

FINAL WORD ➞ BY BART HINKLE

Coercion and Violence

After the slaying of conservative activist Charlie Kirk in September, millions of words poured forth from every corner of the political spectrum. As usual, there were intemperate, even hateful, attacks on The Other Side, either for inciting the shooter or for exploiting Kirk's death for political gain. There was whataboutism and the highlighting of hypocrisy and much of the same old point-scoring that inevitably bubbles up from the depths of political discourse whenever something horrible happens.

To be fair, much of the commentary was more sober. Leading political figures formed a chorus insisting that political violence is wrong, that the seemingly endless cycle of bloodshed must stop, that disagreements must never be resolved by force.

David Holt, the Republican mayor of Oklahoma City, lamented that "violence is the ultimate statement that you no longer have any interest in trying to change somebody's mind, and we as a society seem to jump to that conclusion all too often." Former congresswoman Gabby Giffords, herself the survivor of an assassination attempt, insisted, "Democratic societies will always have political disagreements, but we must never allow America to become a country that confronts those disagreements with violence." Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders put it the most bluntly: "Political violence, in fact, is political cowardice. It means that you cannot convince people of the correctness of your ideas, and you have to impose them through force."

At this point the libertarian must raise a hand and point out the elephant in the room: Imposition does not happen

only when a lone gunman picks out a target through the lens of his scope. It is all around us, perhaps not lethal but very much by force, and often endorsed by wide majorities.

This is not to say that the average citizen thinks vigilantes should go around imposing their will on people with different beliefs. But it bears noting that many Americans are perfectly content for *the government* to exercise the full power of the state on their behalf, even on seemingly mundane matters like flag-burning or smoking in restaurants. Ideally, the latter would be a matter for owners and customers to work out among themselves. But in many states, lawmakers have imposed the preference of some customers on all customers in all restaurants.

Americans are obliged, through the tax system and other means, to support social-welfare programs, military interventions, drug prohibitions, farm subsidies, and a host of other policies with which they disagree. The vast majority do so willingly, albeit perhaps grudgingly, on the theory that those policies were adopted by majority rule. Given the degree of gerrymandering in Congress, the disproportional

tionate representation in the Senate, and the fact that two recent presidents have won the Oval Office by minority vote, that theory is open to question.

But even if the theory is true, it does not ipso facto justify a policy. (Think Jim Crow.) And even when a majority supports a justifiable policy, some people are going to oppose it. As Sanders would say, they are not convinced of its correctness. In the United States, with rare exceptions for conscientious objection, that doesn't matter. You are obliged to support the policy. If you decline, you might be fined or imprisoned. If you resist strenuously enough, armed agents of the state will overrule you by force.

That fact grows ever more obvious on American streets. Today, the police are heavily militarized—often looking (and sometimes acting) less like friendly cops on the beat than special-ops commandos in a war zone. And now, actual soldiers patrol parts of some American cities, unsanctioned by residents or their local representatives. The imagery makes plain what is normally hidden: Political decisions are enforced, ultimately, by the threat of violence. When policies are imposed by law rather than embraced by mutual consent, then we have shown, as Mayor Holt puts it, that we no longer have any interest in trying to change somebody's mind.

And as the scope of government expands, so do the political stakes. Elections become fights over who will control not merely basic services such as fire and police protection, but a giant apparatus with the ability to upend markets, overthrow governments, and reshape millions of people's lives. We should not be surprised when some unstable individuals take similar power into their own hands.

As the reach of government expands, so does the universe of issues that ultimately might be settled through the state's use of force. Meanwhile, the realm of mutual consent—the zone of liberty where disagreements can be settled through persuasion, not coercion—shrinks. That, too, is a kind of tragedy. R



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