

American Violence

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*Version 1.2 (posted on 21 June 2022)
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Violence (*noun*):

1. swift and intense force: *the violence of a storm.*
2. rough or injurious physical force, action, or treatment:
to die by violence.
3. an unjust or unwarranted exertion of force or power,
as against rights or laws: *to overthrow a government by violence.*
4. a **violent** act or proceeding.
5. rough or immoderate vehemence, as of feeling or language:
the violence of his hatred.

Synonyms: *assault, attack, bestiality, bloodshed, blowup, brutality, clash, coercion, cruelty, disorder, disturbance, fighting, rampage, struggle, terrorism, destructiveness, duress, fierceness, frenzy, fury, murderousness, onslaught, roughness, ruckus, rumble, savagery, storm, tumult, turbulence, vehemence.*

Nothing can be said or written about the American penchant for violence that hasn't been uttered or penned a thousand times before. No insight remains unstated — whether true or false, brilliant or stupid, subtle or crude, specific or general, sagacious or foolish, perceptive or ignorant, incisive or superficial, evidentiary or hypothetical. We have examined American violence in every way imaginable: from cover to cover, from front to back, from top to bottom. We have plumbed its depths and probed all its forms. And yet, none of that mountain of thoughts and feelings, analysis, or understanding has mattered one whit in reducing how in love Americans are with violence, not in the past and not in the present. Violence remains fundamental and inviolate as a core element in the American psyche — one of the defining facets of our national character, like commerce, material wealth, and family.

Much of our violence is fantasy-based in the stories we tell and show as "entertainment." Hollywood virtually runs on violence. To grow up in America is to be bathed in violent dreams, marinated in a toxic stew of aggression and vengeance. This is true to some extent of many cultures, but America has taken it to an extreme. By age eighteen, the average American has seen 200,000 acts of violence on TV or in movies, including 40,000 murders. The divide between fantasy violence and real violence is notoriously fuzzy, and the distance between them can be, for certain people, a very short trip.

Much of this can be attributed to the enduring American myth of the Wild West — the Untamed Frontier. We have enshrined “Cowboys” in our story-telling, expanding what was actually a very brief period of two to three decades in the mid-19th century to re-define our entire history through those images and fables (many of which were never really true). We tell ourselves that America is a nation of laws, but in our legends we imagine that, first and foremost, justice is delivered from the barrel of a gun by rugged individuals (almost always men) who are rough-hewn, self-reliant, and don’t take no guff from anyone.

We may prattle on about “respect for authority” or “law and order,” but underneath that smooth surface, whose visible security and apparent safety applies mainly to the privileged among us, the mythology of American violence bubbles away, never far from a boil. And while we tend to attribute most of our violence to enemies — to foreigners or our own underclasses — much of the havoc we’ve wrought (both overt and covert, here and around the world) has been state-sanctioned and authority-approved.

The Industrial Revolution, which provided the basis for America’s rise as an empire, was kicked off by the mass production of weapons. Some people assume that the cotton gin or the steam engine were the initiating inventions, but it was the development of factory-produced guns manufactured with interchangeable parts that truly sparked modern civilization. We may call George Washington the “father of our country,” but it’s probably more accurate to give that designation to Eli Whitney for his factory-made rifled muskets, followed by Samuel Colt for his mass-produced revolvers. Henry Ford may have refined assembly-line factory-production with the automobile, but Eli Whitney invented it. In a very real sense, guns made both America and modern civilization.

Arguing about the true meaning of the Second Amendment or how much and to whom the sale and ownership of guns — whether military-style assault rifles or any other firearm — should be regulated and limited is, finally, a meaningless exercise. The harsh reality is that, as a nation and a culture, America values money more than life. I want to state that again: *Money is more important than Life in America*. Making and selling weapons — to anyone who will buy them — is what we do in this country. Whether it’s missiles and tanks sold to Saudi Arabia or an AR-15 sold to an 18-year old incel with a grudge against society doesn’t matter. Every sale is precious to the Merchants of Death.

Want to stop the killing? The only way I can see for that to happen would be to somehow wean America off its nearly absolute love of violence. After 500 years of murder and mayhem, I think there’s precious little chance of that.