Aaron McKinney's preliminary court hearing Thursday in Laramie has reopened a canker from which our state may not heal in the foreseeable future. McKinney is one of two men accused in the first-degree murder, kidnapping and aggravated robbery of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard. Russell Henderson, who faces the same charges, waived his right to a preliminary hearing. No one in Wyoming condones what happened to Shepard. He was robbed, tortured and beaten into a coma and tied to a fence post east of Laramie in early October. Shepard was pistol-whipped with a .357 magnum so severely that he had a two-inch depression behind his right ear. He was pounded into a coma and remained tied to a fence for 18 hours before being found by a dirt bike rider. Shepard died from his injuries five days later in a Colorado hospital. Wyoming is tired of being placed under a microscope by the rest of mankind, who believe this state is filled only with McKinneys and Hendersons. This crime has placed many Wyoming residents on the defensive. And who can blame them. For the most part, we are law-abiding and peaceful people. Still, there are those people who continue to consider us intolerant. Such characterization is neither valid nor does it mirror the people who live in this state. Such portrayal tells us these critics have never visited our state, don't know us and don't want the opportunity to know us.

The amount and character of the e-mail received at this newspaper on Friday leads us to believe those critical of our state are more intolerant than we who live in Wyoming. One e-mail read: "I am so tired of turning on the news and computer and seeing the backward hick ways Wyoming seems to be handling this inhuman barbaric act against Matt Shepard. Your state and your leaders better pull their heads out of the proverbial sand before you take hard hits economically. I for one will be selling off my land in Wyoming and never plan on visiting again." Another e-mail said: "I hope the other 15 people in the state are a bit more friendly."

"When compared to other states, Wyoming's crime rate is minuscule. New York, Texas or California have more murders per capita in one month than we have in an entire year. Regardless, most of mankind has given Wyoming a black eye that is unjustified. While many people across the nation are asking why Matthew Shepard was killed, those of us who live in this state are asking why we are taking the blame for the actions of two men. Does anyone care to answer?"