

## Is Violence the Answer?



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Earlier this year I was searching for material to help my Complex Problem Solving students understand the concept of Cognitive Dissonance at a deeper, more visceral level. Cognitive Dissonance is: the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioural decisions and attitude change. At an intellectual level, Cognitive Dissonance comes down to new information not fitting with a pre-existing belief. Ideally, all we need to do under such circumstances is to decide that new information that challenges our pre-existing beliefs should necessitate reinterpretation and recalibration of our beliefs. Unfortunately, and in reality, what most often happens is that people experiencing Cognitive Dissonance feel psychologically (and sometimes even physically) uncomfortable about their beliefs being challenged, which regularly results in them justifying why the new information can be ignored, and why their previous beliefs are still valid.

In my search for material that would help my students to understand Cognitive Dissonance at a visceral (rather than an intellectual) level, I came across a TED talk by Tim Larkin titled “The Paradox of Violence.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HROsqfsJkx8&t=29s>) [Tim Larkin is a Self-Protection Expert, and his talk begins with the following sentence:](#) “Violence is rarely the answer, but when it is, it’s the only answer.” For me, this sentence immediately rang

true, as twenty years of working to understand security, warfare, and violent extremism have left me with a begrudging acceptance of the supposed and limited utility of violence. For my students, Larkin's TED talk had the impact I had hoped for: they became very still and very quiet, and our discussion about Cognitive Dissonance became more earnest and thoughtful. With my students, Larkin's talk achieved what I think he set out to do: to ask the audience to consider the utility of violence as a legitimate tool to preserve their safety, which he acknowledges is likely to make many people feel challenged and uncomfortable — a kind of Cognitive Dissonance.

Within seconds of listening to Tim Larkin saying the above sentence, I realised that I had found more than an effective tool for teaching Cognitive Dissonance: I had also found an interesting perspective from which to consider security and violence at both a personal and global level.

The majority of people in modern societies have been normalised to the belief that violence is not the way to solve problems, and that utilising violence is not a personally, or socially, acceptable way to respond to a situation. Despite this major trend over the last one hundred years, eloquent arguments concerning the utility of violence have been made by people such as Frantz Fanon. During the period of African decolonisation after World War II, Fanon argued that oppressed peoples could find catharsis and agency by violently overthrowing the regimes that had dominated them. It was theorised that violence could wipe the slate clean, provide an impetus for personal and political agency, and provide a basis for building a new society. Since at least the 1980s, Islamist Extremist literature has viewed violence in a similar way: as a redemptive force that can cleanse the Earth and usher in a non-violent utopia. In both the Islamist Extremist and Fanon's case, violence is a means to an end, but there is no clear, or convincing, articulation as to how and when the violence will be turned off in favour of civil behaviour, or how rule of law will be created and maintained in the new society.

While arguments in favour of broad social and political violence continue to appeal to a minority of people, the majority of us have been moving, or have been moved, toward more peaceful lives in generally civil societies. In "The Better Angels of Our Nature," Steven Pinker makes a persuasive argument for current people and societies being the least violent in Human history, leading significantly less violent lives than our ancestors. Historically, violence was the norm, and the trend away from violence is new and remarkable.

Modern societies and their states have invested a lot of time and effort into convincing and/or coercing their citizens into the belief that the state should have a monopoly on violence, and that, even for states, violence should be a last resort. Despite all of the normalisation and self-regulation concerning the illegitimacy of using violence to achieve outcomes, there is one obvious problem with how most people have come to think about the inappropriateness of violence: that, at least in the short term, violence regularly gets people what they want.

In Tim Larkin and Chris Ranck-Buhr's book, "How To Survive The Most Critical 5 Seconds of Your Life," the authors argue that the most violent people in our societies use violence to get what they want. These violent individuals have no formal training to use violence: but, instead engage in violence because it gets them what they want, and they cannot conceive of another successful strategy to get what they want. They

have learned that using violence gives them power over their victims—who have largely relinquished the use of violence. Despite the fact that the violent criminals that Larkin and Ranck-Buhr discuss have been arrested, tried, and jailed, demonstrating that a state can create and maintain rule of law, violence is still effective in the short term, and the consequences of personal violence cannot be undone.

Existing alongside our modern societal prohibition on violence is a connected and contingent belief that rule of law will provide sufficient justice to justify not being violent. Rule of law does not have to be perfect, but it does need to underpin enough confidence and control to make civility the easiest and most successful personal choice. Ideally, citizens should behave peacefully, because even if the state cannot stop individual violence happening to them, it will use its power to seek justice on their behalf. Rule of law cannot provide restorative justice to directly redress the consequences of personal violence, but rule of law can provide retributive justice that justifies citizens' believing that we can live together in as peaceful a manner as possible. Consequently, personal "violence is rarely the answer, but when it is, it's the only answer," if it is one of those rare occasions when violence can be used to stop personal violence, which is beyond the immediate control of rule of law. Tim Larkin is not proposing that we should be violent all the time, and I am not proposing that we should be violent all the time, but there is a time to be violent if, and when, rule of law cannot provide immediate protection from personal violence.

While modern societies would like us to believe that they can and will protect us from personal violence, Larkin wants us to consider that we have to take some responsibility for protecting ourselves from the personal violence that the state cannot stop. There is a disparity between what we are meant to think about violence, and what we might need to do to counter personal violence that is directed toward us. This disparity provides good reasons for Cognitive Dissonance, and a degree of ambiguity between how we might want our society to be, and how we might need to act to deal with the limits of what our society can do to protect us from personal violence.

If we shift the context of our discussion from personal violence to global violence, then Tim Larkin's sentence takes on a darker tone. Global "violence is rarely the answer, but when it is, it's the only answer." Like with personal violence, there are plenty of examples of global violence destroying lives. All over the world people have fled violence, either making lives in new and unfamiliar places, or clinging on to the scraps of their lives in refugee camps on the other side of national and ethnic boundaries. People are re-educated in camps, forcefully recruited into militias, and left to the machinations of Warlords. The globe is littered with the markers of mass atrocities and mass graves, and fragmented memories represent the coals that may well go cold before the fire of justice can be kindled.

On the ground, global violence looks like personal violence: one person doing harm to another, with their motives remaining unclear, or incomprehensible, to the person on the receiving end. If violence was to happen to me here at home in Adelaide, then it would most likely be personal violence, as the Australian legal system would do what it can to limit the damage and maintain rule of law. But what happens if the consequences of violence ripple outwards beyond the victim's life disrupting and consuming the lives of people who find themselves in its path? If there is no rule of law to contain violence, then violence can grow beyond the personal until it poses a threat

to entire societies and states. If there is insufficient rule of law to limit what perpetrators can gain through violence, then violence is likely to become a stronger force than the people who use, or suffer, it.

In most societies and states rule of law limits the impact of violence to a personal level, but when violence is not contained its consequences can become global. The international rules based order supposedly exists to stop damage and destruction from expanding ever outwards, but the international rules based order is either young and fragile, or decaying and in decline. Violence occurs with impunity across too much of the world, and we regularly hear the same sentiments repeated: we decry the use of violence and the flouting of the international rules based order.

What if our belief in the international rules based order represents a kind of Cognitive Dissonance? We believe that violence is wrong, and we believe that violence should be curtailed, and we want there to be a system that brings justice to the world, but our beliefs alone do not make this so. It has taken centuries of persuasion and coercion to establish modern rule of law, and, even in states where it works effectively, personal violence still takes a toll.

If we want violence to not be the answer, then we need to decide at a societal and global level what we are willing to do to reinforce and expand the international rules-based order. Persuasion may take a lot of time, and a lot of people will continue to suffer violence while we are persuading societies to use their limited resources to contain and reduce levels of violence.

But what happens if we do not want to invest the time and resources to persuade more societies to expand rule of law and add to the international rules-based order? Will we accept rule of law for us and a lack of rules for others, or will we utilise violence to get what we want in the short term, while ignoring the corrosive and expanding impact of uncontained violence? We can believe that violence is not the answer, or we can do whatever we can to make violence the answer on only the rarest of occasions. My hope is that we will choose to be uncomfortable about the slow rate of progress, rather than being uncomfortable when our beliefs are challenged.

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