

August 30, 2007

## Report Faults University for Response to Cho, Shootings

An investigation into the Virginia Tech shootings criticized the university for failing to respond to the behavior of Seung-Hui Cho and for communication problems. Panel member Tom Ridge discusses the findings.



**Tom Ridge**  
**Virginia Tech Review Panel**

*Governor Tom Ridge Interview Transcript*

### ***Connecting the dots***

RAY SUAREZ: For more on the findings, I'm joined by Tom Ridge, a member of the review panel. He's a former secretary of homeland security and a former governor of Pennsylvania.

And welcome back to the program.

TOM RIDGE (R), Former Governor of Pennsylvania: Good to be back.

RAY SUAREZ: Now, the bottom line, from the hundreds of pages of research and deliberation that your commission did, did you conclude that this was a preventable crime?

TOM RIDGE: I think we concluded that there were many points where the right intervention, the right conversation, the right contact could have -- could have -- avoided the tragedy. And there were so many occasions where, if one person would have talked to

another, where there are a couple of teachers would have talked to the dean of students, to the care team, where they would pull the parents back in.

One of the interesting ironies and tragedies in this whole scenario is that he was diagnosed as having depression and other challenges in middle school, so he had professional treatment. The parents were engaged. He was under medication. He did fine.

He went from that very supportive environment to a large university and an academic environment where students, teachers, administration, police and counseling service all knew that he was troubled, all had signs of very serious personal problems. And yet, in spite of all of that -- and I hate to go back to the 9/11 analogy -- but nobody connected the dots. But intervention at any one of those times with any one of those groups we think could have prevented the accident, the tragedy. Not the accident, the tragedy.

RAY SUAREZ: Your report takes the chronology practically back to the day this young man arrives in the United States as an immigrant from Korea, follows him through his whole life. When he goes to college, is there any sign that he is getting better, getting worse, staying stable? What do we know about the freshman at Virginia Tech?

TOM RIDGE: Well, I think the first sign right after high school, freshman year, frankly, is not too bad. Sophomore year, he moves off campus and has difficulty with a roommate and thinks he has -- he's troubled by some insect infestation and refuses to accept the problem that he's got, frankly, physical problems, acne.

He really starts -- then he decides to change his major from business information systems to English. And then, in his junior year, these writings, these bizarre, violent, scary writings start appearing in poetry, in short stories. And it's that point in time, those writings, his stalking women, his bizarre behavior in certain rooms with students, counseling session with the officials at the mental health unit at the school, intervention of the Virginia Tech police, in the fall of 2006 actually detained overnight by the mental health community and found to be a danger to himself.

So there are plenty of places where, particularly in that end of that sophomore beginning of the junior year, there could have been intervention, through the junior, being a senior could have been intervention.

### ***Privacy bars prevent communication***

RAY SUAREZ: As you note, a lot of different places had a piece of the whole story that is this fellow's story, yet they felt that they couldn't speak to each other. Why?

TOM RIDGE: Well, as it was explained to us, the rationale given to us was that they felt that there were bars -- privacy bars -- established by federal legislation, federal regulations that prevented them from talking to another about his mental health condition and that there would be liability associated with it. Whether or not they ever made a

formal inquiry to get a clear, clear signal from a lawyer that they were barred remains to be seen.

The work that our council did, scandanarps, the attorneys that worked with us and their research said there are clearly exceptions to those regulations in emergency situations. And to take it a step further, I happened to talk to a university president who's a great friend of mine, and he said to me at the outset, "If it's a life-or-death situation, when you see this bizarre, crazy, abhorrent, frightening behavior, and the possibility that you might be breaking some federal reg, you ought to break it to get the professionals involved and worry about liability later."

Now, it's easier said than done, but it's pretty clear that it was at least an explanation given to the panel as to why none of this communication occurred.

RAY SUAREZ: A lot of the report goes to that lack of communication. There's also some attention paid to the fact that Cho was able to buy two semi-automatic weapons. Should he have been able to acquire those guns?

TOM RIDGE: No, he bought those firearms in violation of federal law. Virginia is only one of two states that provides any mental health information into the federal database. Unfortunately, at the time, because of some confusion of interpretation, again, in the law, the notion that a special judge had ruled that he was a danger to himself, that decision, that judgment, had it been communicated to the appropriate authorities, inserted into the federal database, would have been prevented him from being able to acquire both of those weapons. And Virginia is only one of 22 that provides any of that information, so it means there's 28 states out there that don't provide it at all.

RAY SUAREZ: But it was left to Cho himself, therefore, to self-report his mental problems.

TOM RIDGE: Which, of course, he did not. You know, the other challenge that we had during this was that there were mental health records that obviously were written because of his treatment as a young man in the public school system.

And one of the challenges, we think -- and you do want to protect people's privacy -- but when you go from high school to college, they send your scores, they send your extracurricular activities, they ask you about immunizations, they send a lot of reports about you, so that you have a profile. But your profile is basically incomplete if you've got a mental health history, and that's not forwarded. And right now there's a federal -- because of confusion about a federal regulation, most people have concluded correctly that information doesn't transfer.

### ***Initial response to shootings***

RAY SUAREZ: Did you conclude that Virginia Tech responded appropriately once Cho began to commit his crime?

TOM RIDGE: We concluded that the first response to the double homicide was professional. We concluded that Virginia Tech and the Blacksburg Police Department, having worked together and fortunately at that instance put their SWAT teams on campus, which we think probably prevented even further carnage two hours later, but we also think that the Virginia Tech police, who historically had not really been -- their mission isn't viewed as law enforcement. Their job is really to provide a peaceful and orderly campus for the academic life.

They weren't as firmly embedded in the infrastructure. They did not recommend to the policy committee or the administration that they cancel classes. We found very clearly that the warning that was given almost two hours later, they had an ineffective means. They were just about -- they were in the process of building a different system for warning purposes for a different kind of events. It was not in place.

The e-mail certainly was inadequate, and the message was incomplete. So it was sent out late, and the message was about shootings. It wasn't about a double homicide. And we concluded that we thought the Virginia Tech police erred, not so much in saying that the first lead was a good one, because under the circumstances, at that moment, at that factual situation, focusing on a student who had dropped off one of the first students had been killed was a good idea. But it was done to the exclusion of all other possibilities.

And you've got a double homicide on campus, and we think they probably erred in their belief that this particular individual, who they later found off campus, was the primary suspect. You've got to keep your options open when you have a double homicide on campus, and they did not.

### ***Implementing the recommendations***

RAY SUAREZ: President Steger says he wants to implement the recommendations. What can he do first? And what would do the most toward guaranteeing student safety?

TOM RIDGE: I think -- and I say this not because it's just the Virginia Tech president and we were with the governor today, but for the grace of God I think this could have happened in probably scores of college campuses around the country. And so the press conference could have been held in a different state with a different governor.

Bottom line, there are so many gaps in communicating bizarre, unusual and frightening behavior, so many gaps in sharing information about his mental health, so many gaps, so many failures to connect people who knew about his behavior.

And so we think one of the most important things for every college and university to do is devise a threat assessment team that has your police, that has the psychologist or psychiatrist, that has somebody from the administration and other professionals, so if this kind of unusual conduct occurs, somebody cannot only identify it, but then monitor that student throughout that tenure, because there were so many red flags that would have

been identified had this threat assessment group been in play and had his name been brought forward.

The police could have brought it in; the students could have brought it in; the English department could have brought it in. There are a lot of people who could have put this young man's profile before them and said, "We have a very, very troubled student. I wonder if there's any mental health history here. I wonder if there's any problems in his grade school or high school. Maybe we ought to talk to his parents." None of that was done.

And I think one of the first recommendations, you've got to start by building that infrastructure and the notion that you communicate. You know, it's not to take action, but you certainly have to communicate. And there comes a point in time, based on all that information, that you do take action. And here, even though there were plenty of opportunities to intervene, nothing was done. And that's the tragedy within the tragedy.

RAY SUAREZ: Governor Ridge, thanks for joining us.

TOM RIDGE: Thank you.