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Sending a Message: Violence as political communication

Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention.

(Hannah Arendt 1969)

Hannah Arendt's essay 'On Violence' is not a condemnation of violence. Rather, it is an argument about how violence undermines power. In fact, like many influential thinkers of the twentieth century – Jean-Paul Sartre and John Rawls, to name but two – Arendt argues that political violence can be a rational instrument in response to some circumstances.¹ For example, she defended the student violence against US involvement in Vietnam, arguing that

Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it. And since when we act we never know with any certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing, violence can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals.

(Arendt 1969: 176)

In Arendt's (1969: 155) view violence undermines power, and power relies on communication.² Certainly, the goal of public violence to end a war falls into such a category, since it is unsustainable over a longer term if the state is to retain its legitimacy. But my primary concern is not with the sustainability of a state of violence, whether it be perpetrated by state or non-state actors. Rather, it is with the use of violence as a means of political communication. What may

1. In Sartre's 1963 preface to Frantz Fanon's (1963), *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, he argues that appeals to non-violence can serve as appeals towards passivity in the face of oppression, which explains Sartre's defense of Fanon's call for violence in response to French colonialism. But it should be noted that Arendt is somewhat critical of Sartre's take on violence, arguing that Sartre 'believes, on the strength of Fanon's book', that violence 'can heal the wounds it has inflicted' (the latter quoting Sartre). She

concludes, 'If this were true, revenge would be the cure-all for most of our ills' (Arendt 1969: 122). See also John Rawls (1971), *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 351-55.

2. See also Jürgen Habermas (1977), 'Hannah Arendt's communications concept of power', *Social Research*, 44.
3. Christopher Hewitt (1993), *Consequences of Political Violence*, Brookfield, VT: Dartmouth Publishing Co.; and John Keane (1996), *Reflections on Violence*, London: Verso. See also Apter (1996: 1-32); Ten Honderich (1976), *Political Violence*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

appear as a 'senseless' act of violence to some may not only be quite rational to others, but it also may be laden with clear meaning. Of course, choosing to understand, let alone accept, that meaning is another matter entirely.

We can point to the communicative intent that underlies many acts of violence. This has been the case for many years within the realm of highly ritualized real-life and fictional mafia killings. In the film adaptation of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, Don Vito Corleone tells assassin Luca Brasi to go after Virgil Sollozzo, a menacing ally of the rival Tattaglia family. Don Corleone instructs Brasi to meet with Bruno Tattaglia, pretend that he is unhappy working for the Corleone family and indicate that he is ready to switch allegiances. Wearing a bulletproof vest, Brasi arrives at Tattaglia's bar, where he is greeted by Tattaglia and Sollozzo. Sollozzo briefly pretends to be interested in Brasi's proposition to defect, and he offers a deal, which Brasi pretends to find appealing. Then suddenly, in one of the most famous gangster killings in film history, Tattaglia grabs and holds Brasi's arm while Sollozzo drives a knife into his hand, pinning it to the bar. Immediately, a third man garrotes Brasi from behind. After the murder, Brasi's bulletproof vest, wrapped in brown paper, is sent to Sonny Corleone, who is sitting in consultation with his men after his father, Don Corleone, has been shot and hospitalized. Sonny opens the vest to find two whole fish, leading him to ask, 'What the hell is this?', to which one of his men replies, 'That's a Sicilian message. It means Luca Brasi sleeps with the fishes'.

It is idealistic to say that violence happens when communication breaks down, for this view presupposes that the two are somehow dichotomous, and that violence itself cannot and does not function as a form of communication. Although it may be the preference of many defenders of liberal legal-democratic systems to think of violence and communication as fundamentally distinct categories, this is an ideologically suspect assertion. Foucault (1977) shows how public torture and executions were once conducted with the aim of demonstrating the consequences of wrongdoing or, more to the point, the consequences of defying the will of the sovereign. The death penalty is still permitted under the laws of the United States and several individual states, although executions are not open to anyone who wishes to attend. But even under these more restricted circumstances by which the public can learn about executions, it is still widely believed that by taking the life of someone who commits a heinous crime, the state is effectively communicating to the rest of society not only that crime does not pay, but that one must pay the ultimate price for the worst crimes.

Some thinkers choose to define 'political violence' quite narrowly, and in such a way as to restrict the concept to mean acts committed by a government's opposition, typically in the form of rioting, terrorism and civil war.³ It is ironic that such a definition would categorically exclude states themselves as perpetrators of 'political violence', which would be a hard argument to make to the families of the thousands of Chileans and Argentines who 'disappeared' during the military dictatorships in their countries. At the time of the Yugoslav wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, the widespread practice of raping Muslim women and girls, by Serbian forces, was violence not only against women, but against a culture, a nation. These were not 'senseless' or random acts; instead, while barbaric, they were purposeful acts of communication. Likewise, the targets chosen for the 9/11 suicide bombings in the United States were not 'senseless', but rather they were highly symbolic blows aimed at US economic and military power. The 9/11 killings were cruel and perverse, but it is not a complicated challenge to human reason to explain the empirical basis and the logic that

motivated them (despite the widespread cultural prohibition of such discourse in the immediate post-9/11 environment in the United States). Consistent with Arendt's claim, quoted above, the events of 9/11 served 'to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention' (Arendt 1969: 176). Whether the cause that motivated the killings was served is, of course, arguable.

Political violence in particular is, by design and by default, a set of signifying practices involving elaborate cultural codes, serving as illustrations of what David Apter (1996: 14) refers to as 'a discourse theory of political violence'. Apter (1996: 17) writes that political violence 'is an extreme form of interpretative action. The discourse establishes its own communicative fields within which political movements are defined and around which boundaries are established'. He makes a compelling case that it is essential that we at least begin to give greater emphasis to the relationship between violence and communication, not only to answer questions about whether violent expression leads to physical violence (the primary theme of 'violence research' among communication scholars), but also in order to reflect on the limitations in how we define what it means to be violent.

Accepting the idea that states are perpetrators of political violence, and that particular kinds of violence are used to 'send a message', full-scale warfare can easily be understood as a means of political communication. When he decided to launch the 1990–91 Gulf War, George H.W. Bush followed in the footsteps of Ronald Reagan in his efforts to fight off the 'Vietnam syndrome' and, according to William Daniel Ehrhart, 're-establish the legitimacy of U.S. global military intervention' (Ehrhart 2002: 75). Just as US president Ronald Reagan said his military policies in Central America would not create 'another Vietnam', Bush also publicly said that the war in the Persian Gulf would not do so either. In aiming to leave behind the 'Vietnam syndrome', Bush sought victory that would be swift and decisive. The Bush administration managed the news media in the Gulf more restrictively than previous administrations had controlled Vietnam War-era reporting. From a strategic standpoint, the Bush method was useful, because the tighter control helped minimize public knowledge and the potential for informed dissent that could damage the broader base of favourable media coverage and American public opinion in support of the war. Another contrast with Vietnam is that the Gulf War was brought to a swift conclusion. The 'victory' was decisive in that US casualties were very minimal and the objective (ending Iraqi occupation of Kuwait) was accomplished. But the symbolic victory of the Gulf War lay not in the moralistic high ground of 'liberating' Kuwait. Rather, it was found in the triumphal post-war proclamation to the world that the United States had without question shed the shame of its loss in Vietnam and reclaimed its global military pre-eminence.

By contrast, the current Iraq war, launched in March 2003 by George W. Bush (Bush junior), the 43rd president of the United States, has marked a departure from the strategic logic of the war waged by his father, particularly insofar as the recent war has lasted much longer. Deaths of American military in the current war (nearly 4300 at the time of writing) have been almost 40 times higher than those resulting from the 1990–91 war, and polls have consistently showed a steady decline in public support for the war.⁴ Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was predicated on the efforts of think tanks and advisors who had unapologetically and sometimes explicitly advocated an imperial role for the United States in global affairs (Calabrese 2005, 2007). The protracted second Iraq war has not kindled the sort of triumphalist euphoria within the United States that was evident following the conclusion of the 1990–91 war,

4. I do not mean to overlook the far greater civilian casualties that have been sustained by the Iraqi people, despite the fact that it is a subject that has received insufficient attention by the US media and, by extension, the American public (Calabrese 2007).

5. Saint Augustine (1972), *The City of God* (ed. D. Knowles, trans. H. Bettenson) (Harmondsworth: Penguin. See also Michael Walzer (1977), *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, New York: Basic Books; and James F. Childress (1980), 'Just-War Criteria', in *War or Peace? The Search for New Answers* (ed. Thomas A. Shannon), Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
6. Billy Graham's Message on National Day of Prayer and Remembrance. Washington, DC, 14 September 2001. Published by the Associated Press on 20 September 2001, www.fresnobee.com/special/graham/story/863749p-922834c.html.

and in that sense the message the war-makers sought to project – whether that of an unparalleled imperial power or benign purveyor of democracy – has not gained resonance within the United States or elsewhere. Lacking domestic or foreign support for the war, the presidency of George W. Bush did not successfully communicate to the world that a Pax Americana is desirable, yet alone upon us. Failing to send the intended message does not gainsay the fact that an unquestionable attempt was made at communicating one. Despite this, it cannot be denied that the violence of warfare is often, if not only, a way of sending a message.

Not only are acts of violence often intended to send a message, but as in warfare, the preparatory stages lay the groundwork for the intended meaning. That is why a highly ritualized, albeit politically insulated, process occurs when a government seeks to justify a decision to wage war. A Christian doctrine dating back to Saint Augustine represents a unique perspective on violence that is used to justify warfare, namely, the so-called 'just war' theory.⁵ Whether true to the doctrine or not, the use of 'just war' reasoning has been an important part not only of moral reasoning about warfare, but also of efforts by those who declare war to publicly legitimize their decisions. In December 1989, to dispel any doubts that the US invasion of Panama was morally justified, the Reagan administration officially labeled it 'Operation Just Cause'. In 1991, when George Bush, Sr., was President of the United States, before he launched the air invasion of Iraq to begin the Gulf War, he summoned a national evangelical Christian icon, the Reverend Billy Graham, to pray for and with him. The two were shown on national television, pensively pacing on the White House lawn, discussing the President's decision. Having alerted the public that he had the vocal support of Reverend Graham, the President was implicitly morally cleared with God, and politically cleared with Americans, to begin bombing Baghdad. With a similar aim, President Bill Clinton published in the Sunday edition of the *The New York Times* his moral justification for the decision to have the United States lead the NATO offensive against Serbia to pressure Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to end his campaign of ethnic cleansing (Clinton 1999).

Years later, Billy Graham replayed his role as divine medium, this time for George W. Bush. On 14 September 2001, following the commercial airline hijackings and suicide attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, a 'National Day of Prayer and Remembrance' was held across the country. On that day, a service was held at the National Cathedral. The service was attended by a large host of national leaders and foreign dignitaries, and the sermon was delivered by Reverend Graham. Although Graham's message was not overtly militant or vengeful in tone, it was clear that one aim of the speech was to offer justification in the name of God for the president to commence with unprecedented plans to launch a multi-faceted global assault on the terrorist networks that pose a threat to American interests: 'We've always needed God from the very beginning of this nation, but today we need Him especially. We're facing a new kind of enemy. We're involved in a new kind of warfare and we need the help of the Spirit of God.'⁶ For its part, the US Congress granted the president an enormous expansion in the defence budget, and passed legislation providing an unprecedented range of executive authority to protect the country through vastly increased domestic surveillance and security efforts, foreign intelligence, counter-terrorism and military build-up for the 'new kind of warfare'.

For better and for worse, religion has been used to justify large-scale violence for millennia, marking some of the darkest moments in recorded human history. In the name of cleansing and atonement, for the sake of defeating infidels, to root out sorcery and witchcraft, and simply as a matter of community self-regulation and child-rearing practices, many great religious leaders qualify as some of history's most notorious psychopaths, vindictive war criminals, cruelest bigots and clearest opponents of freedom of expression, human understanding and principles of justice. Just as it makes no good moral or practical sense to dismiss the potential of religions to foster good in the world, it makes no sense to ignore that those same religions have demonstrated the capacity to inspire acts of hate and aggression, false imprisonment, torture and murder on a massive scale. The Crusades, the Inquisition, witch trials and burnings and complicity with Nazism are but a few of the legacies of Christianity, which is not to isolate the Christian faith. In Mark Juergensmeyer's (2003: 5) *Terror in the Mind of God*, he documents in great detail how 'religion has supplied not only the ideology, but also the motivation and organizational structure for the perpetrators' of terrorism.⁷ Pained by the fact that religious terrorism is committed 'by pious people dedicated to a moral vision of the world', Juergensmeyer (2003: 7) demonstrates why it is fair to point out that religions have undermined non-violence throughout history at least as much as, if not more than, any other foundation of human knowledge. In a similar vein, Daniel Smith-Christopher (1998: 11–12) acknowledges this dual potential for 'religious values and symbolism' to be resources 'used by the warriors to encourage the great human and economic sacrifices of warfare', and also therefore to serve as keys to unlocking these problems by functioning as 'resources for reconciliation'.

Despite idealism to the contrary, violence is not antithetical to communication, and it often is the instrument of choice for political communication by both state and non-state actors. Although it is rational to try and resolve disputes through non-violent means of communication, there is no denying that violence is often the chosen instrument of political communication. Hannah Arendt makes a reasonable argument that violence undermines power, and that communication sustains it. But that analysis ultimately ignores the fact that violence itself is often the chosen medium through which power is communicated.

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7. Juergensmeyer's (2003) book provides a broad and international view of religious violence, with discussions of cases in the United States, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Iran, India, Algeria and elsewhere. For a specific focus on the use of biblical scripture to provide religious justification of white supremacy in the United States, see Jerome Walters (2000), *One Aryan Nation under God*, Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.

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