The Unacknowledged Victims of Violence

By Dr. Robert P. Abele

Theme: History

Perhaps the greatest unacknowledged brutality wrought by violence on a personal and cultural scale, and by war on an international scale, is not what one person, group, or nation does to others; it is what one (individual or group) does to oneself (itself). Although it is largely ignored by U.S. media, everyone is implicitly, if not directly aware of the incredible physical violence war itself does.

But the hidden aspect of war is the psychological fact that, as one inflicts physical violence on another, one is simultaneously inflicting great psychological violence on oneself. Then one (individual or group) becomes more brutish with each repeated act of unfettered violence. When more and more people in a society develop this psychology of brutality, it becomes a *fait accompli* for political leaders to appeal to it in using domestic violence and international war to further their own self-interested ends. Psychologists call this process "desensitization."

Let us examine, then, the consequences violence and war have on us as individuals, particularly on our ethics, our consciousness of others, when we see others as just an object to absorb our violence, as thereby being less human than ourselves. It is especially important to examine this because of to two contemporary social-political factors. First, the federal government, under the auspices of President Obama, is engaged in the ongoing activities of heightening violence overseas.

Drone strikes on unsuspecting people, mainly innocents, are continuing. In addition, the arbitrary arrest and torture processes begun by the Bush administration, continue unabated during the Obama tenure (and Obama has even upped the ante on state violence by claiming the right to assassinate as well) [See the Open Society report, "Globalizing Torture," 2013].

This type of government violence is not limited to weaponry. The U.S. sanctions on Iran, to name but one example of U.S. government violence, is deliberately crippling the Iranian economy, which now has an inflation level of over 40 percent, with oil exports reduced by another 50 percent. This deliberate attempt to cripple another country's government, and more importantly, its people, for the sake of imposing one's will (e.g. U.S. corporate control of Iran's oil) is a form of violence without weaponry.

Second, the concerted effort by corporate and political/governmental elites (two groups without a distinction today in the U.S.) to reduce the standard of living of American citizens to nearly pauper status continues. The poignant fact here is this: as has been studied and reported by social psychologists since the 1960's (e.g. most recently, social psychologist M.H. Bond's work on culture and aggression), there is a direct correlation between one's economic status and their tendency to resort to violence. This means that in cultures that demonstrate rising economic inequality, such as the U.S., there is usually a rise in

interpersonal violence.

Add to these two factors the well-known and strong social-psychological link between a culture that glorifies war and its military and the disposition of individuals toward violence in their personal lives, and we are now ready to analyze the consequences of our violence on ourselves. (For just one example documenting this, see the studies by social psychologist M.H. Bond, especially his "Culture and Aggression: From Context to Coercion," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 8, 2004.)

One of the consequences that is nearly self-evident from all of the above is that, as we become ethically insensitive to what ongoing violence and war do *to us*, we end up allowing brutes to control our social and political institutions. Such is the case right now in the U.S. government and mainstream media. The war-after-war syndrome we are currently experiencing, and the ongoing drumbeat for war we see from both of these social institutions, is a function of the psychology of violence that is inculcated in a population by its leaders—whether that population is inherently for or against war—to reduce their natural ethical repulsion to violence and war.

This ethical desensitizing is necessary for any individual to inflict violence on another to begin with. So on the social level, the ethical desensitizing process begins with a psychology of brutality that dehumanizes human beings or the groups with which they are associated, and is fostered and girded by institutional interests in money acquisition and political dominance.

There is a second consequence of the fact that the more violent we become as persons and as a culture, the less human we become: we cease to be free in the distinctively human sense. The more we give credence to our violent impulses and emotions, the less we actually make rational choices for what we have thought-through to be the *morally* right course of action. Morally right action requires the exercise of thinking, since it requires the use of norms and principles.

There are two actions contrary to this lack of morality that a violent culture engages. First, we surrender to our emotions in our actions and in our beliefs. This becomes raw impulse-satisfaction, and in this sense is not real personal freedom, since we then become slaves to our impulses. Rather, real human freedom consists of being able to engage in understood behavioral norms, which requires examining and controlling our impulses (For more on this, see Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, especially Part I).

The second way that using violence as a solution to problems limits our freedom is a social one: our thought process becomes a simple "means-to-chosen-ends" approach of instrumental rationality. This uses human thought only to plan on ways to achieve a pre-ordained goal, without considering seriously the ethical character of the goal or the contemplated means to achieve it. On a political level, when the mask of Obama's version of the war on "terrorists" is removed, all that remains is a tendency to use any violent means necessary to procure total dominance over other peoples. We need to understand that such actions are inherently and exorbitantly immoral, just like they would be if we engaged in such actions on a personal level.

Martin Luther King perhaps put it best when he said of this type of thinking: "'The end justifies the means' [thinking] is the way of (totalitarianism)" (In "Love, Law, and Civil

Disobedience" [1961], King actually uses the term "communism," but immediately defines it in a way that we can justifiably use "totalitarianism" in its place.)

Television adds to the psychology of brutality by magnifying violence as sport. By this I don't mean just organized sports such as American football, but the wider understanding that sees the use of physical force against another as a standard and acceptable *modus operandi* between persons. Violence is a particularly visual form of engagement, and the drama that is woven into and out of that violence serves to keep us visually and emotionally engaged, while being intellectually absent from what we are viewing. To put it succinctly, as the 1993 American Psychological Association youth violence commission reported: "The irrefutable conclusion is that viewing violence increases violence."

In fact, television *must* appeal to such drama because it is such an intellectually passive media. This is because it is strictly image-based and not cognitively based, and images have emotive impact (i.e. affect) prior to cognitive abilities used to ferret out our impressions. As such, television itself only reaches—and can only reach—the lower-levels of human cognition (I euphemistically refer to this level of cognition as "brain stem thinking," in order to highlight its lack of appeal to the full human mind).

I won't even get into violent video games here, but there is abundant empirical evidence in psychology that shows that there are at least five consistent effects of regular use of violent video games: increased physical arousal (i.e. pulse and blood pressure), increased aggressive thinking, feelings, and behaviors, and increases in antisocial behaviors (for just one example, see the multitudinous studies by the social psychologist C.A. Anderson from the 1980's to today. Many, but definitely not the majority of them are published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*).

As a side but importantly related note, I take it that this is the most critical message of the contemporary environmental movement, which seeks an end to practices leading to climate change: as we inflict violence on the planet to the point of its mortality, we inflict violence on ourselves, to the point of our mortality. A dead planet will result in dead people, and a people and/or its leaders who are psychologically and/or ethically desensitized to the consequences of this Terran violence have no chance of long-term survival.

There are a few clear solutions to this problem, but they are difficult to implement without great personal effort. They include rewarding cooperative behavior, especially in conjunction with threatened punishment for aggressive behavior; substantially reducing reliance on physical punishment; and learning and using nonaggressive conflict-resolution strategies. On the most pronounced level, the solution is a clear preference for nonviolence, of the kind that Gandhi and Martin Luther King advocated and lived. This is perhaps the most difficult solution, since, as King said: "Nonviolence avoids not only external violence but also internal violence of spirit." For Gandhi, this requires the attitude and practice of "ahimsa," which means complete non-injury to living things.

Further solutions exist on a political level. Because we now know that aggressive stimuli trigger aggressive behavior (again, see C.A. Anderson), we should reduce both the availability of handguns and most importantly, demanding of our politicians—at the cost of their being elected out of office—the stop to the wars and brutality that we have witnessed most sharply with the Bush and Obama administrations. Engaging in war and glorifying the military in media only serves to increase the propensity for violence of the citizens in their personal lives. We can notify television networks and programs that we will not watch

programs and movies that extol military aggression and militarism in general.

If this reflection regarding the ethical desensitization of ongoing violence and its reinforcement by television, the dominant media of choice, is accurate, then there are obvious questions that confront us. What if the greatest violence we are inflicting, when and while inflicting violence on others, is the violence we do to ourselves as persons? Perhaps the most critical question is this: If we recognized this self-inflicted violence, would we demand an end to individual and cultural violence and an end to war? If so, then now is time for the sane and rational anti-violence and anti-war voices to point this out more emphatically. But if we would *not* demand an end to violence, then we embody psychopathy and even masochism to accompany our sadism in inflicting pain upon others, and then, as a species, we are in real trouble. Put differently, to what degree can a nation, culture, or race of people go with such an ethical ignorance of the results of our violence on ourselves, before the culture implodes?

To put the question being asked in this essay into its most direct form: how much time does humanity have left if all that is left to humanity is a species of being that has become ethically and psychologically self-anaesthetized not just to the external, but to the internal/personal results of the violence they inflict on others and on the planet? The clock seems to be ticking more loudly as each minute passes.

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