

Is Violence a Human Necessity?



Speech in Berkeley, California, as a member of a panel, in 1965

Let me speak first about how we are to construe that word "Utopian": We *might* read it, of course, as synonymous with "absurd", or "impossible to realize"—the word is, of course, sometimes used in that sense. But were I to read it that way for present purposes I should be assuming too great a burden—to say nothing of delivering myself into my opponents' hands. Let me concede at once, then, that we simply do not know enough about human beings, and the workings of human affairs, to warrant the statement that all proposals for eliminating war are impossible to realize, and thus absurd. I, for one at least, should not know how to go about defending such a statement. One of the things my opponent and I would most easily agree on, I think, is that while we can often extrapolate from the past and say that such and such is *possible*, because it *has* been done, we can never—never if we are talking about a question worth discussing—extrapolate from the past and say that such and such is *impossible*, because it hasn't been done. What we can do and often do do, is look at the past—at man's history and what it seems to teach us about man's nature, about man's behavior, about socio-political reality—and make such statements as: Given what we know, such and such a proposal is *improbable* of realization—or even so *grossly* improbable of realization that we'd be ill-advised, especially where the stakes are big and valuable, to go putting out bets on it. Or, variously, that to date we know nothing about people that disposes us to believe that they can ever be brought to behave in the manner called for by such and such a proposal. Let me, then, mean just that by "utopian": A proposal is utopian—more or less utopian, if you like—to the extent that we find ourselves obliged, in terms of what we know of the record, to say that the *chances* of its being adopted, and, once adopted, carried into effect, seem more or less slender—too slender, for example, to dispose us who listen to the proposal, and weigh it,

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to risk much of anything on it. In making such a judgment, let me add, we do not necessarily involve ourselves in any quarrel with those who, enamored of the proposal, wish to keep on urging it. Often, indeed, we can admire them for the courage and public spirit that enable them to keep up a struggle against such overwhelming odds, provided they show a certain amount of good sense as to how overwhelming the odds are, and do not use the argument: "I see all that, but it *mustn't* be true; the consequences would be too horrible to contemplate; your 'grossly improbable', where this question is concerned, is shockingly immoral, and betrays a callous indifference to the sacrifice of human life, to the destruction of civilization." That, of course, is an accurate *précis*—not a caricature but a *précis*—of much of what we hear these days about the topic before us. The argument starts out from what is moral, or at least sentimentally appealing, and argues from the moral to the probable; its underlying logic reduces to the axiom: If that which is probable is immoral, then it ceases to be necessary. Not so, either, with the man who argues: The consequences being too horrible to contemplate, people will *see* that they are too horrible to contemplate and take the steps necessary for avoiding them, so that the improbable will become the probable. Not so, finally, with the man who wants to say to us: In thus dwelling upon what we know from study of the past, do you not end up insisting that might is right, that that which must happen, that which is unavoidable, is in fact *good*—that since that which must be will be there's no point in talking about morality at all? Do you not, in a word, end up justifying all existing evils? That man is simply avoiding the question before us, and all we can say to him is this: No, we must not be understood as saying that the probable is good, but merely that it is probable; the question as to what is good, what is morally justifiable, though an urgent question, is a separate question and, for most purposes at least, a *posterior* question; take the moral question up first, and what you end up with is not sound moral speculation but utopianism, which is the intellectual equivalent of the sin of Onan. Put otherwise: let us not hesitate to brand as evil that part of the probable that our consciences condemn—to brand it as evil, to denounce it, even do what we can to bring about a state of affairs in which what now seems improbable will seem so no longer. But you will get nowhere with that by denying, in the teeth of convincing argument, that, for the moment, the probable *is* probable. Not so,

finally, with the man who says: You are taking refuge in sheer determinism; you are denying freedom of the will; you are insisting that there's no point in trying to do anything about anything, that man is the helpless prisoner of so-called forces that he cannot hope to control. I am, I believe, more than ready for such a man, for no one is more deeply convinced than I that man, exercising his free will under the God that gave it to him, makes his own history and can, within certain limits, guide that history where he pleases; I shall say nothing of forces, or historical trends, or the like, that reduce man to impotence. On the contrary: my position is, quite simply, that so far as we know proposals for eliminating war are utopian because man's will *is* free—that so far as we know war is unavoidable because man wills it to be unavoidable, and commits *freely* the acts that lead to war.

Now down to business—that is, the grounds on which I assert that we had best, since so far as we know all proposals for eliminating war are utopian, all denials of the human necessity of force specious, we had best, I say, keep our powder dry.

First, then, the chances of eliminating the use of force in domestic affairs and the use of war in international affairs are just as good as, and no better than, the chances of teaching the generality of men that *discussion, debate, talking things over*, followed, presumably, by some kind of vote whose verdict all have agreed to accept, is a better way of settling differences than fighting them out; and the historical record would seem to suggest that those chances are not very good. (No-one, let me say in passing, seems to have come up with a third alternative, that is, one over and beyond talking it out and fighting it out.) What historical record? Well, to take the simplest case (and, one would have thought, the easiest one), namely, that of the spread, over the face of the earth in modern times, of government by discussion *within* national frontiers. Thirty-odd years ago, in the aftermath of World War I, when all civilized nations seemed, for the moment, to be "going democratic", a reasonable man might, just conceivably, have indulged a moderate degree of optimism about this; since then, however, things have pretty well settled down to the pre-World War I normal state of affairs, that is: on the one hand a tiny handful of "civilized" nations (nearly all of which, curiously, speak either the English language, or a Scandinavian language, or, at the extreme margin, Dutch or Flemish), and all other nations governed by more

or less open dictatorships resting unabashedly upon force, upon the physical might necessary for crushing any potential dissenter. Nor are the reasons for this reversal hard to seek out: Government by discussion, as we know it in the English-speaking and Scandinavian countries, depends for its smooth functioning upon deeply-ingrained political habits, upon a stern discipline, upon elaborate arrangements for confining discussion, for the most part, to that minimal percentage of the population that is capable of discussing to begin with, upon, above all, the kind of trust and confidence, and I am tempted to say affection, back and forth among the citizens that dispose them to accept, beforehand, the verdict of the future vote. These are, in the main, phenomena that are present and accounted for only in the tiny handful of countries that I have mentioned; and where they are not present they can, so far as we know, be called into being only as they are taught and inculcated, which calls for (a) a dedicated elite to do the teaching and inculcating, (b) a population willing to listen to them and be persuaded by them, and (c) that scarcest of all the world's goods, namely, time, and more time by far than we are likely to have before the present crisis in world affairs comes to a head. And let me remind you: I have been speaking thus far of the simplest case, namely, the elimination of the use of force, in favor of government by discussion, within national frontiers (all those dictatorships I speak of, remember, will just as they rest on force be overthrown one day by force, that is, by civil war); even here, I say, the chances of getting the case for government by discussion over to the generality of men in the generality of the world's nations, and within the foreseeable future, are pretty slender. Yet there are those amongst us who dream—and dream, alas, aloud—of extending government by discussion into the realm of international affairs—where, as we shall be noticing in a moment, the issues at stake are, demonstrably, issues that are far more difficult for the discussion process to handle.

Secondly, the chances of eliminating the use of force in domestic affairs and the use of war in international affairs are—again so far as we know—as good as, and no better than, the chances of transforming human nature as we know it, in precisely that one of its dimensions in which, as I believe, it displays its greatest resistance to change; and no, I am not about to say *what*, as I suspect, you think I am about to say. I am, as you perhaps know, a Roman Catholic, and hold what I take to be normal Catholic views about original sin, and

thus about the role in human affairs of envy, of cupidity, of predatoriness, of, at the margin, just plain thirst for blood, just plain lust for lording it over others, just plain orneriness; I do, therefore, believe that a powerful case could be made out, as regards the human necessity of war, on the grounds that the best-laid schemes for perpetual peace will, soon or late, smash themselves against the stone-wall of innate and ineradicable human viciousness. I shall not, however, bring that case, and shall not avail myself of any strength that might accrue to my position tonight from an appeal to any such line of reasoning. Put otherwise: I am more than willing to assume, for purposes of tonight's panel, that the psychiatrists and social workers and city-planners can—even within the foreseeable future—prevail upon the generality of men to cease to be predatory in domestic affairs and, at one further remove, upon the generality of governments not to engage in predatory wars—more than willing not because I believe any such thing, which of course I do not, but because I am convinced that, in our immediate situation, the situation that is in fact at the back of all our minds, predatory war is not the problem. Put otherwise again: the chances of eliminating the use of force from the conduct of human affairs, above all the chances of avoiding an ultimate arbitration by force between the United States and the Soviet Union, are as good as and no better than that of eliminating from the hearts of man *not* the worst that is in them but, paradoxical as that may seem, the best that is in them. For that future war between the United States and the Soviet Union, when it comes, will not be a predatory war, a war of conquest for conquest's sake, but a war rendered unavoidable by dramatically-opposed views as to the nature of man, diametrically-opposed views as to man's relatedness to God, diametrically-opposed views as to what is good, and what is true, and what is beautiful, and what is valuable, diametrically-opposed views as to what man should revere and humble himself before, diametrically-opposed views as to what kind of world our descendants shall be living in a thousand years hence. Now: those diametrically-opposed views arise not out of man's viciousness or predatoriness, but precisely out of his noblest aspirations—the aspiration to understand, the aspiration to penetrate the meaning of the universe in which he lives, the aspiration to distinguish between the good and the bad, the true and the false, the beautiful and the ugly, the aspiration to *identify* himself with the good, the true, and the

beautiful, the aspiration, finally, to sacrifice himself, to give the last full measure of devotion, in order that the good should prevail. Ask me to believe that the would-be reformer of human nature can produce for us a breed of men who will turn their backs on predation, and I shall not accuse you of insulting my intelligence; ask me to believe that they can produce for us a breed of men who will not rally to the standards of a Jesus, a Mahomet, a Marx, who seems to minister to their highest aspirations, and you ask me to believe the unbelievable. Ask me to believe that you can elaborate an international organization that will get across to the predatory the idea that the world will not tolerate wars of conquest, and you merely tax my credulity; but ask me to believe that men will ever bow before an international authority when what is at stake is not a piece of real estate but the very survival of the true religion, and you ask me to unlearn all that I have learned about how history works and how human beings behave. Make no mistake about it: the great arbitrations of history—the decision for example as to whether the Roman Empire is to be Christian or pagan, the decision as to whether Europe is to be Christian or Mohammedan, the decision for example, for we do stand on the threshold of another such arbitration, as to whether Christendom or Communism shall inherit the earth—are *always* arbitrations by force, that is, by war. They *have* to be, because arbitration by discussion between conflicting world-views is out of the question: the contestants possess no common vocabulary in which to speak to one another, and no common set of axioms in the contest of which to conduct a debate, above all, perhaps, no common willingness, where the big issues are at stake, to be swayed by mere reasoned discourse.

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