SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND HISTORY

VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

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IF America had been free of violence it would be a phenomenon without precedent in historical fact or philosophic speculation—a dynamic utopia. From the *Mayflower* to the last presidential commission on national goals Americans have been tireless in the formulation of ideals for a perfect society. But just as tirelessly, from the first landing at Jamestown down to the first American landing on the moon, other Americans, the practical men, have been injecting into the actual American society constant doses of energy and change. Thus the order of today becomes immediately the launching-pad for tomorrow. Change is as integral to the concept of America as liberty or equality or any of the other articles of the national creed. It is not happiness but the *pursuit* of happiness that is the third member of the trinity of human rights. And that pursuit has never been conceived of in passive, contemplative or private terms, but always as innovating and impatient action. That such action should be violent action was not indeed of the essence. But if violence should chance to be a by-product, if it offered a prospect of quicker results, if the knot were more easily cut than untied—then violence was an acceptable accident, a tolerable price to pay. The important things were the goal and the action; the process, by comparison, was to be judged empirically, by results.

Ideals and aims apart, many of the objective factors in American development were favourable to violence. This was a society planted in a New World, removed from the restraints and inhibitions of the Old. Whether or not a sustained policy of peaceful co-existence with the Red Man would have been practicable, it was hardly, within seventeenth-century canons of relationships between white and savage, Christian and heathen, conceivable. The tomahawk and the firearm were as hostile as they were unequal. And to the aggressive violence between Paleface and Redskin there was added almost as naturally (by the standards of the age) the repressive violence

between White and Black. On two fronts, the frontier and the plantation, American society was inured to violence from the moment of its inception.

That immigration means a clash between native and invader is obvious enough. But the distinctive nature of subsequent American immigration, its polyglot, multi-faith, prism-coloured character, set up additional strains and tensions internal to the society itself. Not that the different ethnic groups warred with each other. The great American miracle, perhaps the greatest as it is the least noted achievement of the American genius, is that they did not. But certain consequences of the immigrant flood were inescapable. The absence of automatically accepted common styles and standards, of instinctive mutual trust, of easy intercourse and comprehension—this even between whites of a European tradition in some sense common—was bound to make for strains, for a weakening of the underlying social fabric. At the individual, family, or community level this was bound to result in a feebler attachment to the democratic political and legal process, in a preference for the direct private or clannish settling of disputes over the slow, impersonal, non-violent operations of the law.

Nature cannot be saddled with responsibility for the so-called inhumanities of human behaviour, and violence is a flower that will sprout in any clime. But it can certainly be said that, if violence was to come, the North American continent was a good breeding ground for it. By giving it space it made it at once more exuberant and more tolerable. The U.S.A. is no Japan, a tight-packed society whose congestion breeds stresses and inhibitions that periodically explode—or implode—into violence. But equally it is no Switzerland in which all have learnt to live peaceably with each other because to do otherwise would be intolerable. North America's space in a sense made violence optional. Like the land itself, it could be taken or abandoned at will. If you wanted to live without it, like a Roger Williams or a Thoreau, you could. But if you wanted to indulge in it, the West was always there. It was no accident that 'wide-open' became a synonym for lawlessness and trigger solutions. They bred where there was space for them.

Again, even without being Montesquieuan, one must admit the stimulus of climate. This is a land of harsh and sudden extremes, of heat and cold, of drought and deluge. Natural calamities of the most violent kind, earthquakes and tornadoes, dust storms, forest fires, vast floods and fierce blizzards—it is

with these that the most comfort-loving and gadget-reliant civilization in history has had to learn to live. If climate were all, the American religion would be a set of nature cults far more brutal and demanding than those of the pagan Mediterranean. But even if the Judaeo-Christian ethic, as the Americans like to call it, has remained proof against such pressures, their influence can be detected in the American attitude to nature. A Wordsworthian pantheism, as Aldous Huxley long ago pointed out, cannot survive in the tropics. Just so the European ideal of a harmony between man and nature (still less the British ideal of a domestication of nature) will not transplant to North America. Here nature is in the first instance a foe to be fought and reduced; in the second instance a treasure-house, seemingly inexhaustible, to be looted—always a challenge to effort and strife, seldom an invitation to relaxation and co-operation.

It would be rash to try to measure the contribution this makes to the American style of life. History and environment act and re-act on each other and a national character is formed which re-acts on each. But that important elements of violence carry over into the most ordinary of American activities cannot escape the most casual observer of the American scene. Just as the air of New York carries an electrical discharge that will give you a shock the moment you touch the handle of your hotel room door, so the look, the speech, the style of American urban living —and America after all is an urban civilization—are highly charged with elements designed to shock and excite. Intensity is more prized than subtlety, impact than continuity, immediate effect than long-term consequence. Every visitor to North America has his own catalogue of experiences that record these characteristics, from the Martini to the Broadway musical. Into all of them in some degree, overt or disguised, violence enters. It is endemic in the usages of American speech, the only language in which 'aggressive' is consistently employed as a laudatory epithet. It is a central ingredient in that pervasive American folk culture, advertising. My own favourite example is a very modest, home-grown one—the shop within a stone's throw of Harvard Yard that bore the sign, 'Garbo, a new boutique, invites you to a dynamite experience in ladies' trousers'.

To document this violence-proneness is, however, a work of supererogation. Everyone, above all every American, is agreed about its ubiquity. The question is, how deep does it go, how significant a part of this culture is it? How does it differ from the violence that has, after all, been a recurrent

feature of all societies, in varying degrees, of the past and the present?

Violence, like alcohol, can be indulged in for its own sake, and requires no stimulus other than addiction. Nevertheless just as it is agreeable to know that a little of what you fancy does you good, so it seems to help if violence can be shown to pay. Historically, Americans have been given considerable grounds for believing that it does. Violence, and its elder brother, deceit, won them the best of the Indian lands. Violence, aided by diplomacy, won the infant republic freedom from King and Parliament and made it master in its own house. Violence won Texas, New Mexico, and California from Mexico. Violence, even if only after long provocation, settled the constitutional issue of secession and liquidated the institution of slavery. Violence ousted Spain from the Caribbean and the Philippines and laid the foundations of America's world power. Violence 'took' Panama and left the interoceanic link in American hands. Violence preserved the freedom of the seas and eliminated the German menace for twenty years. Violence stimulated the greatest levels of industrial and military production in history, destroyed Nazi Germany and Japan, and left the United States the greatest and richest power in the world. It is, in its way, a pretty impressive success story—a continent domesticated, a democratic union established and preserved, a barbarous domestic institution destroyed, destructive tyrannies overthrown, a peak of world power scaled and held.

Of course, the advocate of non-violence can draw up an opposite account. He can contend that the waste and bitterness of the Indian wars were as unnecessary as they were inexcusable, that there was land in plenty for Paleface and Redskin if only the Paleface had exercised moderation and restraint. He will argue that the seeming results of the 'shot heard round the world' were misleading, that the War of Independence may have settled who should rule but left for diplomacy and politics the solution of the basic problems of the relationship between Britain and North America and of the relationship between the North Americans themselves. He might add that it also took a second and peculiarly pointless war, in 1812, to get the violence out of America's system where Anglo-American relations were concerned. Even in respect of secession and slavery he could contend that while the War settled who should rule the Union and preserved it in one piece, it did not integrate the South into the nation, that that was only achieved by a

political deal which left the Negro out. In respect of the Caribbean and Mexico, he would say that the American ascendancy was purchased only at the price of a persisting estrangement between the followers of Simon Bolivar and those of George Washington. Of the two European conflicts he could point out how the Americans themselves quickly became disillusioned with the results of the first and for twenty years have had uncertain feelings about the aftermath of the second.

From a profit and loss account so full of subjective items no agreed historical debit or credit is to be expected. What is certain, however, is that until very recent times Americans themselves have had no doubt that the balance was signally in their favour. True, they would not have ascribed these successes as unequivocally as I have to violence. They would have given at least as much credit to the justice of their cause. In the national myth it is a handful of yeoman farmers who triumphantly rout the professional redcoats. At Gettysburg it is democracy which turns the tide in democracy's own favour. Even so they would not seek to deny that the sharp-shooting of the yeomanry and the logistical superiority of the North also helped to tip the scales against the parade-ground incompetence of the redcoats and the gallant but agrarian South. It is no part of the American creed to claim that a trust in God relieves one of the responsibility to keep one's powder dry. In the unfolding of the national achievement, force may have only a part to play, but it may often be a crucial part, and it is seldom judged dishonourable. In an unbroken success story, it is a part played on God's side. The righteousness that exalteth a nation is also a righteousness that sanctifies the employment of violence in its service. 'Force, force to the utmost, force without stint or limit' was what the peace-loving leader of American democracy, the offspring of two generations of Presbyterian divines, President Woodrow Wilson, demanded of his fellow-countrymen in April 1918.[1]

Nor is it altogether an accident that it is the voice of American Protestantism that we hear in this context. The Calvinism that presided over the Thirteen Colonies at most times and in most places believed whole-heartedly that the sword of the Lord was indistinguishable from that of Gideon, and indeed that for most practical purposes the test of its divine sanctification was to be found in its success on the battlefield. More than this, however, there is a tenacious thread in American Protestantism of

[1] R. S. Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters*, viii, p. 76.

apocalyptic violence. We have Perry Miller's assurance[1] that this had little or no place in earlier New England Puritanism, but by 1697 Increase Mather finds in the death of two Harvard collegians drowned while skating matter for the direst of warnings:

> I know there is a blessed day to the visible Church not far off; but it is the Judgement of very Learned men, that in the Glorious Times promised to the Church on Earth, America will be Hell. And although there is a number of the Elect of God yet to be born here, I am verily afraid, that in process of Time, New England will be the wofullest place in all America. . . . It is a terrible thing which God is about to bring upon this land.[2]

Some forty years later the Great Awakening produced the remarkable manifestations of revivalism throughout the colonies. But if these induced in the great Jonathan Edwards the vision of a more collectively joyous prospect, as he sighted the approaching millennium not merely in America but specifically in New England—indeed probably in Northampton, Mass.—yet for the individual the implications might be even graver. His relations with his God, Edwards told him, could be likened to those of 'a spider or some loathsome insect, held over the fire', with nothing but God's incomprehensible mercy to explain why he was not dropped immediately into the flames of eternal perdition.[3] Divine mercy so portrayed might indeed in the Great Awakening be potent to salvation; it might also stimulate in many hearers the conviction that the Lord's work could sanctify some pretty strange and violent practices. And that such tenets were widely held cannot be doubted. Whatever the optimistic deists among the Founding Fathers might say, most God-fearing Americans of the eighteenth century shared the conviction of the backwoods preachers and Jonathan Edwards that the work of the Lord would not be done in North America save after some very strange outpourings of the spirit. And the violent upheavals of the internal life of the sinner would be accompanied by no less violent upheavals in the world around him.

I would not pretend that this apocalyptic and violent note is the dominant national strain for very long. It has to contend against the rising tide of melioristic, eventually liberalistic Protestantism, with its complaisant belief in an irreversible American progress. But though it is only a note, it is a note that

[1] See P. Miller and T. H. Johnson, *The Puritans*, p. 288.
[2] Ibid., p. 347.
[3] P. Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 145–6.

repeatedly recurs—especially where there is an enemy in the midst. From the Millerites in the Burned-Over District in the 1830s to the John Birchers of today (named, significantly, after a fundamentalist preacher) the apocalyptic sects have seen society in Manichean terms of absolute good and evil and have felt free—indeed felt often obliged—to employ violence in the extirpation of Satan, whether he took the form of Free Masonry, or Mormonism, or Popery or Communism. In the South, more readily fascinated by sin than deceived by progress, this note has been steadily dominant. The links between fundamentalism and the Ku Klux Klan, strong and extensive, bear testimony to this. Along the Western frontier, which has its own scepticism about tolerance and the intellect, the note has been, if not always dominant, yet persistently recurrent. Wherever it occurs it has overtones of violence—God's violence, fundamentally, no doubt, but in matters of faith imitation is the sincerest manifestation of belief.

In time of national tribulation in particular these stern doctrines are quickly pressed into service by holders of ordinarily less extreme creeds. Liberal-minded reformers in the 1840s and '50s who saw their early hopes of Negro emancipation wilt as the South dug itself in, turned readily from the language of the Enlightenment to that of the campfire meeting. Consider as an example the advice which Gerrit Smith gave to a convention summoned in 1856 to consider the crimes and wrongs of 'Bleeding Kansas':

> You are looking to ballots, when you should be looking to bayonets; counting up voters when you should be mustering armed and none but armed emigrants; electioneering for candidates for civil rulers when you should be inquiring for military rulers . . . Political action is our greatest hindrance, because it delays the only remedy for the wrongs of Kansas—the action of armed men . . . If all manhood has not departed from us, we will not consent to leave our Kansas brethren to be butchered . . . If our brethren in Kansas can be protected only by the shedding of blood, then blood must be shed.[1]

Neither to Smith nor to his audience did it seem ironical that the speaker on this occasion was also Vice-President of the American Peace Society.

But it was in the person of John Brown that this exaltation of violence as the handmaid of righteousness found its most remarkable embodiment, an embodiment so extreme as to induce

[1] Ralph Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, p. 352.

the conviction amongst many even of his contemporaries that he was mentally deranged. However, deranged or no, his raid on Harper's Ferry, coming at a moment of deep frustration for the forces of reform, endowed a violent solution with an appeal of overwhelming potency. As the Abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, told a gathering of Boston's most respectable and established citizens:

> 'Law' and 'order' are only means for the halting ignorance of the last generation. John Brown is the impersonation of God's order and God's law, moulding a better future and setting for it an example.

Overnight John Brown's Raid acquired the character of an American myth. Then and since his memory has gone marching on because it embodies a deeply felt need of the American consciousness—the need both to break out of the frustrations of the social order with its potent deficiencies and compromises, and the need, no less powerful, to endow this violent breakout with a spiritual or moral sanctification. To those who criticized John Brown's methods Thoreau, the pacifist, replied, 'The method is nothing; the spirit is all'. A hundred years later, to those who criticized the tactics and tone of Right wing Republicanism, Senator Goldwater retorted, 'Extremism in the defence of liberty is no crime'.

Most societies have erected barricades against outbreaks of this kind of enthusiasm, most commonly by insisting on the distinction between the things of God and the things of Caesar—giving the benefit of any doubt to Caesar. The United States, however, has denied itself this protection—and here the Founding Fathers of the Enlightenment have been as much to blame as their forebears of the Reformation. Both join hands in asserting the pre-eminence of the Higher Law; however much they may differ as to its origins and the sanctions for it. Thus, despite the explicit dethronement of religion in the Constitution, there is no scope for the kind of crude Caesarian policing that does a rough justice to warring absolutes in many societies, including our own. The American cop cannot so surely get away with a 'move along there' or the American judge uphold him with an insistence that the peace of the realm is paramount over all other considerations. To both the Supreme Court can and will apply magisterial inhibitions, resting not upon the limited scope of precedent or subordinate to the practical wisdom of a legislature, but derived from *absolutes*, however legalistically refined—freedom of speech and assembly, the right to life, liberty, property and due process. . . .

Thus in no merely abstract sense but in all its actual workings the American system of government operates in the shade of a higher constitutional law which, in the service of a set of higher values, is quite ready to rob day-to-day legality of that certainty and automatism which for the man in the street constitute a major part of its authority. It is of course true that the custody of this Higher Law is entrusted to a highly detached and irremovable Areopagus, the finality of whose decisions is limited only by its divine right to think again. The practical consequence is, however, the creation of a state of mind which gives to law and to law observance a conditional quality. This at the very least tempts every citizen to say that the commandments of the state are not binding upon him until the Supreme Court certifies them to be so. Beyond this lies the creation of a state of mind in which every man may be his own Supreme Court. For although the decisions of the Areopagus incorporate an exhaustive scholarship and may spin as subtle a thread of legal reasoning as any sophist could desire, yet where major issues are concerned they must rest upon an interpretation of broad principles, an application of moral values, about which the plain man can—and indeed ought—to have an opinion of his own. In this sense the repository of the Higher Law has always been in every American's own breast—with all the glories and temptations that that entails.

To say that America, in the last resort, leaves it up to every citizen to decide for himself which laws he will obey, is not of course to assert that it licenses violent disobedience. The most it entitles the loyal citizen to do is to indulge in non-violent civil disobedience—passive refusal, resistance short of force, peaceful demonstration. But America, as we have seen, does not provide a climate naturally favourable to civil disobedience. The sincerity and fervour of its contemporary practitioners, in relation to civil rights and Vietnam, have not protected the movement from infiltration and indeed subversion by conventionally violent elements. The truth is that where non-violence is adopted merely as a method, a technique, the line that separates it from its opposite is at best tortuous and at worst invisible. The Chicago Riots, with their deliberate employment of foul language as an instrument of incitement, may serve as a classic reminder of the truth of Freud's dictum that 'first one commits oneself in words, and then in deeds. Step by step a society becomes accustomed to accept, with less and less moral outrage and with greater indifference to legitimacy, the successive blows'.

Thus violence has in fact acquired a kind of shadowy legitimacy from the relativism which marks the American attitude to law, and opposite factions, from Right and Left, North and South, from motives equally high or equally low, have resorted to it when their frustrations became excessive or the dividends from its employment seemed alluring. It is a rare society indeed in which obedience to the laws can be made a matter of individual option in the serene assurance that disobedience will always take a non-violent form. The United States is not such a society.

If the incitements or predisposition to violence in the United States have their roots in distinctively American factors, are the forms of American violence distinctive too? After all, even the most settled and law-abiding states, contemporary no less than historical, accept resort to force, or violence, as normal, as almost an attribute of their essential nature. However, most such states —our own most conspicuously—have generally been successful in isolating, concentrating and externalising their employment of violence—calling it, in a word, war. When force or violence is employed in other contexts, e.g. to quell domestic insurrection, this uncovering of the Hobbesian substructure of the state is regarded as a regrettable, if unavoidable, lapse, a displacement of the fig leaf of our social institutions. War, on the other hand, is viewed as in another category; it operates outside and beyond the framework of law, obligation and consent, the state a free agent in the accepted anarchy of international relations. The effect of such a condition of things is not, of course, to reduce the state's degree of dependence upon violence, still less to emancipate its employment from any moral taint. But by removing such employment from the normal processes of domestic society it undoubtedly facilitates the creation and preservation of generally law-abiding behaviour amongst its citizens. Of this the supreme example is nineteenth-century Britain, remarkably peaceable and law-abiding at home, while engaging in the lively prosecution of imperial and other wars abroad.

By contrast the development of the United States has largely occurred outside the close and clearly defined state system of Western Europe. It has avoided border wars, to an unusual degree; indeed nature and history have given it a minimum of sharply delineated, fortified boundaries. It has not needed, in the main, to fight foreign wars, until this century. Its struggles have been along a frontier so different in kind from the frontiers of Europe that the word has acquired in America a wholly different connotation. The violence of this frontier has not been

the violence of limited, terminable, and foreign wars; it has been the violence of the settler against the nomad, of civilization pressing on savagery. And so far from being externalized, this violence, from the earliest times down to 1880, was an integral part of the American experience. Ability to resort to it, to overcome violence with violence, has been assumed to be a basic pre-condition of frontier existence. The only good Indian was a dead Indian. There was no substitute for being quicker on the draw. And even when the objective determinants of this disappeared with the closing of the frontier the formative experience lived on, in an apparently deathless American myth, endlessly embroidered and re-enacted in song and story and celluloid. Of this myth violence, its sudden eruption and repression, was an integral part. Moreover, although in its classic re-enactments law and order always emerged triumphant, it would be *simpliste* to pretend that the villains were all repulsive. In fiction even the Redskin could be a noble savage; more important the white desperadoes and bully boys, the Jesse James's and the Wild Bill Hickocks, enjoyed a sentimental glamour much in excess of what their marksmanship warranted.

Nearer home—nearer to some American homes at any rate—there was the violence of the plantation, the violence inseparable from a slave-owning society, however glossed over by that other popular American myth, the Old Kentucky Home. John Hope Franklin has graphically shown how this combined with other elements in Southern culture to produce the 'militant' South.

> The feeling of personal responsibility in defending himself, together with the deep appreciation for the idea of honour, created in each Southerner a sense of 'personal sovereignty'. Ruler of his own destiny, defender of his own person and honour, keeper and breaker of the peace, he approached a personal imperiousness that few modern men have achieved. Not since the days of the medieval barons, perhaps, had there been such individual sovereignty as was found in the ante-bellum South.[1]

Nor did this disappear with the War or stay within the confines of the South. It remained part of that Southern legend which was the South's consolation for defeat; it was resurrected in Reconstruction to live on in a long line of demagogues and Dixiecrats. It infected the North as well; when the South was re-admitted to the national scheme of things by the Compromise

[1] John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South*, p. 36.

of 1877 the North was, in effect, acquiescing in the Southern determination to use, if necessary, repressive violence to control its race relations. And whenever Southerners, white or black, moved North or West something of this went with them. It was never fully nationalised, it never became morally respectable, it has for a generation and more been on the wane, not least in the South itself. But as a component of American culture it has been there.

The violence deriving from these internal sources was put at the service not only of individuals but also of groups. These groups were not only those characteristically (though not exclusively) American organisations operating outside or on the fringe of legality—the Vigilantes, the Klan, the Molly Maguires, and the rest. Resort to violence, upon appropriate occasions, has also been a characteristic of the established interest groups in American society—business, labour, the farmers, even upon occasion the Church (remember Beechers' Bibles). In certain industries and occupations violence has been endemic; in any conflict resort to it has been a natural and immediate reaction of either side. Private armies or security forces at the service of business, resort to criminal organisations to supplement volunteer activities on the part of labour—these have been recurrent features of industrial disputes throughout American history.

This has been possible, almost customary, because the American state has never aspired to the kind of monopoly of force which has been the natural goal of every European state, liberal or autocratic. That the instruments of force should be exclusively in the hands of government has seemed to Americans a principle full of menace, both to private liberties and to the public weal. Of course over many areas of the United States and at many stages in American development it has been physically impossible anyway; settlement was often spread so thin that the law and the police could not guarantee to the citizen the minimum of protection to which he was entitled if he was going to give up the means of defending himself. This, however, is a contributory factor, not the basic cause. Across the border in Canada distances were equally great, settlement equally sparse, but the arm of the law seemed to reach further; the Mounties got their man. At the root of the American condition has been the eighteenth-century anti-governmentalism of the Constitution and especially of its Second Amendment: the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.

The law books all agree—though not always for the same reason—that in the courts the Second Amendment does not mean what it seems to the layman to say, that in fact it provides no constitutional right for an American to carry a gun. And indeed the courts have upheld the constitutionality of every gun control law that has found its way on to the Statute Book. But if one asks why no really effective control legislation has got on to the Statute Book the answer lies in the attitude of mind which finds expression in the Amendment. The idea that the state is merely one, and not necessarily the best, employer of armed force within the community has a tenacious vitality. It is indeed a self-perpetuating concept, because a state so conceived—as merely one competitor amongst others in the provision of security—is unable to generate the popular support its task requires and is continuously tempted to drop to the level of its rivals in the execution of its primary duty. The American policeman is not merely armed; he has a marked propensity to shoot at sight. He not only brandishes his night-stick; he is frequently incapable of doing without it. Thus the state finds itself unable to act without resorting to the kind of violence which it is seeking to restrain, and the President of Harvard—or Columbia, or Cornell, or any other university you care to name—has no means of resisting student violence other than by invoking the aid of police forces who know no methods of restraint short of breaking heads. In the Chicago riots of 1968 it was observable that the National Guard showed greater restraint and self-discipline than the police—that National Guard which is the linear descendant of the 'well-regulated Militia' which the Second Amendment declares to be 'necessary to the security of a free State'.

There is, of course, another side to this penny. One must never forget that the American reluctance to give the state a monopoly of force has had one enormously beneficial consequence. Despite the powerful and recurrent pressures of American life towards an enforced conformity, a tyranny of the majority, the United States has escaped that worst of all forms of violence, the police state. Of course at certain times and places—most obviously in the South, most consistently in relation to the Negro—sustained and authorized police violence has existed, with the most baneful of consequences. But the blackout of law and freedom has never been institutionalized anywhere since the Civil War. Save in the most isolated localities and for very short periods the courts and the electoral process have continued

to operate and the police, whatever their brutality, have remained the servants of both. Nor have the politicians, save in the most sporadic and interstitial way, utilised the police as instruments for establishing or perpetuating themselves in power. Even the F.B.I., under the irremovable J. Edgar Hoover, has not established itself as a power above politics, outside the control of elected representatives, intimidating its nominal masters and enjoying a free hand against the citizen who offends it. To say this is, of course, merely to state the obvious, but in any calculus of violence this institutionalized form has loomed so large in the Europe and Asia of our day, claiming perhaps more victims than even war itself, that its absence from the American scene more than counterbalances the phenomena we have previously been reviewing.

There is another variety of violence to which *a priori* the United States might well have expected to be prone, and it is not. This, whose absence I remarked on earlier, is the violence which in the Old World has gone hand in hand with ethnic diversity. Here the relations between White and Black are, alas, a case apart—whether from reasons of history, or colour, or both, it is not easy to determine. Into these relations violence, both aggressive and suppressive, has of course entered time and time again, and still, most virulently, persists. But between other immigrant groups, though there have been tensions and clashes, these have never developed into the kind of sustained hostility, the covert war which easily leads to the open war, which has so often marked the relationships of adjacent nationalities in Europe or Asia. The blurring of ethnic distinctions, the dissolving of Old World loyalties in the dual acids of individualism and Americanism, the provision of ample moral equivalents of war—whether in western pioneering or in economic rivalry or in competition and manipulation within the democratic process —this has been the great non-violent American success story. The fact that a Polish Connecticut has no frontier settlements armed to the teeth against an Irish Massachusetts, or that New York Jewry does not conduct commando raids against an Italian New Jersey—these are the great non-events of American history. They represent a framework of corporate co-existence within which the violence we have elsewhere been discussing must be viewed.

Nevertheless the America of our day—and its cloud of outside witnesses—seems to see the United States as caught up in a fever of violence which transcends anything else in its previous

experience. The violence of the cities in particular, whether exercised by criminals, Negroes, students, children, or police—this seems to have about it a pervasive and uncontrollable quality that undoubtedly disturbs and baffles and shocks people. Whether the volume of violence is in fact greater than ever before is indeed questionable. As early as 1837 the young Abraham Lincoln felt obliged to devote his first major speech to an attack on 'the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country —the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions in lieu of the sober judgement of courts, and the worse than savage mobs for the executive ministers of justice' and to warn that if such mob law continued the government itself could not last. By comparison with these anti-abolitionist excesses, or with other such outbreaks, such as the anti-draft riots of the Civil War, contemporary disturbances, grave as they are, are less costly either in lives or in money. Industrial relations, once the bloodiest of American social battlegrounds, are now in general both orderly and peaceful. Even the crime figures, high and mounting as they appear, have been shown on inspection to give a misleading impression both of the extent and the growth of crimes of violence. What of course is indisputable is that the tightly integrated, basically urban society of modern America is far more vulnerable to violence than the decentralized predominantly rural America of an earlier age.

It is not, however, merely the practical consequences of today's violence that worry Americans. If the surprising tolerance for violence which Americans have earlier shown is now giving way to a universal impatience and anxiety it is, I suspect, because the public senses a change in the quality as well as the quantity of violence in its midst. A violence so readily practised by White and Black, by well-educated suburbanite students as well as by ghetto gangs, by idealists as well as by criminals, by police as well as by mobs—this, despite all the predisposing factors in the American past and the special factors in the American present—Vietnam, the Negro migration, the population explosion (significant metaphor)—seems to have an extra dimension to it, to be not merely a more pervasive but a more virulent plague.

In general the violence of the American past was an instrumental violence. It was never wholly so, of course, because it is the nature of violence to feed upon itself. But in the main Americans were violent to some purpose—to expel the Redskin, to suppress the Blacks, to browbeat the boss, to discipline the

scab, to defeat prohibition, to hasten VJ Day and save the lives of American boys. Hence this kind of violence was rational and controllable. If society did not like it it could always end it, by meeting the demands that instigated it—the Negro could be freed, the boss could recognise the union, the Volstead Act could be repealed, the Japanese could surrender. By contrast current violence—and this perhaps makes it no longer particularly American but potentially if not actually universal—is largely non-instrumental. Clearly some groups are still using violence in order to gain their ends—most obviously the Negroes and the criminals. But for a wide range of violent behaviour this does not hold. It is a by-product of affluence, not of poverty; it devises demands rather than arises out of them. There lies behind it a new attitude, the adoption of violence as a style of life, addiction to it as to a drug, glorification of it as a good *per se*. This is a sophisticated violence and a theatrical violence, dependent in large measure on the television camera and some sort of education. At the height of the Chicago riots the crowd was heard to chant 'Kill the pig [*Pig*, of course, was the hippies' term for the police], flush him out, bring him in'—a cry which the Walker Report on the riots correctly identifies as derived from *The Lord of the Flies*, 'one of the novels', it remarks, 'most popular on college and high school campuses in recent years'.[1] What the Report does not point out, however, is the remarkable inversion of meaning which the student rioters had given to their cry. In William Golding's novel it is the chorus with which the infant castaways, reverting to savagery, pursue first the wild pigs of the island, then, in make-believe, each other, and finally in real earnest poor Piggy, the fat, be-spectacled, last repository of tolerance and reason. The causes that drew the protesting crowds to Chicago were those traditionally dear to liberal America—peace, racial equality, distrust of power, belief in the individual. But in action the chanting mob was indistinguishable from everything that it found most hateful in its opponents—it was intolerant, brutal, blood-thirsty. The violence with which it became intoxicated could not claim the justification of serving some specific end nor could it claim the saving grace of spontaneity. It was no instinctive reaction to an intolerable outrage; it was a prepared and calculated effect. It was in this, like the fascism of a previous generation, a reversion not just to barbarism, but to a synthetic barbarism. It was a violence not of protest, but of self-indulgence. Its appeal was not just to the

[1] *Rights in Conflict*, Bantam Books, p. 144.

crude; it was even more to the jaded. Whatever may have been its initial purposes, by the end it was simply doing its thing. It would have been as baffling to John Brown as to Abraham Lincoln, to Thoreau as to Billy the Kid. Was it un-American? I do not know.