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**Denial and American Schools**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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Required for Graduation from the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Denial that a terrorist attack can happen in an American school is a prevalent problem in the United States today. Being prepared for such an event should be a priority among law enforcement agencies and school districts across America. The challenge to the security of schools is lack of training, lack of preparation, and the belief that such attacks are statistically rare. Experts on terrorism and school safety, John Giduck and Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, agree that a terrorist attack will occur in America where a school is seized and children and faculty are taken hostage.

Research was structured around a tragic event that occurred at a middle school in Beslan, Russia on September 1, 2004, where school children were massacred by Islamic Chechen terrorists. According to Giduck (2005), it is possible that in the future, a group of terrorists will take over an American school, where hundreds of children, teachers, and parents will be held hostage. Grossman and Todd Rassa, a trainer with the SigArms Academy and an advisory board member for Police Marksman magazine, agreed that a "dress rehearsal for what terrorists plan to do to us" has already taken place (as cited by Remsberg, 2007, p. 3). More than three dozen heavily armed terrorists stormed the Beslan Middle School, and with approximately 49 other terrorists who were discreetly embedded in the crowd, they herded all of the hostages into the school gymnasium (Giduck, 2005). In less than 15 minutes, officially 1,181 hostages, mostly children, were held captive in the gym (as cited by Giduck, 2005). Giduck (2005) expressed the belief that Beslan was a test run for what is being planned for American schools. The purpose of this research is to raise awareness and to prevent such an occurrence from happening in the U.S.

Sources used to validate research were obtained from internet articles, books, and published authors who have expertise in the field of terrorism and violence, such as Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, John Giduck, and others. Research material was also obtained from the online Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT) digital collections of the Newton Grisham Library at Sam Houston State University.

Law enforcement has a responsibility to protect and to educate the public concerning methods of preparedness to prevent terrorist acts of violence from occurring in schools, and America should be prepared to deal decisively with the threat. There must be a partnership between law enforcement and the public to safeguard their communities and to protect the nation's greatest resource: its children. The research contained in the pages that follow clearly support the assertion by experts, such as Grossman and Giduck that "denial" is a reality, and public school systems in America are unprepared to deal with a serious threat to their security.

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## INTRODUCTION

School districts across America open the doors to campuses each year to provide education to children. With the task of education comes the responsibility of establishing security procedures in schools. Emergency operation plans are mandated by law to ensure that a mechanism exists to deal with emergencies, such as fire, tornadoes, and other threats to school safety; however, the measures to prepare for and prevent a terrorist attack on a school campus is extremely limited. The purpose of this research is to show that schools in America are unprepared for a terrorist attack where extremists infiltrate a school, resulting in a hostage situation to further a specific political stance or idealistic cause.

The decision to research the topic of denial and the unpreparedness of schools to deal with a terrorist attack came after attendance at a conference sponsored by the Leadership Command College (LCC) Alumni Association held in Austin, Texas, where the keynote speaker was Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman. Grossman is a former West Point psychology professor who is recognized internationally as a scholar, author, and an expert in the field of human aggression, violence, and violent crime (Dorn & Dorn, 2005). The information that was presented during the Grossman seminar revealed how unprepared schools are to defend against a terrorist attack where schools are seized and children held hostage. Grossman asserted that "Denial is the enemy. Denial will kill you" (as cited in Newman, 2010, para. 5). Schools are unprepared for such an event because of the belief that this type of incident is statistically rare. According to Grossman, a hostage situation involving a terrorist infiltration of a school will be perpetrated on America, and denial that such an event will occur is the greatest

enemy that the U.S. will face. Grossman stated, “The probability of a student being killed or seriously injured by violence is significantly greater than the probability of being killed or seriously injured by fire” (as cited by Giduck, 2005, p.15).

There are many definitions of terrorism, and it is important to define what type of terrorism is referenced in this research. Terrorist attacks vary and include chemical, biological, radiological, electromagnetic pulse, radio frequency attacks, and food contamination, to mention a few. Hostage taking is another form of terrorism effectuated by extremist organizations, and this and hostage taking involving the seizure of a school will be discussed.

The views expressed in the pages that follow will focus on research information that supports the assertion that a terrorist attack will take place in an American school, and denial is the danger zone of thought which is obvious in the lack of preparedness in the school systems across America. Denial, which can also be referred to as the “ostrich syndrome” is a prevalent problem. The online Urban Dictionary defines the “ostrich syndrome” as refusing to acknowledge something that is blatantly obvious by burying one’s head in the sand, which is synonymous to the actions of an ostrich when it perceives possible danger. It is this mindset of denial and the “ostrich syndrome” that makes schools most vulnerable. America should be prepared for a terrorist attack against its schools.

## **POSITION**

On the morning of September 1, 2004, at approximately 8:45 a.m., Islamist Chechen militants stormed middle school number one in Beslan, Russia. A security guard and one police officer immediately engaged and killed one of the terrorists before

being killed themselves by overwhelming odds. By 9:05 a.m., approximately 1,181 hostages, mostly children, were herded into the gymnasium of the school. The terrorists immediately began to fortify their positions, preparing for an eventual assault by Russian police and military commandos. The school was wired with explosives, including the gymnasium where the hostages were held captive (Giduck, 2005).

Once the terrorists had everyone secured inside of the school, their behavior became animalistic. They killed the adult men and the larger male students who could pose a threat to them, after using them as forced labor to assist with the fortification of the school. The bodies of those killed were tossed out of the windows into the courtyard, where the bodies remained for the next few days. Hostages were threatened and beaten, and female students and teachers were raped on the floor of the gymnasium in front of the rest of the hostages. It was reported that terrorists even used the barrels of their rifles to sexually assault some of the girls. Later, female hostages were taken to rooms on the second floor of the school where they were raped repeatedly by the terrorists during the days that followed. The children that were held hostage ranged from ages 6 to 16 (Giduck, 2005).

The sun shining through the many windows of the gymnasium contributed to oven-like temperatures inside of the gym. Thirst and dehydration resulted in hostages drinking their urine and using shoes for cups. This is only a mere mention of what the hostages endured during the four days of captivity. When the siege ended, approximately 330 hostages were dead, including 172 children and numerous others who were seriously injured (Giduck, 2005). The aforementioned events are not

included for the purpose of sensationalism but to expose the merciless behavior and disregard for human life exhibited by the terrorists during the three day siege.

John Giduck is one of the nation's leading experts on terrorism and Russian special operations. He recorded, in detail, the horror of the Beslan attack and the events leading up to the invasion of the school, the aftermath, and how the incident is relative to America. Giduck (2005) stated, "it is possible, even likely, that another group of more than a dozen terrorists will take over an American school and hold hundreds of children, teachers, and even parents, hostage" (p. 37). The possibility of children being murdered by terrorists in a school attack is considerably real. It happened in the tragedy at Beslan, and according to experts such as Giduck and Grossman, it will happen in America, though it is unknown when and where. While considering terrorist actions and tendencies in the past, Grossman maintained that the greatest predictor of future behavior is past performance (as cited in Giduck, 2005). It is necessary to study terrorist events of the past in an attempt to predict what can be expected in the future.

Dorn & Dorn (2005) stated, "Terrorists target schools because they are relatively soft targets and powerfully symbolic targets. Schools and school functions can also provide opportunities for terrorists to create a mass casualty event with large numbers of young children as victims" (p. 61). Another reason that a school is an easy mark for a terrorist assault is because American schools do not have the security found at an airport, government facility, military installation, or school in a country such as Israel. Israeli schools have faced terrorist threats for years and are essentially armed fortresses manned by military commandos. Michael Dorn is the Executive Director of



Safe Havens International Inc., a non-profit school safety center. Dorn & Dorn (2005) stated, "When terrorists desire to exploit the vulnerability of a government to protect its children from attacks, the victimization of school children is a powerful example" (p. 63).

Since the 1999 attack on Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, law enforcement has implemented training to deal with active shooters. Prior to Columbine, officers responding to an active shooter incident would stand by and wait for the deployment of a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team. During Columbine, for the time that it took SWAT to mobilize and to arrive at the scene, innocent victims were being murdered while first responders waited outside. The Columbine shooting ushered in the "active shooter doctrine" that compels law enforcement to move towards the sound of gunfire and not wait for special response units while children are being killed (Giduck, 2005, p. 16).

As much as the Columbine tragedy stunned Americans, there would be no comparison to the prospect of 20 to 30 well-trained, armed terrorists storming a school. Law enforcement is not prepared to face an enemy who has planned and studied the security measures of the intended target and has the fortitude to carry out their mission with school children as the victims. Kenneth S. Trump is the President of National School Safety and Security Services, a national consulting firm specializing in school security. He is one of the nation's leading school safety experts, with 25 years of experience working with school and safety officials in the United States and Canada. Trump (2010) argued that progress relating to security in schools in the years following Columbine has actually decreased.

## COUNTER POSITION

Although a terrorist attack on a school in America may be improbable, it would be irresponsible to ignore the possibility that it could happen. Cavanaugh (2004) wrote an article reporting that an unidentified man was taken into custody by U.S. authorities in Iraq and he had, in his possession, a computer disk that contained a publicly available federal report on school emergency planning. The federal report was a guide for schools and detailed how to prepare and respond to a crisis. The eight school districts mentioned in the report are located in the states of Georgia, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, Oregon, and California (Feller, 2004).

On October 6, 2004, the United States Department of Education issued a letter to parents, students, and staff of school districts across America addressing the terrorist attack in Beslan, Russia. The October advisory letter signed by Deputy Secretary Eugene Hickok was distributed with recommendations for heightened security and emergency preparedness. The letter passively encouraged school administrators to review their security procedures for such attacks and attempted to soothe public concerns (Giduck, 2005).

Paul Fennewald, a 23-year veteran of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), in a personal communiqué to Grossman, reported that he was asked to give a lecture for a U.S. Department of Education sponsored seminar on the topic of emergency management for schools. Fennewald had planned to present a slide show that mentioned the incident at Beslan. On the morning that Fennewald was to give his presentation, he was contacted by the Director of the Emergency Response and Technical Assistance Center, a section within the U.S. Department of Education. The director told Fennewald not

to mention the Beslan incident because it might cause too much emotional distress, and it was their policy not to talk about Beslan in their seminars (as cited in Huddleston, 2009).

It is inconsistent on the part of the Department of Education to issue an advisory letter informing the public of the Beslan incident and then censor an instructor from having a meaningful discussion on a subject that could have future ramifications for America.

Government agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education should be educating the public to the potential threat of a terrorist attack against schools. The censorship of Fennewald is an example of the "ostrich syndrome" being exercised at a government level.

The most troubling statement in the Department of Education letter was at the conclusion, where Deputy Hickok attempted to alleviate concerns by assuring the public that the "information provided by DHS and the FBI was not generated by any threats received by U.S. educational institutions" (Giduck, 2005, p. 274). Giduck further stated that the fact that the terrorists were able to carry out the Beslan attack should be warning enough. If America fails to prepare or take appropriate preventative steps to prevent such an act, then it may be too late.

Despite concerns that a terrorist attack will occur in an American school, there are points of view that terrorist attacks in the U.S. and abroad are statistically rare events. Naysayers state that talking about the possibility of a terrorist attack on a school furthers the terrorist goal of spreading fear. It must be considered that failure to talk about the possibility of such an event causes the public to be more vulnerable (National School Safety & Security Services, n.d).

Waste of money or financial resources is another viewpoint that is espoused and is an important factor that should be considered. The position taken is that money spent on preparing schools for terrorism is wasted money that could be effectively used

elsewhere and if first responders are properly trained, then they will be able to take care of schools if a threat occurs. However, it is alarming that in the aftermath of Columbine and the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center that the trend in recent years is to cut school safety budgets (National School Safety & Security Services, n.d.).

A survey was conducted by Trump (2010) in 2002 for the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO). The survey showed that 95% of school resource officers who participated reported their schools as “vulnerable” to a terrorist attack, and 82% stated that school security personnel had not received any terrorism specific training. The most shocking statistic reported was that 77% of the school resource officers surveyed stated that teachers and school administrators had not received any type of terrorism training (as cited in Callery, 2000).

While in Beslan, following the tragedy, Giduck had the opportunity to interview Russian Special Forces Commander Sergei Lisyuk. The Russian officer made the following comment referring to the American people, "if they do not adapt to the times, and recognize the threats they are now under, they may not have children to teach" (Giduck, 2005, p. 249). Despite warnings by terrorism experts such as Giduck and Grossman, denial continues to be the reality, and denial will be the reason that America will be unprepared when terrorists come to school. America is not prepared for a widespread attack on its schools and simply does not believe it can happen to them (Maier, 2002).

Grossman predicted that parents will not send their kids to school the day following an attack on a school. He believes that the U.S. economy will be devastated by this occurrence (as cited by Remsberg, 2007). Rassa stated that Al-Qaeda has

publicly expressed the right to kill two million American children. As cited by Remsberg (2007), he believes that operations for school attacks are currently in the preparatory stage. Video exists that shows terrorists in Afghanistan practicing the takeover of a school with the terrorist trainees issuing commands in English as they rehearse moving students into more manageable groups. The killing of children is not only permitted but has been approved by Mohammed as long as the terrorists' purpose is for the good of Islam (as cited in Remsberg, 2007). As cited in Giduck (2005), Grossman was direct and to the point when he said that no nation would be as devastated as America if its schools were seized and children murdered. He also stated that America needs to wake up and begin doing something about the possibility of a terrorist attack on American schools.

## **CONCLUSION**

A dress rehearsal for what terrorists plan to do to America has already taken place in the form of the Beslan massacre. America should plan for the inevitable before it occurs and that will only be accomplished through training and preparation. This research has addressed denial and the devastating effect that it will have when a terrorist attack occurs in an American school. Dissenting opinions have been countered by experts in the field of school safety and terrorism that prove the thesis that denial is detrimental to preparedness and school safety.

Grossman stated there were four areas to focus on besides denial: deter, detect, delay, and destroy (as cited by Remsberg, 2007). America must learn to deter by maintaining an armed police presence in schools. Unarmed security personnel in a school are no more than a speed bump for trained terrorists. According to Giduck

(2005), school security officials and Russian Spetsnaz soldiers have predicted that it is first going to take a large body count of children before Americans will abandon their sensitivities and opinions, and demand anything and everything be done to protect their kids. Without an understanding of the enemy, Americans cannot begin to prepare themselves. The public must be vigilant and assist in the detection of any suspicious activity near or around schools and report such activity to the appropriate authorities. Schools must have a plan to delay terrorists should an attack occur. Schools should rehearse anti-terrorist scenarios and implement school lock-down procedures. School administrations need to re-think funding of security budgets. Thousands of dollars are spent to guard against the threat of fire with drills, alarms, and sprinklers systems with little funding for training and prevention of a terrorist attack on a school. However, violence poses a greater threat to the safety of children than being injured in a fire according to Grossman (as cited in Giduck, 2005).

Responding officers must be prepared, mentally and physically, to use deadly force to stop the terrorists. Grossman stated that law enforcement must be ready to confront the threat immediately and not make the mistakes that were made at Beslan while the Russians attempted to negotiate with the terrorists. Every minute the Russian commandos delayed their decision to assault the school, it allowed the terrorists more time to fortify their positions (as cited by Remsberg, 2007). Law enforcement must alter their thinking and realize that from the moment they encounter an armed terrorist until the battle has ended, they are no longer police but soldiers fighting a war on terror (Giduck, 2005). In speaking about the legal system and the news media, Giduck stated that they must understand that such situations are not street level crimes, committed by

typical criminals, or the socially misunderstood, where force is determined by the actions of suspects, where they are afforded all of their legal rights. Terrorist attacks are assaults on American citizens by an enemy who is intent on inflicting as many casualties as possible. The greatest amount of force must be brought to bear against the terrorists if the lives of innocent adults and children are to be saved. It is all about preparedness and not panic. It is about being informed instead of succumbing to the "ostrich syndrome." It is about maintaining an American way of life uninfluenced or deterred by an enemy intent on destruction. This paper is much more than research to fulfill the requirements of academic achievement. It is about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and most of all, it is about surviving to preserve the American way of life for the next generation. Thomas Paine stated that, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind" (as cited in Ruffini, 2006, p. 266).

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