



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MISCELLANEOUS

## Don't highlight record-setting bloodshed

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment December 9, 2011 10:00 AM

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Anyone living anywhere except under a rock would have reacted to yesterday's news of a shooting at Virginia Tech by recalling the unspeakable horror that occurred nearly five years ago on that Blacksburg campus. No one needed a reminder of what came before.

The *New York Times*, however, felt it necessary and appropriate to lead its coverage of what appears to have been a cop murder then suicide with a first-phrase reference to that tragic day in April 2007.

BLACKSBURG, Va. Nearly five years after a massacre at Virginia Tech that was the deadliest ever on a school campus, two men, including a campus police officer, died of gunshot wounds there on Thursday afternoon.

Of course, yesterday's deaths may not have been quite as newsworthy were it not for earlier events.

In addition to rethinking the placement of the historical note, the *Times* might also have been more judicious in choosing adjectives to refresh our collective memories. Identifying the earlier massacre as the deadliest ever reflects the unfortunate context in which the news media often chronicles events, especially tragic ones. Records are there to be broken. Each time we hear about some misdeed that was the worst, the deadliest, the cruelest, or the most devastating in history, a small few who might identify with the villain are challenged to outperform their unworthy role model.

Let us not forget that the *New York Times*, whose motto promises All the news that's fit to print, deemed it fitting to print an offensive photograph of the man who perpetrated the April 2007 bloodbath boastfully brandishing his weapons, and to place the image on the front page, above the fold. Without a doubt, the massacre was a major news story, but the attention then and now should not be about the man who made that news.

It will take years" make that decades" before the memory of the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre fades. But whenever there are reminders of that terrible tragedy, as with yesterday's shooting, let's recall the senseless suffering of the innocent victims, but not the selfish actions of one despicable man who set some ignominious record of carnage.