

America: Home of the Free, Land of the Violent

Robert L Sterken 12/10/15

Holland Professional Club

My paper tonight is about violence:

American Violence towards other Americans, and towards other countries. Certainly the events of the last few weeks have brought much of this to our attentions but this is not new.

I read recently that:

"The United States of America was conceived and nurtured by violence.

Violence pervades this culture. Americans not only engage in violence, they are entertained by it. Killing takes place in America at an average of 87 times each day. Going to war in Afghanistan is less dangerous than living in Chicago. The Romans went to the Coliseum to watch people being killed. In major cities, Americans just look out their windows. Baseball, once America's national game, a benign sport, has been replaced by football which is so violent it destroys the brains of those who play it. Violent films dominate our motion picture theatres and television sets. Our children play killing video games."

It has seemed to me, for a long time, that the United States is a violence loving society. Compared to Europe and Canada, we just seem to more be intent on war, extreme punishment, guns and an attitude that "Might makes right".

People have bumper stickers that proclaim, "Our Colors never Run". You mess with us and we will "Kick your Ass".

We do not lose wars, admit that we made a mistake, we push others around. WE do what we want, we say what we want, we get what we want, we make our own rules...basically we are the world's most violent bully.

Is this a fair assessment, or just a very negative, critical way of looking at things?

As it turns out violence in our society has been going on for a long long time.

Native American Indians

It is estimated that there were over 12 million Native Americans living in America before the European Colonization. Four centuries later, the count is about 237,000. Millions of Native Americans have been killed, starved and forced out of their homelands.

Native Americans had been living in harmony with animals for centuries. If an animal was killed, it was killed for food, clothing or whatever they could get from it. They hunted the weakest members of the herd leaving the biggest strongest animals to further maintain the herd.

Historians estimate that there may have been 30 to 60 million Bison roaming the American plains but by the late 1880s, a few hundred wild bison, mostly living in Yellow Stone Park were the last that remained.

Millions of Bison were just slaughtered.

When the railroads extended to the west, they advertised "hunting by rail." Parties of hunters would sit on the top of the railroad cars or shoot from car windows and kill the buffalo. They just shot them for the thrill of killing them. They had no intention of keeping the meat or using the hides.

Hunters now go for the biggest, strongest alpha male animals and shoot them with huge rifles from hundreds of yards away. They call that sport.

War:

American foreign policy for decades has consisted primarily of military misadventures—foreign policy through the barrel of a gun! Today, the gun has become the drone and the bullet, the hellfire missile.

General Smedley Butler (1881-1940), one of only two Americans to win the Medal of Honor on two separate occasions, wrote:

"I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. . . . I helped make Mexico, especially Tampico, safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen

Central American republics for the benefits of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. In China I helped to see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested.”

Since the American Revolution, The US has fought in 12 major wars.

We are the only country to have used nuclear weapons and we did it twice. We do however, feel perfectly fine about telling other countries that they can not have such weapons.

War seems to be looked at as an answer for the US in part because we fight wars on other people’s properties. We do not see, first hand, the ravages of war.

Now let us look at what is going on today in various categories:

Capital punishment;

The US ranks fifth for the highest number of executions. We are behind China, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

The US has executed 1,421 since 1976. We have been averaging about 40 -50 per year for the last 10 years.

The U.S. has a strict attitude toward punishment in general. Having a severe attitude toward the death penalty is only natural when you consider that the U.S. leads the world in mass incarceration of prisoners and holds records for solitary confinement and sentences to life in prison.

Prisons:

The US has the largest prison population in the world. The US has nearly 2.5 million prisoners. The US incarcerates about 700 people per 100,000 compared to about 100 per 100,000 for Canada, The Netherlands, and Spain. Japan incarcerates 50 per 100,000

China is the only country that comes close with about 200 persons in prison for 100,000.

The US has about 4.4 % of the worlds population and houses about 22% of the world's prisoners.

Guns:

The US accounts for less that 5% of the world's population but accounts for nearly 50% of the civilian owned guns.

The US has the highest gun ownership in the world with almost 300 million civilian owned guns. India comes in second with 46 million civilian owned guns.

Roughly 68% of homicides in the US are committed using guns. In India, only 8% of homicides are committed with guns.

Think about that for a minute, other countries have guns also but they are not using them to kill people nearly as much as we are.

In 2013, in the US, firearms were used in 84,000 non fatal injuries. There were over 11,000 deaths by homicide, 21,000 suicides by firearm and 505 deaths due to accidental discharge.

The difference in the **number of gun deaths** is especially noticeable when comparing the US to nations that are otherwise similar. For example, Britain in 2009, there were only 138 gun deaths in its population of 64 million. That same year Canada saw 173 deaths in a population of 35 million.

Whatever you think of gun control, one thing is for sure: The U.S. really has far more gun violence than other advanced countries.

Ironically, the most conservative religious people also seem to be most enamored with the military, war, capital punishment and unlimited guns.

Military:

Our current budget is \$610 billion. This is more than the next 7 countries combined. Military spending accounts for about 20 percent of all federal spending.

We are one of nine countries with nuclear bombs. We have more deployed warheads than any other country. Of the roughly 4000 Deployed Warheads in the world, we have 1920.

Only Russia comes close in Nuclear Forces.

Our military "Policies" the world.

The military of the United States is deployed in more than 150 countries around the world, with over 150,000 of its active-duty personnel serving outside the United States and its territories and an additional 71,000 deployed in various contingency operations as well as through military attache offices and temporary training assignments in foreign countries.

Mass Shootings:

The US has more mass shootings than any other nation.

Adam Lankford released the results of his study on global mass shootings, a term defined by the FBI as at least four individuals killed in a single spree that isn't related to gang violence. Lankford's study analyzed 171 countries. His findings showed that mass shootings are as American as apple pie.

In the 46 years covered by his study, All told, the figures showed that nearly a third of all mass shootings in the world have taken place in the United States.

Joel Tanis just posted an article that showed the there have been 994 mass shootings in the last 1,004 days.

I wrote this last week and there have been several since then including an especially violent one in California.

So, in all of these categories of force and violence, the US either leads the world or is in the top few countries. Over all, no other nation comes close to the US. So, to characterize the US as a violent bully, may be closer to the truth than we like to admit.

What is going on, why are we the way we are?

Todd May, a retired Clemson political philosopher, has suggested that there are three main reasons for how the United States has become so “saturated in slaughter.”

He says:

There are, of course, many reasons, but three stand out, one of which is deep and longstanding and the others of more recent vintage.

The deep reason lies in our competitive individualism. Americans are proud of our individualism, and indeed it is not entirely a curse. To believe that one has a responsibility to create oneself rather than relying on others for sustenance has its virtues. The dark side of this individualism is a wariness of others and a rejection of the social solidarity characteristic of countries like Denmark, Sweden, New Zealand and France. We make it, if we do make it, but we do so alone. Our neighboring citizens are not so much our fellows as our competitors.

This individualism and associated aggression goes way back in our history.

When Europeans first came to the Americas, they thought that they had discovered a new world. Instead they found a land already inhabited by people with their own ways of life. Christian intolerance required the use of violence. Just as the Romans took the parts of Europe they wanted, these Europeans took the Americas. Violence was in their souls. Current day Americans have inherited it.

We like to think of the Pilgrims as passive, peace loving Christian people. By the very nature of the risk that they took coming to America, these people were quite the opposite. Religious, somewhat, but certainly willing to do whatever it took to survive. This can be said of virtually all of the huge number of emigrants that made their way to American soil.

The second reason is the decline of our ability to control events in the world. We might date this decline from our military failure in Vietnam, or, if we prefer, more recently to the debacle in Iraq. In any event, it is clear that the United State cannot impose its will as it did during much of the 20th century. We live in a different world now, and this makes many of us insecure

Our insecurity, in turn, reinforces our desire to control, which reinforces violence. If we cannot control events in the world, this must be a result not of our impotence or the complexity of the world's problems but of our unwillingness to "man up.

Dan Bolt gave an excellent paper regarding FEAR about a year ago. He showed how we are very much effected by fear and fear tactics.

We have right wing conservatives who preach fear everyday. "WE need to kill them before they kill us." "We can not let refugees in from Syria because maybe a few of them will kill us." We end up supporting politicians that have extreme views because a more moderate candidate might let terrorists in.

The third reason is economic. The welfare state has been in decline for more than 30 years now. The embrace of neoliberalism erodes social solidarity.

Neoliberalism is defined as a laissez-faire economics which advocates fiscal austerity, deregulation, free trade and

reduction in government spending. This started with Reaganomics.

Each of us is an investor, seeking the best return on our money, our energies, our relationships, indeed our lives. We no longer count on government, which is often perceived as the enemy. And we no longer have obligations to those with whom we share the country, or the planet. It is up to each of us to take our freedom and use it wisely.

Competitive individualism, insecurity, neoliberalism: the triad undergirding our penchant for violence. This, as much as anything else, is the current exceptionalism of America.

Others are not our partners, nor even our colleagues. They are our competitors or our enemies. They are hardly to be recognized, much less embraced. They are to be vanquished.

So we take a society that clearly has some deep seated attitude issues and then we add in violent movies, TV and video games.

We, and our children, are exposed to so much violence that we are numb to it.

According to a report from the American Psychiatric Association, adolescents will have viewed 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence by the age of 18. Worse yet, the current portrayal of violence is highly graphic. At the same time, violent acts go unpunished 73% of the time. The "good Guy" is often the perpetrator of violence, which sends the message that violence is justified and a viable method for dealing with problems.

Movies:

Watching violent films does make people more aggressive, studies show.

In particular, gun violence in PG-13 films has tripled since 1985, the year the PG-13 rating was first introduced. And overall, violence in movies has nearly quadrupled since the 1950s.

Psychologists say it's a worrisome trend that we should take seriously, because there is evidence that watching violence on screen increases aggression in real life.

Ratings are determined by the Motion Picture Association of America — which means they're "assigned by the industry."

A movie rated PG-13 will attract more theatergoers than an R, of course, because kids can go see them. Many PG-13 movies are extremely violent.

TV:

Television can be a powerful influence in developing value systems and shaping behavior. Unfortunately, much of today's television programming is violent. Hundreds of studies of the effects of TV violence on children and teenagers have found that children may:

- 1 become "immune" or numb to the horror of violence
- 2 begin to accept violence as a way to solve problems
- 3 imitate the violence they observe on television; and
- 4 identify with certain characters, victims and/or victimizers

Worst of all may be: Video Games:

The American Psychological Association recently released a report that while there was no single risk factor to blame for aggression, violent video games did contribute.

90% of pediatricians agreed that violent video games can increase aggressive behavior among children. [75]

60% of middle school boys and 40% of middle school girls who played at least one Mature-rated (M-rated) game hit or beat up someone. Simulating violence such as shooting guns and hand to hand combat in video games can cause real life violent behavior.

Video games often require players to simulate violent actions, such as stabbing, shooting, or dismembering someone with an ax, sword, chainsaw, or other weapons. Game controllers are so sophisticated and the games are so realistic that simulating the violent acts enhances the learning of those violent behaviors.

More than any other media, these [violent] video games encourage active participation in violence. From a psychological perspective, video games are excellent teaching tools because they reward players for engaging in certain types of behavior. Unfortunately, in many popular video games, the behavior is violence

As many as 97% of US kids age 12-17 play video games, contributing to the \$21.53 billion domestic video game industry. More than half of the 50 top-selling video games contain violence.

Mental Health:

It is estimated that 55% of male inmates and 73% of female inmates have some type of mental illness. Only 1 in 3 state prisoners and 1 in 6 jail inmates who suffer from mental illness report receiving any care for their condition.

We have an enormous number of people who are suffering from very treatable illnesses who are not getting treatment and who end up getting caught in the criminal justice system as opposed to the mental health system."

President Reagan also spearheaded the idea to close down mental institutions. This well intended effort ended up sending many people with mental illness into situations that they were not prepared to cope with. People who were once in institutions are now roaming the streets and filling our prisons after committing violent crimes.

Funding for mental health is very much a low priority. Some insurances only pay for 60 days of treatment and then you are on your own.

Ottawa County is losing millions in state and fed revenue so there will be a millage next year to hopefully support it locally.

So, we take a society that is selfish, scared and insecure, whip it up with

violent movies, tv and video games, throw in political and religious leaders that pray on fear and doubt, and then we add in 300 million guns.

How can we be surprised that violence is a result?

As I said before, The US has the highest gun ownership in the world.

Why so many guns? One huge reason is the gun lobby.

In June 2015, President Obama made a speech lamenting the NRA's extremely strong "grip" on Congress's neck. Dramatic as this may sound, it's not too far from the truth. The gun lobby has poured so much money into Congress that it's breathtaking.

Between 2000 and 2013, the NRA, the firearms industries, and the ultramilitant organization Gun Owners of America poured over \$81 million into House, Senate, and presidential races. This so far outstrips anti-gun spending as to make any comparisons seem laughable.

This overspending has real consequences. When the issue of expanded background checks came before the Senate in 2013 in the wake of the horrifying Sandy Hook massacre, 46 senators voted down the bill. It was later revealed that 43 of them had previously received financial help from the gun lobby, with 38 of those 43 receiving over \$15,000 each.

Just this week The Senate rejected an effort to bar suspected terrorists from buying guns.

The amendment would have allowed the U.S. to block the sale or transfer of guns to suspected or known terrorists.

The amendment needed 60 votes to pass, but got only 45 yes votes in the Republican-controlled Senate. Just one Republican, Mark Kirk of Illinois, voted with Democrats to approve the measure.

The vote came a day after a mass shooting in San Bernardino, Calif., that left 14 people dead.

Money aside, the gun lobby is also good at manipulating

campaigns. If a senator is pro-gun, the NRA will launch wall-to-wall attack ads against his opponent at election time. On the other hand, an anti-gun candidate will receive a level of harassment guaranteed to make their lives miserable and cost them a close election.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT. Are we in a hopeless situation? I think not, but attitudes will have to change.

Here are a few suggestions:

First:

NRA and other pro-gun organizations need to change their actions and their rhetoric and become much more in line with public opinion. The members of these organizations need to elect different leaders. 91% of Americans and 85% of NRA members support increased background checks for gun buyers and yet the NRA opposes ALL forms of common sense gun control.

The leaders of the NRA are fanatics. I would argue that they are almost as far from main stream thought as members of ISIS or the Taliban. Their extreme positions are literally killing Americans.

Second:

THE Right wing of the Republican party needs to stop pedaling fear and violence as the answer. The more moderate side of the party needs to stop being bullied by the far right. The party needs to stop fighting gun control. I find that this group pushes the notion of fierce individualism, victory at any cost, and basically, selfishness, at every turn.

It baffles me that so many conservative Christians are aligned with this party that is going further and further away from religious values.

Third

People need to use common sense use rather than just letting the law be their moral compass. I think that people need to take more personal responsibility to police themselves, their families and neighborhoods.

Many neighborhoods have a "Neighborhood Watch" We need to have a Nation Wide Watch.

How is it possible that the couple that just did the shooting in California could drop their kid off at a grandparent, live and work in a neighborhood, have family close and yet NO ONE noticed that they accumulated a massive arsenal of weapons and ammunition? I strongly suspect that someone close to them was aware but said nothing.

How does it happen that a mother buys a gun for her deranged son and then is surprised that he uses it to kill people?

We ALL need to be observant and pay attention.

Along with this, there will many perfectly innocent people that may need to be checked out. That is too bad but simply a sign of the times that we live in.

We can no longer rely on the FBI and CIA to identify and find people who have no previous criminal records. If you see something suspicious, call the police.

Fourth

limit computer games, tv and movies At the very least, parents need to be talking to their children. It seems very unlikely to outlaw violence in these things but if fewer people purchased them, the industry would change.

We can not let the industry do their own rating systems.

fifth

-politicians need to start talking peace and non-violence. For too many politicians, any talk of non-violence is a sign of weakness.

In my view, President Obama came in with talk of peace and unity but has generally caved under the circumstances.

sixth

Clergy need to step up to the plate. I have seen that the Muslim community has been much more aggressive in condemning ISIS and other extremist Muslim sects.

I do not know about the Jewish community but I have not been aware of their leaders preaching peace and love.

It pains me that many Christian leaders seem to take the side of violence over negotiations. Guns over gun control. What are they thinking?

Most universities want guns off their campus. Liberty University, on the other hand, is going down another route and actually wants as many of its students to carry weapons, as possible.

Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of Liberty University, called on students to get permits to carry concealed weapons, noting they can take “a free course” **right on campus**. Having more guns on campus could help those in the university fight back against any kind of attack like the one that happened in California on Wednesday that killed 14 people, he argued.

What is he thinking? It is hard to imagine that a person who probably is wearing his WWJD bracelet would call for these actions.

Pope Francis is, in my opinion, one of very few prominent religious leaders that is preaching peace and condemning violence in response to violence.

It will be very interesting to see how his leadership is able to impact the way the world thinks.

So, there are many other areas of concern but if we worked on these issues, we could change America, and maybe, the world.

SEARCH

I will close with a few more words from Todd May.

He wrote this in 2013.

THE STONE

Is American Nonviolence Possible?

By TODD MAY date published APRIL 21, 2013 7:00 PM date updated

April 21, 2013 7:00 pm

Can we do this? Are we capable at this moment of taking on the mantle of nonviolence?

The lessons are already there in our history. The civil rights movement is perhaps the most shining example of nonviolence in our human legacy. After 9/11, after Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy, and now, in the immediate on-the-ground responses to the Boston bombing, Americans pulled together with those they did not know in order to restore the web of our common existence. We are indeed violent, but we have shown flashes of nonviolence, that is to say moments where our competitive individualism, our insecurity, our desire for the highest return on our investment of time and money, has been trumped by the vividness of the likeness of others. Granted, these are only moments. They have not lasted. But they teach us that when it comes to nonviolent relations with others, we are not entirely bereft.

What would it require for these lessons to be become sedimented in our collective soul? There is much work to be done. We must begin to see our fellow human beings as precisely that: fellows. They need not be friends, but they must be counted as worthy of our respect, bearers of dignity in their own right.

RELATED

More From The Stone

Read previous contributions to this series.

None of this requires that we allow others to abdicate responsibility for their lives. Nor does it require that we refuse, when no other means are available, to defend ourselves with force. Instead it calls upon us to recognize that we, too, have a responsibility to more than our own security and contentment. It commands us to look to

ourselves and *at* others before we start casting stones.

Would this end all senseless killing? No, it would not. Would it substitute for the limits on guns that are so urgently needed? Of course not. While the recently rejected limits on guns, however timid, might have provided a first public step toward the recognition of the requirements of our situation, our task would remain: to create a culture where violence is seen not as the first option but as the last, one that would allow us to gaze upon the breadth of space that lies between an unjust act and a violent response.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said that the core of morality lay in treating others not simply as means but also as ends in themselves. Nonviolence teaches us nothing more than this. It is a simple lesson, if difficult to practice — especially so at a moment like this when our rage and grief are still raw. But it is a lesson that has become buried under our ideology and our circumstances. We need to learn it anew.

Learning this lesson will not bring back the life of the Martin Richard or the other murdered victims in Boston. It will not return to health those who were injured on that day. It won't bring back Trayvon Martin or the children of Sandy Hook. But it will, perhaps, point the way toward a future where, instead of recalling yet more victims of violence in anger and with vows of retribution, we find ourselves with fewer victims to recall.

Todd May is Class of 1941 Memorial Professor of the Humanities at Clemson University, and the author of, most recently, "Friendship in the Age of Economics." He is currently working on a book on the philosophy of nonviolence.

12/9/15