

CAN THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY?

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In the general state of turmoil in the United States today, one of the most commonly sounded notes of accepted wisdom is the warning against the use of violence by such groups as students, the New Left and militant blacks. From the rhetorical overkill of the Vice President through the avuncular viewing-with-alarm of the *New York Times* to the parlor psychoanalysis of such domesticated radicals as Irving Howe, the message is the same—violence is criminal madness.

One does not have to be an admirer of violence to observe a curious double standard in many of these admonitions. Put in its simplest terms, this might be expressed as the distinction between official, hence legitimate, violence, and unofficial, hence illegitimate, violence. Put more formally, this is an attempt to substitute what *Webster's New International Dictionary* gives as the secondary definition of the word—"injury done to that which is entitled to respect, reverence, or observance; unjust force"—for its primary definition—"broadly, exertion of any physical force considered with reference to its effect on another than the agent . . ."

This bit of simple definition is necessary because of the efforts, by all sides in this dispute, to claim that there is good violence (theirs) and bad violence (that of the other side). Such a claim overlooks the most elementary fact about violence: it is neutral. Violence knows no moral ends. It is available to all men; it belongs to none.

It is part of the hypocrisy of all governments and status quos that their violence is somehow sanctified, that common consent makes superior virtue. This is the justification offered by such governments as Brazil, Greece, China, South Africa, Russia, Iraq, Israel, and many others, our own included. A comforting argument to the majority, it helps explain their apathy about governmental violence and the hubbub with which they greet the violent acts of individuals. Morally and logically, however, it is not much of an argument and serves mostly as a vestigial remain of the theory of the divine origin of the state.

But the divine origin of the state is not of much interest to those groups in our society who regard the contemporary state as owing its derivation much more to the devil, and it is not difficult for them to see the fallacy of this position. In its place they put a reverse theory, one which might be labelled "right makes might." Faced with a wicked and powerful adversary to whom moral arguments are meaningless, the use of violence is justified by superior insight and morality.

This argument is self-serving, but not necessarily any more so than those of the groups it seeks to overthrow. The groups on the out in our society nowhere show how much they are a

part of our society than in the way they accept its implicit assumptions. Of these assumptions, none is more pervasive than the idea that victory is the final test. In American life, there are "winners" and there are "losers," and that exhausts the categories. An idea "works" or "doesn't work." The ultimate sin in our society is to lose.

Therein lies the truth of Mr. Rap Brown's celebrated remark about cherry pie. Americans are not by nature any more violence-prone than, say, the Swiss, but their cultural imperatives reward violence a great deal better. This is the lesson of the ghetto riots; it is the lesson of the "love children" turned into workers in bomb factories; it is, above all, the lesson of Vietnam.

What then? Is violence simply the way of the world? The passage in Matthew (11:12) alluded to in the title of this editorial (and familiar to readers of the late Flannery O'Connor) says, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force." The statement occurs in the context of a warning of Divine judgment on those who refuse to accept prophets when they appear.

How to distinguish the true prophet from the false one is one of the most vexing problems of history, no less so in a society which specializes in marketing prophets much as any other commodity. One might very well argue that the problem is even more difficult in a media society. It is reassuring to argue that revulsion against the war in Vietnam is due largely to seeing the normal violence of war on television in our living rooms. But one wonders if the sequence in Fellini's *Satyricon*, where a man's arm is actually chopped off as part of a theatrical performance, is not simply a reminder of ancient cruelty but also a prediction of things to come.

Non-violence has always received sentimental lip service in this world, but little else. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. were not even allowed to die non-violently, so let us not be too glib about forswearing violence. Perhaps the time is coming when the sheer violence of our society will bring forth, in desperation, a new crop of advocates of non-violence as the atomic bomb produced a new breed in the nuclear pacifists.

Let us hope so. In the meantime, we must struggle with the problems of how to produce a society based as little as possible on coercion; a society that truly does value multiplicity rather than conformity but yet does not disintegrate. Those problems are complex and difficult, but

there is one thing that is necessary before attempting any solution. We must stop lying to one another and, more important, to ourselves. There is no benign violence. The Chicago Police and the Weathermen, the F.B.I. and the Black Panthers are morally in the same boat. We may judge one necessary and the other not, but that is a prudential judgment only. For violence is a psychotic whore; she will sleep with any of us in turn or all together, but in the end she will turn and kill us all.

Arthur J. Moore

DECEPTION AND POLICY

On the human affectivity scale, the love of truth holds no primacy. There are a lot of things we like more. Ease and clarity are examples. And when deceits promote ease and clarity, we fall in love with deception and resist the truth as we would a rival. None of us are all that alien to Elwood P. Dowd, the visible hero of *Harvey* who, when urged to be realistic, professed that he had tried reality and found it wanting.

Now let it be said that ease and clarity are no mean values. And yet, securing them in a world of mounting ambiguity and complexity often requires considerable sacrifice at the level of truth. A truly objective view of today's social realities brings us into agonizing confrontation with absurdities, threats, and contradictions. The effort for objectivity yields no ease and little clarity. The quest for truth is a rough and abrasive pilgrimage. Deception, imposed or self-administered, is the easy and obvious solution. Small wonder, then, that deception is in such strong demand and copious supply on our current national scene.

No viable government, of course, has ever been unaware of the possibilities of deception. Deception, conceived outside of context, is a morally neutral notion. In certain contexts, it can be good. There are tender deceptions that preserve relationships from inevitable weakness and there are strategic deceptions that make diplomacy and politics feasible arts. Deception can serve and be good. It can also dominate and be bad.

The Nixon Administration did not initiate political deception any more than Johnson invented incredibility. This Administration has, however, been emitting some distinctive and high-profile deceptions to an avidly receptive nation. But now some of the tangled webs that have been woven