Why Violence Works

By Benjamin Ginsberg  |  AUGUST 12, 2013

Humans, and perhaps their prehuman ancestors, have engaged in murder and mayhem, as individuals and in groups, for hundreds of thousands of years. And, at least since the advent of recorded history, violence and politics have been intimately related. Nation-states use violence against internal and external foes.

Dissidents engage in violence against states. Competing political forces inflict violence on one another. Writing in 1924, Winston Churchill declared—with good reason—that "the story of the human race is war."

Some writers see violence as an instrument of politics. Thomas Hobbes regarded violence as a rational means to achieve such political goals as territory, safety, and glory. Carl von Clausewitz famously referred to war as the continuation of politics by other means. A second group of writers view violence as a result of political failure and miscalculation. The title of an influential paper on the origins of the American Civil War by the historian James Randall, "The Blundering Generation," expresses that idea. A third group, most recently exemplified by the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, regards violence as a pathological behavior that is diminishing in frequency with the onward march of civilization. Some proponents of that perspective have even declared that violence is essentially a public-health problem. Whatever their differences, each of these perspectives assigns violence a subordinate role in political life.

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But there is an alternative view, one that assigns violence a primary role in politics. This outlook is implied by Mao Zedong's well-known aphorism that political power "grows out of the barrel of a gun." Violence, in other words, is the driving force of politics, while peaceful forms of political engagement fill in the details or, perhaps, merely offer post-hoc justifications for the outcomes of violent struggles. Mao corrected Clausewitz by characterizing politics as a sequel to or even an epiphenomenon of violence—a continuation of violence by other means.

Unfortunately, Mao seemed to have an inordinate fondness for bloodshed. After all, he suggested that the quality of a revolutionary should be judged by the number of people he has killed. Yet our revulsion at Mao's practices should not blind us to the accuracy of his observation. Violence and the threat of violence are the most potent forces in political life.

People say that problems cannot be solved by the use of force, that violence, as the saying goes, is not the answer. That adage appeals to our moral sensibilities. But whether or not violence is the answer depends on the question being asked. For better or worse, violence usually provides the most definitive answers to three major questions of political life: statehood, territoriality, and power. Violent struggle—war, revolution, terrorism—more than any other immediate factor, determines what nations will exist and their relative power, what territories they occupy, and which groups will exercise power within them.

In the case of statehood, there are occasional circumstances when a state may be built and endure mainly through peaceful means. The peaceful divorce of Slovakia and the Czech Republic is an example. This is, however, one of the rare exceptions. As the social scientist Charles Tilly has observed, most regimes are the survivors or descendants of a thousand-year-long culling process in which those states capable of creating and sustaining powerful militaries prevailed, while those that could not or would not fight were conquered or absorbed by others. Similarly, when it comes to control of territory, virtually every square inch of inhabited space on the planet is occupied by groups that forcibly dispossessed—sometimes exterminated—the land's previous claimants.

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Within every nation, the composition of the ruling class is generally shaped by the use or threat of what Walter Benjamin called "law-making violence." That elections have become common in some parts of the world over the past two centuries does not contravene the point. Yes, Barack Obama, America's first black president, was elected. But the possibility that a black person could join America's social and political elite was established through sometimes violent protest four decades earlier, to say nothing of the bloody war that freed black people from chattel slavery.

Violence is politically important for several reasons. Two of those—at the risk of stating the obvious—are the dominance of violence as a form of political action, and the fact that violence is, in the end, politically transformative.

First, the issue of dominance: Those willing to use violence to achieve their goals will generally overcome their less bellicose adversaries—overturning the results of elections, negating the actions of parliamentary bodies, riding roughshod over peaceful expressions of political opinion, and so forth. Indeed, the mere threat of violence is often enough to compel acquiescence. Violent groups can usually be defeated only by enemies who use superior force against them.

Occasionally a regime steeped in violence can be successfully confronted via peaceful means, but those are exceptional cases. East Germany collapsed in the face of peaceful protests in 1989 only when its Soviet sponsor, having decided to rid itself of its satellite empire, would not allow the German Democratic Republic to mobilize its feared security services. The Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet actually stepped down after losing a plebiscite in 1988, some 15 years after he had seized power in a bloody military coup. Yet even Pinochet's departure from office came on the heels of an assassination attempt and five years of violent demonstrations that undermined the Chilean economy, convincing many military officers that it was time to return power to a civilian government.

Generally speaking, force can be defeated only by force. When peaceful dissidents confront tanks, the result is more likely to resemble the Tiananmen Square bloodletting than the fall of the Berlin Wall. This lesson has been learned repeatedly throughout the Middle East in recent years. Peaceful protesters in Libya and Syria were no match for the
than the fall of the Berlin Wall. This lesson has been learned repeatedly throughout the Middle East in recent years. Peaceful protesters in Libya and Syria were no match for the tanks and machine guns their rulers were only too happy to deploy against them. Only when Libyan insurgents resorted to force backed by NATO airstrikes were they able to defeat the Qaddafi regime. And only through force could Syrian protesters confront the Assad government. In Egypt, President Mubarak was ousted more or less peacefully only because the army calculated that, in the event of violence, it could most easily retain control of the nation by acceding to demands for a new president.

Much attention is given to the putative effectiveness of nonviolence in politics. Nonviolent tactics are often said to have brought an end to segregation in the United States, Communist rule in Eastern Europe, and British rule in India. It's true that political leaders espousing nonviolence in those cases—Martin Luther King Jr., Vaclav Havel, and Mahatma Gandhi—played important roles. However, the tactics—strikes, boycotts, demonstrations—that leaders like King and Gandhi used were far from nonviolent. Rather, they were designed to provoke violent responses from their opponents. Attacks on apparently peaceful protesters would, it was hoped, elicit sympathy for the innocent victims and encourage politicians to intervene on their behalf.

Consider one of the tactics King used to undermine segregation in the South. King often led peaceful groups into hostile communities where he was confident that local authorities would assault the protesters. Those images helped build support for his cause and for demands that the federal government intervene, by convincing Northern audiences that Jim Crow was brutal, evil, and fundamentally un-American.

One of the most famous protests King organized, in March 1965 at Selma, Ala., is instructive. King picked Selma partly because racial discrimination there and in surrounding Dallas County was so obvious. For example, only a tiny percentage of the county's registered voters were black, even though blacks accounted for more than half the county's residents. King was also confident that the state and county political leaders were fools. He expected them to respond with violence and, in doing so, imprint themselves on the collective consciousness of a national television audience as the brutal oppressors of heroic and defenseless crusaders for freedom and democracy. With network cameras rolling, Alabama state troopers viciously attacked marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, seriously injuring many of them in what the news media called...
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Images of the violence unleashed enormous sympathy for the civil-rights cause and helped lay the groundwork for the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which sent an army of federal law-enforcement officials into the South with the power to suppress white resistance to the registration of black voters.

In essence, this nonviolent protest succeeded because the protesters' allies had an even greater capacity for violence than their foes. But in a case like Tiananmen Square, where protesters had no allies able to deploy or at least threaten the use of force, nonviolent protest will almost always fail.

The second reason violence is important is that it is a major instrument of social and political change. Without violence, as the always-prescient Mao put it, "it is impossible to accomplish any leap in social development."

The United States-dominated international system is, like its predecessors, in large part a product of wars and other violent episodes that created some nations, eliminated others, and determined the balance of power among the survivors. Today forces intent on changing the shape of that order are working assiduously to develop military capabilities that will allow them to challenge the United States or whatever regional powers stand in the way of their ambitions.

Thus, Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons that might give it a dominant role in the Middle East; China is building naval, air, and ground forces that could make it the central power in Asia; and a variety of less-well-endowed states, such as North Korea, and nonstate entities, like Al Qaeda, are counting on nuclear blackmail, terrorism, and other forms of asymmetric warfare to advance their interests.

Like conflict among states, violence within states, too, brings about major transformations. Practiced by dissident groups against regimes or by regimes against domestic foes, violence can sweep away established institutions and social forces and help to empower new ones. Violent change is particularly important in two realms.

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Consider the relationship between African-Americans and American police forces, school systems, social-service agencies, and other urban bureaucracies in the mid-20th century. Before the 1960s, those institutions generally viewed blacks as problems rather than clients. Many big-city police forces, in particular, routinely subjected blacks to harassment and were far more likely to employ brutality against blacks than against whites, claiming that extraordinary force was needed to maintain order. (These problems still exist today, of course, but before the 60s, they were more systemic and not as much a subject of public discussion.)

At the same time, police officers in black communities were generally slow to respond to calls for help and were more likely to ignore a range of illegal activities, like drug abuse and prostitution, that they would not have tolerated in white areas. All of those practices, according to the criminologist Robert Fogelson, were routine elements of police culture.

Most efforts by African-Americans to persuade the police to change their practices were unsuccessful. In New Orleans, for example, after 1945, African-American leaders formed more than 30 organizations to protest police misconduct. Groups like the Police Brutality Committee and the Committee for Accountable Police met with politicians and police officials and held numerous peaceful protests, all to no avail. There, as in other cities, the police dismissed black criticism as an effort to undermine the effectiveness of law enforcement.

Urban police departments were compelled to modify their conduct only by an outbreak of rioting and violence. Major riots took place in New York, Philadelphia, Rochester, N.Y., and Jersey City, N.J. (1964); Atlanta and Chicago (1966); Detroit and Tampa, Fla. (1967); and Washington (1968), while lesser disturbances occurred in many other cities. Virtually all of those riots were sparked by confrontations between African-Americans and the police. In most cases, rioters directed their rage at the local police, who suffered many injuries as well as some fatalities. National Guard troops who mobilized to restore order were generally treated courteously.

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After the riots, investigations by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the President's Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, and the National Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice came to the obvious conclusion that police misconduct had been a major cause of the riots. Local and federal officials were determined to prevent a renewal of the violence that had already cost billions of dollars in property damage. Reforms included the appointment of larger numbers of black police officers; the promotion of black officers to command positions, including the highest ranks of urban departments; police-community relations programs; and rules and regulations designed to compel officers to behave courteously toward black citizens. Two years of violence had forced the police to adopt policies that they had rejected for decades.

The political efficacy of violence is clear. But because violence can be so terrible, there is a persistent tendency to treat it as a problem rather than a solution. Some see political violence as a disease that can be cured through the alleviation of poverty and inequality. That position has been articulated by the National Institute of Mental Health and such political luminaries as former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark and President Lyndon Johnson, who said violence is caused by ignorance, discrimination, poverty, and disease. President Obama recently repeated that view in Chicago when discussing gun violence.

The idea is fanciful. Even if we overlook the overt acts of mayhem committed by wealthy and powerful individuals, groups, and nations, we can't ignore what the social theorist Slavoj Zizek calls "systemic violence," the use of coercion and threats of violence by the powerful to control and intimidate the lower orders.

In the United States, we are aware of the petty forms of criminal violence often committed by the poor. These are cataloged each year as "crimes known to the police" in the statistics reported by the FBI. Yet we are less attuned to what might be called "coercion committed by the state." In any given year, more than 1 percent of American adults, 2.5 million individuals, are incarcerated, with nearly five million more placed on parole, probation, or temporarily free on bail awaiting trial. Most of those people are charged with nonviolent crimes, and perhaps half of those are victimless offenses like drug possession, gambling, and prostitution. Under what is sometimes called the "broken windows" theory of law enforcement, which holds that disorder tends to spread, the police might not respond to a crime unless it is a breach of public order.
"broken windows" theory of law enforcement, which holds that disorder tends to escalate, harsh punishments are meted out to maintain a level of public order that makes "respectable" people comfortable. Systemic violence, then, is a deliberate solution imposed on behalf of the "better classes"—not an unfortunate and inadvertent problem caused by poverty and inequality.

Another group sees violence as a political problem that can be solved by appropriate forms of political organization. This group follows two main schools of thought, the Hobbesian and the Kantian. For Hobbes, the solution to violence was the creation of a state powerful enough to put an end to strife. For Kant, concerned primarily with international conflict, the solution was an increase in the number of republican governments, a type of regime that, in his view, was reluctant to engage in acts of armed aggression.

Neo-Hobbesians concerned with international violence favor the empowerment of supranational organizations; those concerned mainly with domestic violence look to strong states able to suppress violence within their borders. Neo-Kantians count on the spread of liberal democracy to bring about a "democratic peace."

Those solutions have their problems.

Hobbes famously wrote that in the state of nature, the life of man was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The solution was submission to a government with absolute power. In the Hobbesian Commonwealth, war and violence were to be eliminated by the subordination of the wills of the people to the will of the state. That sovereign must be absolute, since any limitations on its power would open the way to disputes, which might, in turn, lead to violence. Thus the Hobbesian solution to the problem of violence was, in effect, tyranny—far preferable to anarchy and violence. "Sovereign power is not so hurtful as the want of it," he averred.

This is problematic in at least two ways. First, it is not clear that tyranny is preferable to violence and disorder. The prevalence of popular revolution suggests that large numbers of individuals prefer violence to tyranny. Thousands of Libyans, Syrians, Tunisians, and Egyptians have chosen the former over the latter, even in the face of tanks and machine guns. In a similar vein, the former East Germany seemed like a very orderly place, but during its four decades as a nation, hundreds of thousands of its citizens risked their
guns. In a similar vein, the former East Germany seemed like a very orderly place, but during its four decades as a nation, hundreds of thousands of its citizens risked their lives to flee to the disorder and uncertainty of the West.

Second, the Hobbesian solution to violence requires a great deal of violence to implement. Hobbes indicated that men might "agree amongst themselves to submit" to a sovereign. If not, they must be compelled to submit "by natural force" or "by war." And once a Hobbesian Commonwealth is established, considerable violence will very likely be required to maintain its power. East Germany kept the peace by a program of surveillance, intimidation, and punishment that enrolled nearly a quarter of its populace in the regime's various security forces or as informers. Violence lurked behind the orderly facade.

There are cases where a Hobbesian "agreement" might be reached peacefully, but that seems most likely when states or other entities already have few antagonisms toward one another and see submission to a single authority as a means of advancing their mutual interests. The 13 American states in 1789 or the economically advanced Western European nations today are examples.

The imposition of sovereign authority over antagonistic states would entail considerable violence and a continuing regime of coercion—in other words, an imperial project that is more a recipe for violence than a cure.

As for the neo-Kantians, there is support for the idea that democracies are less likely than other sorts of nations to go to war, especially with one another. The evidence, however, is far from conclusive. Moreover, the world's premier liberal democracy, the United States, is among the most bellicose nations on earth. Since the Civil War, U.S. forces have been deployed abroad on hundreds of occasions, for major conflicts as well as minor skirmishes. And, of course, America's military arsenal and defense budget dwarf those of the other nations of the world. Ironically, the United States has justified many of its wars, including that in Iraq, with the claim that its goal was to transform its adversary into a peaceful, liberal democracy. Kant's democratic peace requires a good deal of bloodshed.

A final school of thought views violence as a moral problem that can be addressed through education and example. No doubt, this can be effective, and if everyone could be persuaded to forego violence, peace would prevail. But even those who would like...
through education and example. No doubt, this can be effective, and if everyone could be persuaded to forswear violence, peace would prevail. But even those who would like to reject violence should be wary of those not as enlightened as themselves. The Moriori of the Chatham Islands, east of New Zealand, remained true to their pacifist principles when attacked by the Taranaki Maori in the early 19th century. The result was that most of the Moriori were killed or enslaved by the invaders.

Of course, most groups and nations that avow strong commitments to peace are somewhat less principled than the unfortunate Moriori. Indeed, several forms of pacifism are less peaceful than might meet the eye. As with the civil-rights demonstrations in the American South, nonviolence can be a tactic of fomenting violence rather than engaging in it. Also common is what might be called contingent pacifism, in which political actors denounce the use of force by some groups or nations while casting a tolerant eye at the use of violence by others. For example, many American progressives are quick to condemn Israeli violence while justifying Palestinian violence against Israelis.

Finally worth noting is what might be called liberal pacifism. Tolerant, politically liberal individuals shrink from using violence under almost any circumstance. Most, however, accept the protection of the government and its military and police forces, paying taxes to support the systemic violence that preserves their comfortable lives. And in the international realm, by opposing violence, they are effectively condemning many others to live under tyranny.

Thus, like it or not, violence often is the answer to our political problems.

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