

Roundtable Discussion / Jan. 29, 2015

## America's love/hate relationship with violence

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Recent high-profile events on our streets and playing fields have refocused public attention on the nature and level of violence in our society. While most of us would likely agree that the United States has a violence problem, much disagreement reigns over what it is, why it is, and what to do about it.

Few would deny that our individual and societal attitudes about violence are, at the very least, confused, if not conflicted. We despise and condemn it, but we also enjoy it. We denounce it from the statehouse to the pulpit, while spending billions of dollars to support and encourage it in popular culture and sports. Much of our popular TV fare dwells on crime and violence. We favor movies and video games that depict torture, murder and other remarkably gruesome acts. We love “reality” TV shows that encourage people to hurl accusations, insults and sometimes fists at each other. Our fictional villains use violence and operate outside the law – and our heroes often do likewise.

“While the causes of youth violence are multifactorial, ... the research literature is quite compelling that children's exposure to media violence plays an important role in the etiology of violent behavior,” said Dr. Eugene V Beresin of Massachusetts General Hospital and McLean Hospital.

Early on, our children are instructed that problems cannot be solved by the use of force, that violence is not the answer. Then we grow up to find that things are seldom that simple. As Professor Benjamin Ginsberg of Johns Hopkins University put it: “Whether or not violence is the answer depends on the question being asked.” True, we do revere the moral superiority of non-violence as a means of achieving political ends, as accomplished by such leaders as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. But as Ginsberg notes, even such tactics — strikes, boycotts, demonstrations — were not *completely* non-violent. They were in fact deliberately designed to provoke violent responses from their opponents and thus arouse sympathy for the cause.

Our rejection of violence is limited in another significant way: We abhor virtually all violence, except that provided by

### **CDC: Assault 'Widespread'**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers physical assault “widespread among adults in the United States: 51.9 percent of surveyed women and 66.4 percent of surveyed men said they were physically assaulted as a child by an adult caretaker and/or as an adult by any type of attacker.”

The CDC also reports that 22.1 percent of surveyed women and 7.4 percent of surveyed men reported they were physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, boyfriend or girlfriend, or date in their lifetime.

the police forces and military personnel who keep us safe and protect our quality of life. As George Orwell put it: “People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”

So it seems that there is good violence and bad violence. In the minds of many Americans, however, both can spring from the same source. Crime is clearly bad violence. Police officers use good violence – except, many Americans believe, when police use too much violence, especially towards members of racial minorities. Contact sports such as football, hockey and cage fighting are both extremely violent and immensely popular.

Also, we revere our men and women in the military, but are in no hurry to hear their tales of the injury, death and mental trauma that battlefield violence leaves in its wake. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder afflicts:

- Almost 31 percent of Vietnam veterans
- As many as 10 percent of Gulf War (Desert Storm) veterans
- 11 percent of veterans of the war in Afghanistan
- 20 percent of Iraqi war veterans

These points and others raise some questions, which our Morrison Institute Roundtable Discussion panel will address today:

- Are men and women who engage in “good” violence – athletes, police officers, soldiers – different from the rest of us?
- What impact does doing even “good” violence have on its practitioners over time?
- How do fighters, police officers, etc. “switch off” their aggressive impulses when they leave the ring or the street?

In other words, how do “violence professionals” – those trained and rewarded for employing and enduring violence – view it, deal with its effects on them, and separate the culture of aggression from their personal lives and intimate relationships? How do they view individual and social violence; do they think America has a violence problem? What could they tell us about whether and how society should place greater restrictions on the use of “good” violence in their professions and elsewhere?

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## Violent Crime in Arizona

Arizona’s rate of violent crime was about 19 percent higher than the national average in 2013. Arizona ranks sixth among states in its incarceration rate. The state’s population has doubled in about the past 30 years, while its prison population has increased tenfold.

– Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## Violent Crime in America

“The United States has significantly higher rates of major violence, particularly homicide. However, most homicides are not the result of criminal activity; they stem from arguments rather than break-ins or muggings.”

– Professor Franklin Zimring, *Crime is Not the Problem: Lethal Violence in America*