

WAR: WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

A Reflection on Violence

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Throughout history, homo sapiens have killed each other by the millions. In Jared Diamond's book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, this violence is illustrated countless times. Whether we look at the destruction of the Inca empire by the Spaniards, or the way in which Maori tribesmen conquered in the South Pacific, we have been fighting each other since the beginning of time (Diamond). I wanted to write this paper on something I can relate to my own life, and which is important to our global community. Although I am a Durham college student, I am also a member of the Canadian Forces. I am training to be a medic, and I come from a long line of soldiers who have fought for justice and freedom to stop the tyrants of the world from propagating greed and intolerance.

The question "Why Violence?" was posed by a fellow classmate, and it made me begin to think. I have often heard people talk with disdain for the military, saying that as humans we are the only species that kills its own kind. Our history is filled with wars, invasions, and genocides. Yet, even within the animal kingdom, there are wars for territory, for food, or to win a mate. In the wild, bands of chimpanzees will wage war on other chimps over territorial rights (Viegas). If chimps, our closest animal relatives, choose to kill each other, then why are

humans expected to act so differently? I will not insult the millions of years worth of evolution that have lead us to become “Homo Collosus”; but we are still part of the kingdom *Animalia*, and as such, our brains are hardwired to allow us to react to threats against our survival. Our intelligence coupled with our animal instincts has allowed us to survive and thrive thus far as a species. Over the course of many millennia, we have caused mass extinctions of creatures far larger and more powerful than ourselves, so it is apparent that violence has helped define us as the dominant species on planet earth. As we developed civilizations and hierarchies and populations grew, we turned on each other and fought for resources and against anyone we considered a threat. People in power are threatened by new ideas, by change, and by the potential for loss of power. Greed, intolerance and inequality are the triggers that lead to hate and violence. But how can we fix this? If humans have solved conflicts with violence since the dawn of time, how can we be expected to change our behaviour so quickly?

Historical events show that non-violent intervention almost never succeeds. It is usually followed by mass slaughter (by a military or government agency), aimed at silencing those who rebel. A prime example is the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese republic army. Tibetan Monks who preached peace and nonviolence tried to hold their ground with non-violent protest and were extinguished, along with hundreds of thousands of Tibetans who died of torture and starvation. The Dalai Lama and other holy men were forced into exile and have had to rely on the global community to try and fight with peace rather than guns for the past 50 years (Nissani). In theory we would all like non-violent solutions to the conflicts that exist between us. In practice, though, non-violent protest or negotiation only works if both parties comply. Those who do not have the weapons or technology, or choose not to use them, may gain the

moral high ground, but there is a high likelihood that they will be extinguished by those who choose to exert their force. Non-violent protest cannot accomplish anything until the threatening population is willing to listen. The process is inevitably slow, and it relies solely on the goodness of people. Wars and violence start out of desperation: for power, for change, for resources, or for religion among other things. When people are desperate to obtain something, they use their most basic instincts to gain it by any means possible. Unfortunately, violence is the method through which many humans resolve conflict.

If all of Europe stood together in non-violent protest during WWII, for example, and asked Adolf Hitler to listen to reason, I do not believe that he would have agreed to sit and chat. Hitler would have decimated every country in Europe one by one and achieved his goal of *lebensraum*. Hitler was an incredibly evil individual, and the only way to fight his attacks were with more violence. Eventually by working together with a common desperation for restoring peace, the Allied forces managed to defeat Hitler's army (Robinson).

Whether or not we choose to exercise violence is up to the individual morals and beliefs of people. Yet as long as there are groups who believe that violence is acceptable, it will always have to be fought with further violence. As long as there is inequality and indifference, there will always be violence; and as long as there is money involved in war, there will always be a need for weapons and armed forces. Violence is a vicious cycle, and it must be stopped altogether or else it is unlikely to be stopped at all. Violence is a byproduct not only of our base animalistic nature, but the intelligent nature of humans to want better things and to abolish any threats to their goals or their survival.

As a military medic, I am taught to fix people's wounds, maintain their vital signs and to protect life at all costs. Life and breath are the most precious of all commodities in my trade. I am then trained to kill: I am taught where and how to shoot, and I am taught to operate weapons and machinery, which will aide me in destroying the enemy. It is a unique paradox with which I live.

I hope that I never have to harm another person. As North Americans, we enjoy our democratic state of living and its many opportunities, and it would be negligent to have no security forces to protect something we have worked so hard to maintain. If during my life I must use a weapon to protect my country, my democracy, or people who cannot protect themselves, I will accept it as necessary violence. Until the day when all the countries of the world can agree to disagree, put down the weapons, and rid the world of greed, inequality and intolerance, violence will unfortunately persist. Until that day, we will continue to use reactive violence to do the most good we can, until those who instigate can learn to accept and negotiate with those who are different from them.

Works Cited

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