

anything more active than that.

The tyranny of the future (and not the distant future, either) will arise in the vacuum left by the destruction of public political life, a destruction that is proceeding apace in the United States, as it already has in Sweden, in the Soviet Union and in many other places as well. Its harbinger will be the destruction of political institutions and the growth, in their stead, of pseudo-institutions, transient assemblies of the temporarily committed, vicarious participation in the spectacle of political affairs by isolated millions of fragmented individuals.

The lesson of Huntford's book is that there is no remedy for this problem in *program*. All the panaceas struggling through Congress have already been tried in Sweden, and it is still a form of tyranny, albeit a well-fed one. If there is a menace to be read in Richard Nixon's victory at the polls, the desperation that produced it cannot be remedied by this or that program discovered by bright young men in a Senate office. The desperation comes from the conditions of political life itself, the prime condition being the shrinking of that life in the first place. It is well to remember the utter emptiness of a world without politics that comes through so forcefully in Orwell's *1984*:

It struck him that the truly characteristic thing about modern life was not its cruelty and insecurity, but simply its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness. Life, if you looked about you, bore no resemblance not only to the lies that streamed out of the telescreens, but even to the ideals that the Party was trying to achieve. Great areas of it . . . were neutral and nonpolitical, a matter of slogging through dreary jobs, fighting for a place on the Tube, darning a worn-out sock, cadging a saccharine tablet, saving a cigarette end.

This is the life of millions of Americans—although, with affluence, they watch the telescreen more and darn socks less. Otherwise that description comes much too close for comfort.

The American Way of Violence

by Alphonso Pinkney

(Random House; 240 pp.; \$7.95)

Violence: The Crisis of American Confidence

edited by Hugh Davis Graham

(Johns Hopkins University Press; 180 pp.; \$8.50)

Paul M. Thompson

Talk to any American about social and political life and the discussion will come around to violence. In an affluent suburb, Vietnam or repression are the most frequent examples given; in the ghettos, violence by police and in prisons; in decaying ethnic wards, violence on the campuses and in the streets. Indeed, violence has become a masterword in our public life and a political institution in its own right. Educators and experts are given funds to study it; politicians exploit it as a salient issue; motion picture executives make it their stock in trade. And the lonely figures like Oswald, Ray, Sirhan and Bremer use it for their own tangled purposes, so much so that assassinations threaten to become, like presidential elections, a quadrennial feature of American politics.

According to Alphonso Pinkney this is not at all new; America had a violent past which has created a violent present which, in turn, will create a violent future. Of course Pinkney has no trouble finding the "evidence" to support his thesis; only a bit more effort and he might have written a book entitled "The Human Way of Violence," beginning with Cain and Abel. Violence has indeed always been with us, but that hardly accounts for the differences in its extent, in the means by which it is expressed, in our fascination with it or, most important, in the degree to which it is regarded as legitimate. Pinkney's "historical" method—however justified his anger

at American atrocities past and present—reflects more than poetic license in the selection of data.

For example, in discussing lynchings, Pinkney writes that

In 1964, while dragging the Mississippi River for the bodies of three Civil Rights workers who had disappeared and who were later discovered to have been murdered, the searchers discovered the mutilated bodies of two black men. *It was not known how they met death and there is every probability that they were lynched* [emphasis added].

Perhaps Pinkney knows more than appears in this paragraph. But a human being can be murdered or mutilated in a variety of ways (most of which Pinkney discusses in his book). The "probability" that the two victims were lynched is, as far as the reader can see, Pinkney's own invention, and the argument is only an instance (if one of the more defensible) of the author's assertion of causal relationships which are neither causal nor related.

Violence: The Crisis of American Confidence is quite a different book, reproducing the papers of twelve participants in a 1970 Johns Hopkins seminar on violence. It attempts, we are told, to gather "noted authorities on the origin and control of American violence" in the quest for definitive analysis. These "authorities" include David Brinkley and Herbert G. Klein, one of Mr. Nixon's spokesmen, which helps make

the book not only too diverse—a normal fault of conference anthologies—but too superficial to provide much in the way of coherence or understanding.

The major thesis of Graham's essayists is the scarcely astonishing proposition that violence is due largely to socioeconomic conditions. But the analysis of these conditions is neither very precise nor very intelligent, and the discussion of possible remedies—where, of course, there is less agreement—is worse.

Charles Frankel argues, for example, that "only a strong government, one whose authority is habitually accepted by the citizenry, can marshal the power to do something effective about poverty and injustice." But on the record to date it is hard to disagree with Howard Zinn's rejoinder that "our most powerful institution, the federal government, does not serve our needs—it serves its own." Bureaucratic agencies encroach on the citizen, and increasingly on elected repre-

sentatives in the effort to "solve problems," but insensitivity and arrogance create resistance, undermining the authority Frankel demands and preventing the solutions for which he hopes. Government, as Zinn suggests, has become part of the problem.

Our efforts to eliminate poverty, to take the obvious case, have had few successes. They have, though, inspired rage among working Americans who feel themselves neglected—and with reason. Affluence was always a myth for the vast majority of Americans (and many of the erstwhile affluent have been hit by the Nixon recession), and many of the nonaffluent have recognized that they are being asked to pay the bill, socially and economically, for the desperately poor. They fear that they will lose the rewards of labor and, in fact, that they will lose even the chance to labor as unemployment spreads and "affirmative action" is demanded.

That the poor are not the appropriate objects of wrath hardly matters; the anger and the potential for violence are just as real, whatever their objects. (Suburban liberals would not be happy, for example, if Newark's Tony Imperiale turned his hostility from blacks to the well-to-do communities in Bergen County). What does matter is the political paralysis which prevents effective action by the government or by citizens themselves.

Most of the participants in Graham's seminar call for "citizen action" as the remedy for violence. But citizen action, even were it possible, is an uncertain remedy. Pinkney is right, after all, to pay a good deal of attention to lynchings: They are a classic example of direct citizen action. John Gardner's Common Cause, run from the top, is less a form of citizen action than the opposition to busing in states like Michigan or a riot in an urban ghetto.

Despite all the rhetoric of recent years, participation and community action are still radically ineffective and badly organized; students have done too much marching with too

few results. But even if citizen action were made effective there would remain the problem of directing it toward desirable ends.

Daily more and more demands are placed on the government. Most are in the form of vague and emotion-laden but quite valid pleas for dignity, common humanity, honesty and justice, presented in *personal* terms. But a government of 200 million cannot respond to individual personalities. All of these demands were once satisfied to some extent by churches, social organizations and local communities. In his introduction to the Graham collection, Milton Eisenhower states that "it is the job of local schools, churches and citizen's groups to emphasize and transmit, more effectively than they have in the past, the values that will make our society more human and less violent." A good precept, a poor analysis: Mr. Eisenhower fails to recognize that all these institutions (and others like them) are in decay and that the government has been an active agent in producing their decline.

It is not simply that we need less government and more citizen action. We will need a government actively sympathetic to community, to social and religious organization. Civic life must precede civic action. Political life in America is diseased at its root, and without it we are unable to find support, guidance and reason in a world of misinformation and unintelligible rhetoric. We lack the ability to distinguish statesman from demagogue and in times of crisis are too prone to seize the remedy for violence that is easiest to bear and causes the least grief and anxiety, hiding violence under a rug of government repression (if we are rightists) or desperate permissiveness (if we are on the left).

It will hardly be a simple task to create political and civic life in America. It is possible, I suppose, to defend books like Pinkney's and Graham's on the grounds that they have made a beginning, and perhaps they have. But that only indicates the dismal point at which we begin.

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