awkwardness, and seek to compensate for it. They turn into what German writer Hans Enzensberger called "the

radicalized losers,” the unsuccessful males who channel their blunted male social impulses toward destruction.

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These frustrations about sex and identity are especially dangerous when they flare into violence. Roof raged about blacks “raping our women,” a concern almost identical to those expressed by the group of wannabe-jihadis thwarted some years ago in Canada who were obsessed with the idea that Canadian soldiers were raping Afghan women. Eliot Rodger, the young man who killed three people before plowing his car into many others near the University of California-Santa Barbara in 2014, explicitly

said he was punishing other men—and, of course, the slutty women who love them—for being more sexually successful than he.

Jihadis, of course, are the object lesson in this kind of deformed male identity. For all their faux piety and supposed distaste for Western immorality, the young men from North America and Europe who gravitate toward jihadism are often gleeful consumers of forbidden Western delights, and they have a particular obsession with rape, pornography, and an adolescent fixation on the subjugation of women. Terrorist organizations overseas are happy to accommodate this need: it’s not a coincidence that almost every time a jihadi nest gets raided, there’s plenty of porn to be found. Even Bin Laden had a voracious appetite for it.

## The Narcissistic Revenge of Angry Losers

Angry losers are not a new or exotic phenomenon. What’s different now, however, is how social media and the unarguable growth of narcissism among younger people are creating a new kind of lashing out. It’s not enough to kill people or to strike at symbols of authority like the government; today, a new breed of young losers insists on larger social relevance and mass recognition for their actions. We once thought it disturbing that someone like the Unabomber would demand that the world read his silly manifesto; now we’re surprised if a young man who engages in a gigantic crime of any kind *doesn’t* leave behind some kind of testimony for his imagined legions of fans on the Internet.

Young black men, of course, actually harm each other more often and in more disproportionate numbers than the angry white losers. I am not a sociologist, and I am not going to digress into the problems of the inner city. It seems unarguable, however, that young black males who prey on their own society share one essential trait in common with the white losers who act out and harm strangers: they are not men in any sense of the word that connotes responsibility, restraint, self-discipline, or the other traditional masculine virtues.

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These are the qualities of “manliness” described by Harvard University professor Harvey Mansfield some years ago, and whose disappearance from modern society Mansfield not only lamented but also presciently warned would have baleful consequences. Like their white brethren, dangerous black males are angry and childish, but their effect usually does not reach beyond their own neighborhoods. Likewise, the media and the public, for a variety of tragic reasons, simply do not respond to the daily violence among young blacks the same way they respond to the showy productions executed by angry white males.

## Portrait of a Misfit as a Young Man

Indeed, it is telling that we pay attention only when white kids—or, as in the Virginia Tech case, an emotionally disturbed Asian—snap. There is a subtle, even unconscious racism at work here, to be sure. Perhaps we are shocked when young men who we think might have more of a stake in the social order turn on it. Or perhaps we are now simply numb to urban black violence.

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Even in the world of espionage, however, there seems to be a public double standard: many people look up to Snowden as a celebrity, while just a few months ago former Central Intelligence Agency officer Jeffery Sterling, an African-American, was sent off to federal prison for leaking American secrets with nary a peep from the public. (I think both Sterling and Snowden are criminals, for what it’s worth.)

Still, the alienated young loners, especially those who commit spectacular acts of violence, are largely a white phenomenon. As loath as we are to accept it, Roof is different only in degree, but not in kind, from young men like Lindh, Snowden, Bergdahl, Salvi, Britain's "Jihadi John" (another middle-class "quiet kid" who turned against his own society) and others.

This is a disturbing charge, but consider for just a moment the ways in all these young men are similar, rather than different. They are aloof, and their peers generally do not understand them. They may be liked in a small circle of people, but they also make those same people uncomfortable. Their adolescence, which should have been shed years earlier, has stayed with them like a worn t-shirt or a beat-up pair shoes they couldn't bring themselves to throw away. Whether fascinated by hip-hop culture like Lindh and Jihadi John, or living a virtual life online like Snowden, they do not move on to the responsibilities of adulthood.

They find education tedious, not least because even the normal challenges of high school require the social skills they lack. College, if they make it that far, is just another arena for social failure. Working life is out of the question: these are young men who imagine themselves cut out for more important things, whether music stardom or greater missions like, say, saving the United States from tyranny or from a foreign war. Or, in Roof's case, white maidens from the fearsome sexuality of black men.

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The military, or at least a fascination with the military and its symbols, is often a short-term solution for these boys. Many of these young misfits are mesmerized, as boys transitioning to men often are, with symbols of sex and power: guns, the military, and heroic medieval myths. (It is now a sad trope that every tragedy inevitably turns up Facebook pages and pictures of the perpetrators **in wannabe gangster or paramilitary poses**.) Very few Americans serve in the military, yet among this small sample of alienated losers, many either joined or tried to join the Army, including McVeigh, Snowden, Bergdahl, and, while he identified as a male, a young Bradley Manning. Two tried for the Special Forces. (Lindh, I suppose, joined up too, but in a different army.) You don't have to be a statistician to find that odd.

## An Inability to Handle Real Difficulty

Their experiences varied, but none were successful. McVeigh was briefly a competent soldier, but left the Army after being judged too psychologically unstable for the Special Forces assignment he wanted. Bergdahl went to Afghanistan to change the world. When life in the Army turned out to be beneath him, he decided that he was special enough to walk off and reason with the enemy one-on-one—**after, of course, leaving a list of gripes**. Manning was a problem from his first days in the Army, and was finally sent to Iraq to a desk job.

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Snowden, too, made a run at being a military hero. Unable to finish high school, Snowden tried the military cure and never even got through infantry training. With adolescent fantasies of grandeur, the young Wolfking, **the “TrueHOOHA” (as he was known in another of his identities on the Internet)** also headed for the Special Forces—every little boy wants to be the bravest soldier in the Army, apparently—only to find that things like standing up straight and getting out of bed in the morning were skills he’d have to master before he could jump out of airplanes with a knife in his teeth.

Snowden found people on the Internet—or, far more likely, they found him—and suddenly, a life with meaning was in his reach. He would be the greatest champion of liberty in U.S. history. Like many permanent teenagers, his political beliefs were rigid, but fickle: before he became a champion of stealing U.S. secrets, **he said that people who reveal classified information should be shot**. Taking a shortcut to glory, he stole thousands upon thousands of documents, most of which he now admits he never read. These days, he lectures us on our civic duty to democracy from his safe house in Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

This Manichean worldview, the division of the world into a childish game of Cowboys and Indians, is another commonality among these man-boys. Roof chose white supremacy, Lindh and the radicalized losers of Europe chose jihad, Snowden chose a caricature of civil libertarianism. If it hadn’t been one of these causes, it would have been something else: I have no doubt that at some point we will see a mass murder or



anti-government attack committed by a spelling reformer or a raw-milk advocate, if that's what it takes for a screwed-up adolescent to act out his rage against a world that refuses to acknowledge his specialness.

## A Failure to Mature Out of Social Confusion

Intelligence analyst John Schindler has identified these males as **a generational “insider threat”** to the security of the United States. He has a point. For years, Schindler warned anyone who would listen that the U.S. intelligence community, as he later put it on Twitter, was “one disgruntled, maladjusted dork away from disaster,” and he was right. In a darker but similar vein, former **Federal Bureau of Investigation agent Dave Gomez noted after the Roof case** that many of these young men “are guys with anger issues about race and unfairness and loneliness and inadequacy, and they find this stuff online and start copying the rhetoric. Instead of meeting in a hall somewhere, they meet in chat rooms....and most of them never do anything but talk.”

The argument here is not that Bergdahl and Snowden are potential killers, or that all introverted or awkward young men threats to society. Indeed, any man who has never gone through phases of introversion and awkwardness is unusual. In fact, sometimes extroverted young men are monsters: in the case of the Boston bombing, the older Tsarnaev brother **fits the bill of the creepy, disappointed narcissist**, while his younger brother, now sentenced to death, really does seem to be nothing more than an aimless pothead who knew how to have a good time, but who could not bear to disappoint his weird brother.

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Nonetheless, social isolation is an important, even key, factor in the paths chosen by these males. The mainspring of their actions is a juvenile narcissism that grows out of social resentment and a failure to mature. And this should matter to all of us, because when society breeds too many narcissistic males determined to get even with a world that denies them their due—the fame, recognition, or sexual mate they think they deserve—we're all in danger.

## Why Modern Society Creates Destructive Outcasts

What we don't really want to think about, because it challenges our cherished political narratives, is why modern society creates such destructive outcasts. These killers, school shooters, terrorists, or traitors, all of these failed boys—more accurately, failed *men*—are all incubated in the same environment of social isolation and prolonged adolescence. (Roof, by the way, was almost a “school shooter:” the high-school dropout **planned to attack a small college** before settling on the AME church.)

**To steal a phrase from Sen. Elizabeth Warren: we built that.**

How does this happen? Well, to steal a phrase from Sen. Elizabeth Warren: we built that. We, the adults, have made this generation of young men by allowing, over the course of some 40 years, the eventual construction of a hyper-sexualized, publicity-obsessed, winner-take-all

twenty-first-century culture in which success means money, sex, and fame at any cost. Young males no longer live in a world where there's a Jack for every Jill, or where social institutions like schools, the police, churches, or the military—all decimated by repeated social attack since the 1960s—provide some kind of equalizing effect among men, protecting and building up the weaker boys while disciplining and maturing the stronger ones.

The result is that today American youth, and especially the males, live in a kind of “Lord of the Flies” domain where the Wild Boys act without restraint and the weak kids fall off the ledge, without even a noble Ralph to mourn them. The already-anarchic environment of adolescence has been turned completely toxic by the absence of responsible adults and especially of male role models. In the jungle, the strong and aggressive rule, and in that world, the losers, the “kind of a loner” geeks, the misfits, feel they have no place.

They're not entirely wrong. So they settle on every young loser's fantasy: Revenge.

Here, however, I am at a loss for a solution, because the answer lies in some kind of long-term restoration of social order among young men. I don't know how to do that: the multiple horses of promiscuity, affluence (even among “poor” kids), permissiveness, violent and ghettoized teen culture, and perpetual immaturity are so far out of the barn now, and so entrenched in American life, that I have no idea how to stop their corrosive influence on the weaker or less competitive males who are plowed under a society that moves faster than they, and we, can manage.



Older men can no longer mentor younger men in any meaningful numbers. There are not enough of us, and many of us are reluctant to engage in such work in any case. The traditional venues for male socialization (including marriage) have mostly vanished or, in the case of schools, been rendered safe havens from the normal behavior of males in need of discipline and maturing.

Nor can mentors or schools fight the epidemic of divorce, pop culture, the media, and the overall assaults on the creation of the kind of family life that channels men toward creation rather than destruction. There has to be a sea-change in social attitudes, but I'm stumped about how to make that happen in a nation as self-indulgent and as averse to hard introspection as ours is now.

In the meantime, let's stop arguing over the symbols these failed men choose. Hateful ideologies and dangerous symbols are worth discussing, but we live in a free country and we're not getting rid of them. Instead, let's ask the harder question: why are we raising so many boys who will never make the transition to men, and how do we stop their repeated attacks on their own society?

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