The Culture of Violence

It now seems an almost unassailable reality: that we in North America (and the United States in particular) have come to accept living in societies where the level of day-to-day violence is unmatched by any other peace-time nation.

A rash of recent incidents have brought the extent of the violent sickness home: the murder and carjacking of Michael Jordan's father, the Paul Bernardo case of demented murder and rape, a rise in juvenile arrests and such statistics as, in 1990 alone, 4,200 teenagers in the United States were killed by gunfire. The list could go on.

The violence has struck at places traditionally thought to be safe, like hospitals, malls, movie theaters, restaurants, cars, and white middle class neighborhoods. And it has struck with a savage force. The sidewalks are unsafe to walk on. Strangers should be feared.

The search for the source of the often fatal fury has dredged up a whole collection of possible candidates. From one perspective, violence has been a part of the American psyche and spirit from the outset. The legacy of the "wild west" where the ability to gouge out an eye with one's thumb was central to survival, and certainly key to establishing a reputation and credibility—similar to today's city streets.

Today, the prevalence of handguns and the ease with which they can be obtained pushes all crime to the most dangerous extreme. The violence and destruction shown on television desensitizes us to reality. National heroes tend to be individuals particularly adept at violence: John Wayne, Rambo, Schwarzenegger, the American Gladiators, and Clint Eastwood ("go ahead, make my day"). The triumphs of war, in the Gulf for example, are glorified. The failures of war, like Vietnam, are brought into the living room on the news.

Many analysts point to the malaise of the middle class and the impact of television on our imaginations. Youth has been left without any interests or hobbies, except perhaps guns. By the same token,
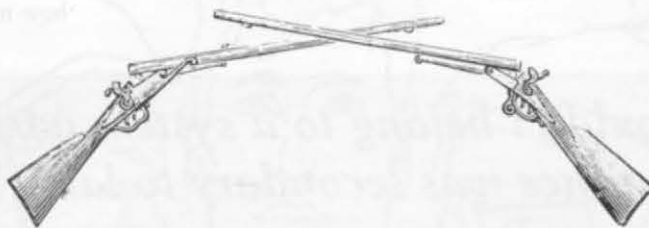
critics charge, the changing nature of the family has also had its affect. It was not until 1974 that fifty percent of children found nobody at home when they returned from school. In the 1990s, the number stands closer to eighty percent.

The penal and judiciary systems are also singled out at as the cause of violence. Says Randy Ballin, head of the California Highway Patrol's Los Angeles auto-theft unit: "They have nothing to lose. The Criminal-justice system is not a deterrent. It's a minor inconvenience."

For others, the rise in violence is simply a matter of perception. Many people are only now realizing that it is not just someone else's problem. Violence does not plague only poor, often racial minority communities. In fact, while crime in the big cities is down, it is on the rise in the suburbs and smaller cities and towns.

What all of these issues point to is an acceptance of violence that works at many levels in our society. Two comments from American citizens, one old and one young, uncover the all-permeating culture of violence. A teenager from middle America relates how "parents just don't understand that everything has changed. You can't just slug it out in the schoolyard anymore and be done with it. Whoever loses can just get a gun." A father from that same middle America laments: "It's so sad. I can remember when you could settle things with

fisticuffs. Man, that's antiquated now."

Both of these statements betray a relationship to violence that perhaps we cannot afford to be comfortable with if we wish to reduce the violence around us. The message is clear: violence within certain boundaries is acceptable, expected—the problem is guns and death. In fact, violence of some sort makes up the only option for problem solving for these two Americans. Fists are fine, guns and death are not. But what about knives, kicks with steel-toed boots? Is the gang fighting of the 1950s and 1960s tolerable because fists and pipes were the main weapons, but the gang warfare of the 1990s not, because of guns? As the rise in violent crime has demonstrated, the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable violence are not always clear. More importantly, they are easily stepped over and the violence escalated.

If violence is a learned characteristic, as many psychologists argue, is it being learned directly from *us*, and not the television or the judicial structure? Are we, in our day-to-day toleration and even promotion of certain types of violence, the real culprits in the escalating spiral of fear and death? Should we not rethink our own relations to violence at all levels, if we are to avoid the drift into a fatally dangerous, lawless society? ●

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