Democracy and Violence

Thomas Jefferson, in a 1787 letter to the son-in-law of John Adams, wrote: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." Defenders of violence as a part of our democratic process reach for this Jefferson quote whenever civil action, or civil disobedience boils over. Indeed, this overworked quote is frequently used to justify actions that are in violation of the U.S. Constitution (See Commentary essay on Mobs and Democracy) in which many of Jefferson's ideas on government are embedded.

We are a violent species; we live, after all, in a violent natural world. But killing in order to eat, to sustain the species, is one thing; it is another to kill for no other reason than fear—or hate, which seems unique to *homo sapiens*. Even the "lower orders" of animals only resort to violence when seeking to mate, or to establish dominance within the group, and in neither case is the intention to exterminate, but merely to reproduce or to protect the group; extinction is generally the result of cataclysmic phenomena.

While there are abundant examples of senseless violence reported around the world these days, it is the *threat* of violence that has much of our country experiencing heightened stress. The threat of violence has been an effective tool for millennia, used by dominant groups to subjugate other groups. It was used in this country over the past few centuries to oppress slaves, and later on to suppress the rights granted those same peoples by our Constitution. Almost any minority group in this country can cite examples of intimidation or threat of harm in one form or another.

But lately, by which I mean at this moment, threats of violence have become the method of choice of certain minority factions in efforts to achieve goals that in past years they would not have attempted for fear of public disgrace. During the turbulent 1960's, the long battle for civil rights was reaching its climax, Martin Luther King preached that peaceful protest, the civil disobedience he learned from the practices of Mohandas Gandhi, was the way to go. Detractors in his own flock, led by firebrands such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael of the Black Panthers chose militant resistance. That did not end well (Kids, check our U.S. history). Gandhi's practice of non-violent non-cooperation he called Satyagraha was applied during the Vietnam War protests—concurrent with civil rights protests—by people who refused to register for the military draft, or burned their draft cards.

The assault on peaceful protesters has revealed a resurgence of the 1960's militant resistance, but it is not Black Power advocates, but rather a consortium of groups that include White Supremacists, Evangelicals awaiting the coming Armageddon, Q-Anon conspiracists and assorted nihilists, some of whom have been elected to Congress or even higher office. No longer is peaceful protest the accepted method of influencing public opinion. No, now it is the threat of bodily harm, or even of death, to not just fellow citizens, but to our legislative leaders, which by extension threatens democracy itself. The 1960's civil rights and war protesters were trying to improve democracy; the current crop of protesters seems to be bent on replacing it.

It was recently revealed by a U.S. Senator that several of his fellow Congressmen were reluctant to—and indeed did not—vote in favor of impeachment of our former President for fear of physical attack to themselves or their families. At the other end of the spectrum, but just as importantly, we have had election workers intimidated and threatened, in one instance by, of all people, the former President (See essay on Democracy and Elections). From poll workers to spouses of U.S. Representatives, from Secretaries of State to White House interns, from Senators to Federal judges—no one is immune from a threat of violence, which in some cases has been carried out.

Author Bradley S. Klein* writes, "When threats of violence insinuate themselves into political decision-making on vitally important governing matters, the nation has reached a dangerous crisis point. The phenomenon has gained momentum in recent years, thanks largely to [former President] Trump. Now, however, Trump is joined

by elected Republicans and news media personalities in the widespread incitement of hate speech that agitates for violent political assault. The immediate aims appear to be to instill fear and paralyze the opposition. But the endgame is far darker than this." Klein further writes, "Embracing extremist views destroys the capacity of a civil society to function and poisons the political culture. Effectively, it means handing political power over to enraged mobs — incensed followers of would-be autocrats who wish to take matters into their own hands. In a country with such a strong gun culture as the US, the consequences are particularly worrisome."

Worrisome, indeed. This never-ending drumbeat of the threat of violence creates an atmosphere that normalizes threats of violence, like a contagion for which there seems to be no remedy. But if we are not going to surrender to an authoritarian state, how are we to save our civil society?

While we should expect a strong free press to report on the incidents as they occur, so as to push our government leaders toward legislation to curb such activities, we should also speak out. There is, indeed resistance, whether it be parents at school board meetings opposing book banning, or employees fighting for unions, or women's groups helping to organize for safe and legal family or abortion services, or high schoolers protesting for better gun laws to prevent school shootings. These do not speak directly to violence, but they exhibit a broad resistance to the policies that an authoritarian minded minority seek to impose through power and intimidation, and threat. Those in power do not necessarily wield the weapons that are striking terror into the population, but through their public exhibitions they encourage and endorse it. Showing support for those in our government who are prepared to fight and are attempting to resist this behavior is the least we can do. Participation is important, even at the lowest levels of our democracy.

Richard Waterman

* Brian S. Klein and Scott G. Nelson are the authors of *Democracy After Trump: Authoritarianism versus Democracy in a Post-Pandemic Era*.