

# There is no middle ground

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The nation has recently been subjected to a totally misleading controversy over questions of urban "violence" and campus "unrest" based on a false dichotomy between those who supposedly believe in violence, chaos, and the destruction of normal political channels for change and those who favor nonviolence, order and democracy. Such a simplistic scheme, of course, begs the question: everyone who is not an undercover police agent or an outright psychotic would of course prefer order to chaos or nonviolence to violence, if these categories were compatible with justice; all would prefer to use routine political channels rather than be forced to invent new ones, if those channels were indeed open. But they are not.

The history of the past ten years of Left dissent in America however has demonstrated that "normal" channels close most suddenly when protest centres on any of the vital power relations in the society. In every important case, movements of protest have gone from the most benign of tactics to those that are more troublesome because of the intransigence of established power, not because of their own degeneracy or protesters' eagerness for violence. SNCC began as a pacifist organization patiently involved in voter registration; it ended in a militant avowal of Black Power. In the interim, society managed to bust as many pacifist heads as militant ones, and the only difference was that SNCC began to fight back. The movement for campus change began with the non-violent sit-ins of the FSM at Berkeley, with prayer and song by Joan Baez, but liberal Governor Brown called out the troopers all the same, and soon the students were showing up with protective helmets and occasionally giving back some of what they got. The peace movement tried its letter writing campaigns and electoral politics, but as it amassed support, the elites of the major parties moved decisively to prevent a vote on the war in the national election.

Those who dissent are admittedly more bitter now, and increasingly cynical about a Gandhian appeal to the good will of men of power; but assertions that they are the purveyors of violence in this society are a deliberate distortion of the facts.

It is still the police who are the major source of violence in American ghettos. The O'Brien case documents the contention of the Black Panthers that cops are an alien, violent force unleashed on the black community, that the courts will not convict cops who kill blacks, and that black self-defense has become a necessity.

It is still the U.S. government which is, as Martin Luther King said shortly before his death, "the major purveyor of violence in the world," in Vietnam and elsewhere; and it is the rankest hypocrisy to focus on student protesters who occasionally harass a Dow recruiter, disrupt classes, or break the windows of an ROTC building, as seriously competitive with this officially sanctioned violence. It is also quite illogical to argue that all violence is the same, both quantitatively and otherwise, for clearly a tomato thrown at a Dow recruiter is a very different matter, by any reasonable standards, from napalm thrown upon Vietnamese, and no one has yet even spoken about napalming Dow Chemical itself, which would certainly be morally more justifiable in terms of saving human lives than the bombing of Hiroshima or many other grand acts of national policy. Which is just the point: when mass death is officially disseminated it is "policy," but when a Harvard dean is shaken a bit it's "violence."

The liberal mentality, because it is almost constitutionally unable to focus on ultimate causes, must focus instead on that which is most obvious: tactics. But the central question is one of power, not tactics. All government bureaucracies have their own violence. They call it moral. They call it law. Such governments everywhere are united in branding those who challenge the legitimacy of their laws as purveyors of violence and chaos. Those who have power have the police and the courts, and if they do not permit channels for a basic challenge to their power, then they are the ones who impel the use of illegal tactics.

The protesters are then left with the choice of remaining within the system as an entertainment—the loyal, ineffectual opposition—or thrashing about for ways of rudely confronting that system and forcing it to give. This last is not a neat alternative; there is much confusion and error as men shorn of power attempt "by any means necessary" to assert themselves. It would be far better if the system would simply give way or open up, but it doesn't. It rather becomes more and more oppressive: conspiracy indictments against the Chicago protesters; long sentences for the Presidio "mutineers"; Smith Act indictments against the leaders of the Black Panthers. The "mutineers"—who simply followed Martin Luther King's tactics by sitting in a circle, holding up fingers in the peace sign while singing "We Shall Overcome"—received harsher sentences than all other protesters, even though their tactics were totally nonviolent, precisely because they challenged the centre of government violence, the army, proving once again that it is the challenge to established power and not the choice of tactics which is troubling to the men who run this country—the "they."

And if there is one thing which separates the protesters from those who administer the government or form the backlash or are simply apathetic, it is over the recognition of the "they."

We were all raised on the myth of the egalitarian American politic: power is diffuse, the political channels permit a redress of grievance for all, and what imperfections appear from time to time are marginal to the system and may be corrected without troubling the whole. But the last ten years of government have revealed all too clearly that power is highly concentrated in those corporate and political elites which run America, benefit from its empire and political status quo and control its universities toward that end. The FSM'ers soon discovered that the regents of their university were not simply neutral citizens but rather representatives of the top economic corporations in the state, from Matson shipping to Pauley oil and the Hearst corporation. Vietnam protesters soon learned that the war was no accident of American foreign policy but rather necessary to the maintenance of the empire, and the activities of black militants revealed that racism was not a Southern aberration but rather something built into the very core of the American experience. And when protesters moved beyond marginal criticism to a fundamental challenge to established power they became a recognized threat—"New Left wreckers" rather than sincere reformers. The latter could be abided, even coddled, but the former, **no matter what their choice of tactics**, need to be eliminated. They will repress the Left no matter what its tactics whenever the Left gets near the jugular—be it denying the university to the military, organizing in the Army or organizing black people as revolutionaries rather than as black capitalists. They will bemoan the Left's choice of tactics, but what they really resent is its program which challenges prevailing power.

But nonetheless, the Left ought to be terribly concerned with matters of tactics, not because it will convince the powerful but because incorrect tactics will confuse the majority and make the pogrom easier. It must organize as a serious factor in American political life. A tactic which merely confronts without at the same time providing an educational basis for organizing those who are most affected is obviously to be rejected. Too often radicals seem bent on proving their revolutionary ardor in the eyes of their family or friends and stressing the degree of their alienation rather than the content of their program. Such tactics merely indulge one's sense of cultural uniqueness or political impotence, as in the case of the self-annointed "Crazies" (who recently disrupted an I. F. Stone talk) and other lumpen groups who provide ammunition for the enemy, confuse the majority that has a real stake in bringing about change in America, and force the Left to argue endlessly about dubious tactics rather than advancing its program.

The press has chosen to identify the wilder ploys of a small majority of radicals (increasingly the work of police agents) with the main activity of the movement in order to denounce it. But it is the Left which has been the victim of violence rather than its purveyor. At SF State, Harvard, Cornell and Berkeley, violence was first brought to the campus by the police and not the protesters.

The press has also frequently equated civil disobedience with violence. It is assumed that the student seizure of a campus building is inherently a violent act even if conducted peaceably, but that the original purchase of a building by trustees (whatever social hardship it may entail) is not—even though that purchase could hardly stand were the cops not ready to crack the heads of those who acted to deny its legitimacy. It was "lawful" and presumably "nonviolent" for the Regents of the University of California to level the housing in the bohemian student quarter in Berkeley, leaving a square block of dust in its place. But when people began planting trees and grass with swings for kids, making it a park, the pigs came in. At the request of urbane Chancellor Roger Heyns, they ripped it up and imprisoned the park within a grotesque iron fence. And the cops were lawful and orderly when they used tear gas, clubs and shotguns, shooting scores of people at random—which was not an example of "Pigs Gone Wild," as the headline in one underground paper had it, but rather the precise observance of Sheriff Madigan's orders to shoot, issued in compliance with Chancellor Heyns' directives. If Heyns were shot we'd never hear the end of it, but the students and street people simply didn't matter. And those who had planted the grass were held responsible for the violence. It proved once again that the game is rigged.

Neither could the line between ghetto and non-ghetto, or have and have-not, stand, were not the police primed by law and custom to preserve it. This power arrangement works most efficiently if it is not noticed, but it has been increasingly revealed as a result of the protesters' challenge to that power. The police are on the offensive; as the O'Brien case illustrates, the courts will no longer contain their excesses for fear of jeopardizing the very foundation of that official violence. But the establishment blows its own civilized cover in the process and is then forced to develop more obvious and ugly rationalizations for what is simply a fast-developing police state.

There is no longer a middle ground; it is necessary that people stand against that official violence, or they become responsible for it.

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