

POWER, FORCE AND VIOLENCE

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John Dewey, agonizing over whether to support United States entry into World War I, tried in several essays to distinguish force and violence, force and war.¹ Dewey never carried through consistently on his distinctions. His efforts were dismissed by commentators who pointed out that in international conflicts, *force* and *war* are used interchangeably. That criticism is true but it is a statement of the problem not a reason for dismissing the question. Until the language of power, force and war is reformed, discussion of war will always be between *realists* who are certain that war is an inevitable fact of human life and *idealists* who think that the use of force is immoral.

What is needed is to change the use of the term force in international discussions of conflict. Can the term *force* be changed in meaning? Actually, the most common meaning of force is precisely the one that is needed. In practically all uses of the term, outside discussions of war, force is distinguishable from violence. While violence is thought to be a dangerous possibility when force is introduced, the term is not equated with explosions of obscene amounts of violence that destroys every living being in its path. Why then, in international discussions, do people say *force* when they mean war? It seems to be a euphemism but one which has the unfortunate result of closing off imagination about how force and forces could be used to avoid war. When the European Union in February, 2003, tried to dissuade the United States from war on Iraq, it stated: *War is not inevitable. The use of force should be the last resort.*² Wouldn't they have spoken more logically, realistically and effectively, if they had said: *Force is inevitable. But war should be the last resort.*

Force is a pressure upon humans or nonhumans to get them to act in a desired way. For nearly everyone, the use of force is a daily occurrence, from forcing open a jar of pickles to forcing one's way through a crowd. As a one directional action, force is always questionable. Especially in attempting to coerce human agreement to a certain way of acting, force is a restriction on the freedom of another. Although force may slide into violence, there is sometimes a need for the force of restraint on a human being who is incompetent or is criminally dangerous. Force may be needed to keep a child from running into the street, or force may have to be used to stop a would-be rapist. Less obvious uses of force are present in the business and political world, and even religious and educational institutions. Force allows for innumerable degrees of exercise from psychological intimidation to a swift blow in the midsection.

Force is constantly used against the physical environment. Since there is no resistance by another's will, the moral issue is less ambiguous. Nonetheless, human beings have slowly been learning that they cannot be cavalier in the use of force against the environment. Force has to be carefully rationed because a human being can never grasp all the effects of any action in trying to make the world suit his or her desires.

Power

The misuse of the term *force* in international conflicts is not likely to be corrected unless a deeper linguistic confusion in using *power* is unearthed. *Power* stands on one side of *force* as *violence* does on the other. Linguistically, force collapses into violence because power has already collapsed into force. Unless the term power is used in ways that do not inevitably lead to force, then a nation's use of force becomes equated with war.

Power, like so many important words, has two almost opposite meanings. When people who call themselves *realists* talk about power, they have one very clear meaning of power in mind. Power means the exercise of force; power in this context is the means to coerce and dominate. One of the most discussed essays on international affairs in 2002 was Robert Kagan's essay, *Power and Weakness*.³ Slightly expanded, it was published as a book with the title *Of Paradise and Power*.³ There is no question in Kagan's mind that power is the opposite of weakness, that the United States represents power and Europe represents weakness. The reference to paradise in the book's title might suggest something positive about Europe but, for Kagan, Europe's living in a paradise is a delusion made possible by United States (military) power. Kagan would probably acknowledge other kinds of power than military power but his standard use of the term is to equate power and military power. Therefore, countries that do not spend a sizeable part of their budget on military power are *weak*.

Liberal commentators in the United States were skeptical of Kagan's crude stereotypes. But a book which they did praise was Joseph Nye's *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Cannot Go It Alone*.⁴ Nye distinguished between *hard* power and *soft* power; this distinction was widely hailed as a breakthrough in thinking about United States power. Many people were therefore surprised when Nye supported the United States war on Iraq. Where did soft power go? The answer, I think, is that a distinction between hard and soft is only a minor issue of degrees in the exercise of power. Nye never gets to the real paradox of power. His hard and soft powers still refer to coercing people in a one way exercise of force. If manipulation with soft power does not get us what we want, there is hard power (bombs) as a backup.

The real paradox of power is that power can be almost the exact opposite of force. In addition to meaning active coercion, power can also mean passive receptiveness. In fact, this latter meaning is the root from which all power springs. Power belongs to the same linguistic family as possible, potential, passive. In classical and medieval philosophy, power is the lowest and weakest form of being - mere possibility that has yet to be realized or actualized. Power is capacity for action but needs to be brought to act.

When one comes to the human as the paradoxical union of matter and spirit, what was weakness can be turned into strength. The fact that humans, in contrast to other animals, are mostly unformed at birth can be turned to advantage. The humans are born with capacity, the power that is receptiveness. They are not born with wings but they can invent an airplane. Among the other animals, they are on the weak side in brute strength, but the human strength of intelligence gives them an advantage far beyond the other animals.

The paradox of power is that power begins as weakness or passivity, an undesirable condition in the material world. But humans have a passiveness or receptiveness that is their strength. They are able to exercise control of their surroundings by ideas and language. True, elements of force are mixed in with the human efforts to control. When threatened, humans may mistakenly equate their power with force. For defending themselves against hostile animals or dangerous weather, force may be an appropriate defense. But with other human beings, human power resides in listening and responding. Between humans, force is a sign that human power has failed.

When human beings enter into mutual exchanges, then the power of each is enhanced. Human life become richer the more that receptivity to others is exercised. Of course, not all human encounters are mutually affirming. Some people, for whatever the cause, never grasp the paradox of human power. For them, the world has a top and a bottom; they are willing to do whatever is necessary to get on top. Other people who are on the receiving end of this kind of force are tempted to act the same in return. Worse, they are pressed to accept this picture of the world with a top and a bottom. One of the worst aspects of being a slave is that it can make you desire to be a slave owner.

The most appropriate human response to a force that has turned violent is to act asymmetrically. That is, human power resides in not returning violence for violence. Whatever is done, it must be action to break a cycle of violence so that a degree of mutuality can be restored. Doing good to one's enemies is not a form of weakness but of human strength. What is sometimes called passive

resistance can be misunderstood as doing nothing. But passive resistance is an action, the most intensely human action. The Sermon on the Mount is often cited as an advocacy of doing nothing in the face of evil. But showing love to one's enemies and deliberately refusing to offer violence for violence requires courage, determination and an understanding of power.

In realist literature, the Sermon on the Mount is often praised as an ideal that individuals should try to live by. But to protect these good and innocent people the government has to be amoral; it cannot be naive and idealistic in a world of predators. The assumption is that the only thing that counts in international affairs is self-interest. However, the question for a nation is the same as for the individual: What kind of self are you becoming? That is, what are your interests? The nation state has a proclivity to feel threatened and therefore to use the crudest forms of force. One nation cannot change this long history but it is possible that the world's nation-states might establish a system that allows for nations to have other interests than that of being more militarily powerful than their neighbors.

The United Nations is the present fragile structure for international cooperation. The right wing in the United States contemptuously dismisses the United Nations as a debating society but that is precisely what it should be. As a forum for discussion, it needs the help of other international or transnational bodies to facilitate numerous forms of national exchanges, such as business, athletic or religious dealings. It also needs a legal and judicial structure to be a restraint on the misuses of force that continue to be part of human experience.

Terrible conflicts are not likely to disappear soon but it is time to start speaking a language of power, force and war that will reduce human violence and unlock human power. A country that equates power and military power is on the way to self-destruction. The alternative is to use the human power of mutual pacts that provide as much security as human beings are likely to have in this world.

Terror

I think a good litmus test for understanding the limits of this security is the way in which terror and terrorism are spoken about. When power and force are misunderstood today, an obsession with fighting terrorism is almost bound to follow. The perennial tactic of fighting violence with violence has evolved into a special format for today's world. The phrase Awar on terrorism has become ubiquitous in the United States. But what must be said is that there isn't any war on terrorism. The phrase is nonsensical, which is not to say that it isn't a useful tool for some parties. My thesis is that there cannot be a war on terrorism

because war is terrorism. War is the most obvious, most widespread and most deliberate use of terror. The reason why this simple fact is not acknowledged is because of the peculiar way in which Terrorism has been defined.

Caleb Carr's book, The Lessons of Terror, was criticized for blurring the distinction between war and terrorism.⁶ It allowed Carr to cite numerous examples from military history as examples of terrorism. I think blurring the difference made sense and made for a more interesting book. However, I think Carr gets it badly wrong by claiming that Terrorism is war. That led him to advocate that (their) terrorism should be met with (our) war. The real lesson of terror is not that terrorism is (a form of) war but that war is (a form of) terrorism. And the way to respond to (their) terrorism is to examine (our) terrorism and find a non-symmetrical response that might reduce the terrpr of violence on both sides.

Terror has a very clear meaning in the English language. People have little difficulty in understanding the feeling of terror or identifying something as a cause of terror. Terror is an emotional reaction to a situation in which one fears for one's safety or for one's life. The threat may be shadowy or even illusory but mental anguish is central to how severe is the fear of physical harm.

A Terrorist, then, would be someone who uses terror as a means to an end. Someone using terror is a terrorist at that moment, although the act does not necessarily constitute one's identity. There are few people whose identity is to be a terrorist. Many people at times in their life have been involved in terrifying a group or an individual. This is especially true if one recognizes that many kinds of organizations use tactics of terror.

The cause of the confusion and blindness regarding terror and terrorist comes from the use of the word Terrorism. Like most words ending in -ism, it is an abstraction that any powerful group can define as they like. In this case, the powerful group can be a nation-state which has simply decided that a nation-state cannot engage in terrorism. Only individuals and sub-national groups are designated as terrorist organizations.

The most influential definition of terrorism was issued by the U.S. State Department in 1998. The beginning of the statement reads: The term terrorism= means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.⁷ This statement limits terrorism to non-state actors. The exclusion of the state from terrorism delimits the methods employed

by terrorists to those available to non-state actors. Tanks and war planes are not used by terrorists; When tanks and war planes are used, then that is not terrorism.

The second clause of the State Department's definition is: "The term 'terrorist group' means any group practicing, or any group that has significant subgroups that practice, international terrorism." By distinguishing between a group that practices terrorism and a group that has significant subgroups that practice terrorism, the State Department makes room for the idea of state-sponsored terrorism without granting that states are actually perpetrators of terrorism.

The manner in which the State Department defines terrorism determines the data incorporated into its terrorism databank. The CIA and RAND conceive terrorism to be the illegitimate use of force by non-state actors and rogue nations, such as Syria and Iran. But whatever is done by the United States or Israel is outside the State Department's definition of terror. In this context, war is not terrorism. The firebombing of 67 Japanese cities in 1945 or the bombing of Belgrade to convince the Serbian government to change its ways cannot be called terrorism, despite the extraordinary terror caused to millions of people.

The definition of terror should exclude the actor. If there were a focus on the nature of the act, it would be harder to persevere in the common practice of referring to terrorism practiced by the state as "maintaining order," "ensuring security" or "upholding democracy." The meaning of terrorism I have proposed resists seeing terrorism as induced by a disposition that compels the actor toward violence.

If one thinks of international terror as the unleashing of violence to reach a political end, there can be little doubt that most of the world sees the United States as the chief terrorist organization. The United States, with more military might than most of the rest of the world combined, uses its firepower to achieve what it decides are good ends. The U.S. military insists that it does not "target" civilians and military planners no doubt try to avoid the civilian population. But if one looks at the act and the results of military operations, especially aerial bombing, the effect is terrifying for anyone in the vicinity. All wars spread terror but a war from the sky multiplies the terror tenfold.

The torture of prisoners is a part of the terror of war. Not all soldiers practice torture but training to kill the enemy is hardly good preparation for taking care of the imprisoned enemy. The Geneva Conventions are a noble attempt to resist the full logic of war. They are a continuance of Christian theology's rules for going

to war and rules for conducting a war. But the twentieth century should have made obvious the illogicality of declaring that some aspects of war are illegal.

The United States has killed thousands of Iraqis. Scandalously, the U.S. government openly admits it has no interest in counting the number of Iraqis that have been killed. In the United States this slaughter seems to have been accepted with a shrug: So what do you expect in a war? And yet the pictures of a few dozen Iraqis being tortured and humiliated set off a worldwide furor. The pictures are able to focus attention on the inhumanity of the whole operation.

Shouldn't the next step be to have a fifth Geneva Convention that war is illegal? If torture and assassination are illegal, how can war be legal? It is true that so long as international authority is not sufficiently developed, there would remain conflicts. But a nation that unleashed a war on another nation should be considered a terrorist state. The international community would have the power to authorize a degree of force to resist violence but not to wage war.

The United States, in disregard of international opinion, has launched a tirade of violence, with no end in sight. In 2001, the United States met terror with terror. The metaphor of war was introduced immediately. It resonated with all sorts of other metaphorical wars - on poverty, drugs, illiteracy, pollution. The metaphor is nearly always hideously inaccurate (although a cold war captured some of the real conflict that involved proxy armies). The problems require education and political skill. Declaring a war on terrorism was absurd. Where is the battlefield on which this war was to be fought? It turns out to be everywhere. A terrorism, a doctrine about practices of terror, is in any country that one chooses to name.

We now know that the executive branch of the U.S. government decided from the start on one country against which to wage an actual war. A war on terrorism was the gateway to a war on Iraq. It was not a war with Iraq which would suggest two nation-states being at war. It was a war launched on a country that supposedly embodied terrorism. The war on terrorism as a nonsensical phrase did not prevent it from being a linguistic preparation for a war on Iraq. One can hope that the unexpected difficulties of this venture will call a halt to preparations for knocking over other countries that are defined as hotbeds of terrorism. But the evidence is not clear that any lesson has been learned or that a war on terrorism might not continue without end.

1. John Dewey, Force and Coercion, and Force, Violence and Law, *Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 10:244-51; 211-15.

2. *New York Times*, Feb. 19, 2003, p. 1A

3. New York: Knopf, 2003.

4. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

5. Michael Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

6. New York: Random House, 2003.

7. Andrew Valls, *Ethics in International Affairs* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000), p.103.