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Solving the Problem of Violence

Duane Ruth-Heffelbower

Violence has been part of human life from the beginning, and the bloodiest century humankind has ever known just ended. It is estimated that, "Worldwide, more than 100 million soldiers and civilians were killed in the wars of the twentieth century."¹ The World Health Organization Europe reports, "Overall, violence is among the leading causes of death worldwide for people aged 15–44 years."² Discovering useful ways of responding to violence is an important theme for governments, private groups, and individuals.

There is a place for leaders to negotiate and declare peace, but unless individuals begin the transforming work of trusting one another, this declared peace goes nowhere.

The *SIPRI Yearbook 2002* presents an estimate for world military spending in 2001 of 839 billion U.S. dollars.³ World Bank Gross Domestic Product (GDP) statistics for 2001 show this military expenditure to be about equal to the combined GDP of 124 nations. These figures do not include police and prison expenditures. The United States alone directly spends over 150 billion dollars per year on criminal justice (police, courts, and prisons).⁴

As this is written, North Korea is renewing its nuclear weapons program and the United States is responding by declaring its ability to fight

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two regional wars at once. The Christmas Eve headlines in 2002 were full of the impending war between the U.S. and Iraq, and noted bombings by religious extremists in Kashmir and the Philippines. Closer to home, a small item in the newspaper reported a California prison which is working to curtail alcohol production by inmates in an effort to curb violence.

Why is it that with so much of the world's attention and wealth focused on violence, and with humanity having so much experience in the matter, we seem to be further than ever from solving the problem of violence? This paper will offer a definition of violence, and then make four proposals for overcoming the problem of violence.

WHAT IS VIOLENCE?

Criminal justice statistics are categorized generally into violent and nonviolent. A burglary, where the thief enters an unoccupied building and steals, is not violent. A robbery, where the thief takes directly from the victim by force or fear, is violent. A bank robber may or may not be armed when slipping the teller a note demanding money, but the implicit threat of force creates fear that motivates the teller to give the robber money. This is a violent crime.

Defensive force is less clear. How does the threat or use of force apply in such a case? Suppose a robber demands money from a convenience store clerk while pretending to have a weapon, and the clerk responds by shooting at the robber, striking an innocent customer. No one would doubt that this was a violent incident, and under usual criminal law standards the robber is responsible for the injury to the customer. Was the clerk violent?

Violence, for purposes of this paper, will be defined as any threat of harm or use of force to coerce another person into behavior they would not otherwise choose, or any use of force to harm another person. How can violence be overcome?

TO SOME, VIOLENCE IS NOT A PROBLEM

When one discusses "responding to violence" or "overcoming violence," there is an inherent assumption that violence is a problem to be solved. Yet that view is not universally held. Far from being a problem, for a large portion of humanity violence instead seems to be a functional part of life. The first task, then, is to overcome the notion that violence is not a problem.

On a recent exit exam for general education students of a Christian university in the historic peace church tradition, less than twenty per-

cent agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that a Christian should not participate in war or preparation for war. The inescapable conclusion is that the rest believed war to be an appropriate (functional) activity in at least some situations. The campus of this same university has signs from a security firm promising “armed response” posted at all entrances to the campus. Apparently on this campus, violence, including deadly force, is understood to be a normal part of life to be managed like any other aspect of life and used as a tool when appropriate.

There is for some the idea that appropriate uses of force do not count as “violence.” The clerk shooting at the robber, for instance, is seen by some as self-defense and therefore outside the definition of violence. It is probably more helpful to think in terms of justified violence and unjustified violence. Societies all have some types of violence that are approved, typically self-defense or violence by constituted authorities including police and military. A parent picking up a recalcitrant child and removing them from a situation is a coercive use of force that could fall within the definition of violence, but few would call it that. This is a justified use of force in most people’s minds, and outside the definition of violence. As will be seen, it is more helpful to recognize even this benign use of force as violence if we are to find a way to overcome violence. Excising approved uses of force from the definition of violence creates a slippery slope of denial not helpful to our purpose.

While no one wants to be the victim of violence, fifty-seven percent of Americans polled by the Gallup organization in 2001 thought execution of the convicted perpetrator was the appropriate response to murder.⁵ In the United States, police forces have been steadily growing in size, and the number of correctional institutions has shot up. There are around two million people incarcerated in the United States, the majority for crimes not involving violence. About one million Americans are convicted of a felony each year, and one in every thirty-two adult residents of the United States was incarcerated or on probation or parole at the end of 2001.⁶

Prisons are generally acknowledged to be some of the most violent places on earth, even though control of life within the prison is as close to absolute as could be found anywhere. That this situation is accepted, and that the public seems comfortable with forcing nonviolent offenders into such a morass, shows a level of comfort with systemic violence inconsistent with seeing violence as a societal problem. The law of *talion*—equal and direct retribution offering violence for violence—is found in both the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi and the Old Testament. It well describes the prevailing public sentiment in the United

States. That a tremendous, costly security apparatus has been erected to ensure violence for violence, as opposed to an apparatus designed to prevent crime by dealing with its roots, indicates that violence is not seen as a problem to be solved, but as one more part of life to be managed and used when appropriate.

The refusal to recognize violence as violence, mistakenly identifying justified force as not violence, contributes to this confusion. The result is adopting violence as a useful tool, rather than trying to overcome the problem of violence.

The mind-set that accepts and plans violence into daily life will need to be addressed by anyone wanting to lessen the amount of violence in the world. As it stands, antiviolence efforts generally focus on particular types of violence or particular populations, rather than on systemic change throughout society. An example is the California law described on billboards and in television commercials as "Use a Gun and You're Done" or "10-20-Life." This law enhances prison sentences for those who use a firearm in the commission of a crime.⁷ This solution to violent crime focuses narrowly on a particular segment of the crime-committing population rather than on the underlying problem posed by millions of firearms being available to those who would commit crimes. Violent systems cannot reasonably be expected to work against violence. Their role is to ensure reciprocal violence. Nonviolence is actually a threat to such a system, since violent systems rely on a continuation of violence for their existence.

Who is actually suggesting that violence is a problem to be solved? The U.S. election campaign season in 2002 brought out a lot of talk about the problem of violent crime and how to solve it. Interestingly, the suggestions usually offered as a response to violent crime consisted of plans to ensure reciprocal violence. Politicians were claiming to offer solutions to the problem of violent crime, but their proposals fell into the category of ensuring more perfect reciprocity. There was an unstated assumption that reciprocal violence would be beneficial to the public by reducing violent crime, although evidence of a correlation was not offered. Studies attempting to show the correlation have been unconvincing to date, partly due to the plethora of factors that must be considered. For our purposes here, it must suffice to say that reciprocal violence has been the solution of choice for millennia, and that violence continues unabated.

The assumption that something harmful must be a problem to be solved seems logical. When the news media report that yet another food has been identified as unhealthy, many people stop eating it. The obvi-

ous conclusion people make is that if harm can be avoided by avoiding the food, one should avoid it. It is interesting that no one seems to be suggesting that since violence is harmful, we should all avoid violence. When people are told to avoid fat, for instance, they scrupulously work through their diet identifying all the fat sources and cutting them back or eliminating them. Violence is surely a health problem, yet there is no call to begin identifying all the sources of violence in our lives and removing them. Violence is seen as an inevitable, if not necessary, part of our lives. One can work to keep the amount or type of violence under control, but to eliminate it is unthinkable.

THE PRINCIPLE OF CONSERVATION OF VIOLENCE

A second proposal is to embrace the principle of conservation of violence. The first law of thermodynamics explains in part how our universe works. It states that the total amount of mass and energy in a system (or the universe for that matter) is constant. One can convert matter into energy or energy into matter, or move energy among systems, but the total remains the same. Neither mass nor energy are ever lost, but simply converted into the other or transferred among systems. This law is referred to as the law of conservation of energy.

Proposed here is the analogous principle of conservation of violence.⁸ It posits that within a human system there is a certain total amount of violence and nonviolence. One can convert violence to nonviolence or vice versa, or transfer them from one system to another, but the total remains the same. Thought of another way, the only way to decrease the amount of violence in the system is to increase the amount of nonviolence. Conversely, any increase in nonviolence within the system yields a decrease in violence. The chart below visualizes this relationship.

Principle of Conservation of Violence: Violence/Nonviolence within a System



■ violence
■ nonviolence

The operation of this principle explains why efforts to reduce violence by reciprocal violence are, and always have been, doomed to failure. A Palestinian suicide bomber blows herself up in an Israeli market. The Israeli army responds by destroying homes of Palestinians. The total amount of violence in the system has increased, not decreased. Reciprocal violence leads to an overall increase of violence within a system. Therefore, all efforts to decrease violence by practicing reciprocal violence will fail to reduce violence.

According to the principle of conservation of violence, the only way to reduce the amount of violence in a system is to transform violence into nonviolence. This transformation process requires identifying the sources of violence in a system and transforming them into sources of nonviolence. The process can be engaged at the individual, group, or societal levels. There are many good examples of this process, one of which will be described below.

PROPONENTS OF NONVIOLENCE NEED TO BE MORE ASSERTIVE

Third, to address the problem of violence, proponents of nonviolence need to become more assertive. The current run-up to a war between the United States and Iraq has seen a resurgence of the antiwar sentiment last seen during the American war in Vietnam. The Gulf War brought out some protest, though nothing like the Vietnam era. Yet even with this great increase in antiwar sentiment, the news media remains dominated by public calls from war advocates. Large antiwar protests are covered on the day they occur, but there is a daily drumbeat of pro-war news. Pouring out of newspapers and television is a constant barrage of anti-Iraq and pro-U.S. military news releases.

That proponents of violence would be more assertive than proponents of nonviolence certainly fits the ethos of each view. Killing people and breaking things is inherently more aggressive than helping people cooperate with each other. Yet aggression and assertiveness are not the same. Aggressiveness is a form of attack, an offer to dominate. Assertiveness, however bold, simply declares the truth of a proposition and offers it for inspection. For the nonviolent, there is no ethical restriction against a strong assertion of their views. Yet proponents of nonviolence can usually be counted on to be less assertive of their position than can those proposing violence. Why is this so?

Citizens of industrialized democracies are taught from their earliest years in school that the majority rules. Politics is the process by which competing needs are weighed, with the will of the majority—usually

expressed through representatives—deciding among the competing claims on available resources. This process is sacrosanct and is what sets a democracy apart from “lesser” nations ruled by oligarchies where the few rule the many. The upshot of this education in democratic process is that people understand acquiescence to the will of the majority to be a civic virtue. Being a good loser in the political process is one mark of being a good citizen.

Proponents of nonviolence have tended to be in the minority most places at most times in history. That those who live in democracies would recognize their unpopular position and readily acquiesce to the will of the majority should not be surprising. One thing that the successfully nonviolent have learned over time is that both persistence and insistence are important in attracting others to one’s goals, and vital to the ultimate goal of attracting the majority to the nonviolent position. Peace activists in the U.S. were ultimately successful in ending the war in Vietnam, but many of them had to endure great hardship before that result was achieved through turning the tide of public opinion. That level of commitment to the cause of nonviolence rarely arises and is even more rarely sustained over the necessary course of years.

Ron Sider posed the question well in his address to Mennonite World Conference in 1984: Why are so many willing to give their lives for war, and so few willing to give their lives for peace? Standing up to the bad guys offering violence for violence has always seemed more attractive than working things out cooperatively with the bad guys.

Besides the built-in democratic predilection for accepting the majority preference for violence, the unfortunate truth is that nonviolence threatens moneymaking opportunities offered by violence. To assert the validity of a nonviolent option is to threaten the profits of those who do well supplying the violent. Micah 4:3b-4a offers the description of a nonviolent world: “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid” (NRSV). Where is the opportunity for profit in that vision?

Modern violence on the larger scale requires concentrations of capital, whether for military or criminal justice concerns. Concentrations of capital are in themselves concentrations of power that work toward greater concentration of capital. Nonviolent alternatives, on the other hand, seldom require concentrations of capital and may even require distribution of capital to achieve their ends. The economics of violence and nonviolence could not be more opposite.

This economic difference means that there is little direct financial incentive for asserting nonviolent alternatives. It also means that there is no source of money for marketing nonviolence. The companies who pay for advertising in the mass media are much more likely to benefit from violence than nonviolence, and any benefit from nonviolence would be indirect. A rare national television advertiser does not directly benefit from violence.⁹ It is also obvious that a major portion of television programming is about or based on violence.

These twin deficits, money and popular opinion, must be faced by activists who would assert a preference for nonviolence. As things stand, the majority of U.S. citizens and the corporate interests that fund efforts to sway public opinion are more likely to prefer violent options when the question turns to national defense and criminal justice. Violence is seen as a practical tool for combating the threat of violence, not as a problem to be solved. Voices stating an alternate view are muted.

AN APPROACH TO SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE

Finally, nonviolent conflict-resolution models must be employed in situations of tension and relationship breakdown. Efforts are underway in many places around the world to solve the problem of violence, efforts which directly address the problems described thus far. One of those places is the island Ambon, one of the Maluku Islands of Indonesia.

The Maluku Islands became known in the west as the Spice Islands, being one of the first sources of cloves and other spices to make a commercial impact on Europe. These small islands form a chain stretching from the Philippines to Australia. Traders brought both Christianity and Islam to the islands over the centuries, and by the end of the twentieth century the two religions had similar numbers of adherents, although there was a tendency for groups to clump together on different small islands. The region was known for religious tolerance and offered as an example of how the two major world faiths could live together in peace.

When the Indonesian dictator Soeharto fell in 1998 as a result of the Asian financial collapse, people suddenly discovered just how effective his security apparatus had been. When it suddenly ceased to function, the personal and intergroup animosities that had built up over the course of his thirty years in power erupted many places, not the least in Maluku Province. Christian and Muslim villages attacked each other in a frenzy of killing. Two years later the province was divided into homogeneous armed camps with sporadic raids between villages. The existence of well-armed militias, apparently supported by factions of the military, increased the level of violence dramatically. Over nine thou-

sand died and five hundred thousand fled from their homes.¹⁰

Relief and multilateral organizations wanted to stem the tide of wholesale murder and displacement of population. The crisis created by so many internally displaced persons made finding a solution to the violence a high priority. Unfortunately, there were groups in Maluku Province benefiting from the violence, and it appeared further that powerful groups outside the conflict area saw the violence as beneficial to them. In short, there was not wide agreement that the violence was a problem to be solved. Even among those who wanted the violence to stop there was some sense that they should first have their own vengeance before peace returned. The principle of conservation of violence was at work.

There were Malukans calling for peace, but their voices were soft. To be for peace was to be seen as wanting to give up the right to vengeance, something not usual in the culture. There was even a question of whose side you were on if you called for peace, and proponents of continued violence were willing to use violence to silence those who were a danger to their interests. The few areas in the city of Ambon where both sides gathered for marketing and other purposes were targeted by bombs on a regular basis to discourage intermingling.

Peace activists needed to find a way to change public opinion in order to make calls for peace socially acceptable. They also needed to find a way to protect those willing to work toward peace so that they could risk raising their voices. The basic need was to decrease the violence in the system by increasing the prevalence of nonviolence. The primary outside push for peace came from UNICEF, the multilateral organization most active in the area.

UNICEF selected a group of Malukans as a peacebuilding team. It sent them to training events outside the province to develop their team spirit and skills in peacebuilding. The strategy developed by the team through its training process was to gather mixed groups of people who wanted peace, and to train them in peacebuilding techniques. These trainings would help the participants learn to trust each other and would increase the amount of nonviolence in the region. The hope was that these groups would continue to add new members, gradually increasing the zones of peace. The team would support these efforts.

Some of the trainers who had worked with the UNICEF team returned with them to Ambon, one of the Maluku islands, to mentor the team in providing peacebuilding events for mixed groups of Muslims and Christians. The team itself was a mix of Christians and Muslims. The island and the city of Ambon were divided into Christian and Mus-

lim enclaves with roadblocks preventing persons of one faith from traveling to areas controlled by the other. Indonesian identification cards include one's religion, so the roadblocks were effective. Training team members had to travel from the airport by different routes based on their religion.

The event was held in the Provincial Governor's office, a neutral location that allowed Muslims to enter from their side of town and Christians from theirs. UNICEF had its offices in the building. Tension was high and trust between Muslims and Christians was low. This gathering occurred one week after the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., heightening the tension. The building was guarded by heavily armed soldiers from the regular military.

The people selected to participate in the peacebuilding event were chosen because of their interest and the likelihood that they could use the training to influence others. The group was an equal mix of Christians and Muslims. The Vice-Governor opened the event.

The event had three parts. The first part focused on the group teaching one another their normal ways of responding to conflict. This was done using role plays and small group work. It helped everyone become acquainted as it gave the opportunity to take the small risks any group process requires. A good deal of hilarity accompanied the process, and by the end of the day the fearfulness that permeated the room in the beginning was gone. This first day also helped to establish the leadership of the UNICEF team, something that was not a foregone conclusion.

The second day was devoted to the team presenting conflict resolution theories and concepts new to the group, and letting them try some things with role plays. A bomb scare punctuated the day, but proved to be a false alarm. The third day offered the opportunity for small groups to focus on particular issues or problems, and to develop plans for approaching them based on what had been learned so far. New teams were developed, plans were made, and there was an agreement to keep working together across the religious divide. Within two weeks people from the group had led similar events at other places on the island, a process that continues today.

The goal was to create zones of peace where all aspects of violence would be identified and rooted out, replacing violence with nonviolence. Teachers worked at identifying and eliminating the violence in their schools, including that found in their discipline system. Others from church, nongovernmental, and government organizations applied the ideas in their own ways. Things were going pretty well for a short time.

There had been two bombings in the small town while the peacebuilding event was in process, and bombings continued. Muslim and Christian boats, which ferry people across the bay that nearly cuts the island in two, fired shots at each other. As more talk of peace emerged, more acts of violence also emerged. The Governor's office was burned down by a mob six months after the initial peacebuilding event described above. Then things began to change. The outside militia blamed for much of the worst violence disbanded and went home. Internally displaced persons began returning home to the extent that the government ended the programs of support related to displaced persons. While there was still the occasional bombing or shooting, markets catering to both Christians and Muslims began to be well attended.

On Christmas Day 2002, a Muslim man visiting Christian friends in a Christian neighborhood was stabbed, but the perpetrator was identified by locals and arrested by police. There was no other response to the incident, which would have led to large-scale violence only six months earlier. The Diocese of Ambon (the Catholic Church judicatory for the island) reports continued cooperation and good feelings among the citizens of the island.

The good things happening in Ambon may or may not be a result of the efforts of the UNICEF team. They do follow the pattern described earlier in this paper as necessary to any successful response to violence, in this case extreme violence between people groups. The promise of reciprocal violence did not work in Ambon. Since the actual perpetrators of violence could not be identified and punished, reciprocal violence had to be meted out at random on members of the group from which the perpetrator supposedly came. This meant that if a Muslim was shot, there would be a revenge attack on a Christian, or vice versa. This ensured that innocent people were usually the victims, fueling another round of vengeance.

Rather than responding with reciprocal violence, what was needed was for violence to be transformed into nonviolence. One step in the process is to move from personal vendetta to treating violence as a criminal act to be dealt with by the criminal justice system. In the example of the Christmas stabbing mentioned above, the case turned into a simple criminal matter instead of mob violence. This is a dramatic transformation for the people of Ambon. It is an example of the way in which a functioning criminal justice system can improve people's lives, and increase the amount of nonviolence in a community. It is a later step in the peacebuilding process to humanize the criminal justice system, further increasing the amount of nonviolence.

As people began moving into neutral areas to shop at markets operated by the other group, distrust decreased. The need for roadblocks diminished. Children played together across religious boundaries rather than objectifying the others and seeing them as enemies to be avoided.

Most transformation activities are small and personal. One person decides to cross the street to buy vegetables from a seller from the other group. This takes a certain amount of trust and courage. When it works out, others follow. This creates a zone of peace where violence is not welcome, and where the assumption of nonviolent ways of dealing with each other rules. The recent past in Ambon had seen these zones of peace being destroyed violently. The hope is that the amount of nonviolence will increase until the expectation of violence drifts away, and actual violence disappears with it.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing violence as a problem to be solved and working on the problem individually or in small groups is the first step in effectively responding to violence. Even in situations of large-scale intergroup violence, as was the case in Ambon, the initial responses have to be small, personal, and aimed at transforming violence into nonviolence. There is a place for leaders to negotiate and declare peace, but unless individuals begin the transforming work of trusting one another, this declared peace goes nowhere.

Violence is not transformed into nonviolence through the threat of reciprocal violence. The principle of conservation of violence states that reciprocal violence simply increases the amount of violence in the system. It is not possible to provide perfect reciprocity. If each person committing a violent act could be instantly identified and instantly receive an identical dose of violence, reciprocal violence might work through deterrence. Real life is not like that, and the result is creating new victims of violence while trying for reciprocity.

Violence can also be transformed by identifying those who benefit from it, and removing that benefit. This was done in Ambon by identifying and publishing the names of those who appeared to be benefiting from the violence, including elements of the military and extremists groups. When people begin to ask who is getting the benefit of an act of violence, rather than thinking about getting revenge on the apparent perpetrator, reciprocal violence is transformed into an accountability process.

Proponents of nonviolence need to learn how to be persistent and insistent. It takes courage to identify and publicize the beneficiaries of violence. It takes courage and resolve to risk crossing the street to buy

vegetables from a member of the other group. Yet these things must be done to transform violence into nonviolence. Those who benefit from violence are persistent. Those who respond to violence must be equally persistent to move beyond a shortsighted reciprocity to actual transformation. ✨

NOTES

1. Ben Wattenberg, *The First Measured Century* (accessed 24 December 2002); available from <http://www.pbs.org/fmc/book/11government8.htm>.
2. World Health Organization Europe. "Public health and violence—European facts and trends" (accessed 24 December 2002); available from <http://www.who.dk/document/mediacentre/fs1002e.pdf>.
3. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (accessed 26 December 2002); available from http://projects.sipri.se/milex/mex_trends.html. 839 billion dollars is a conservative number. The War Resisters League puts U.S. total spending for current and past military at 776 billion dollars for 2003, a figure which would push world expenditures over the trillion dollar mark.
4. Bureau of Justice Statistics; available from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>.
5. Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2000*, 141 (accessed 24 December 2002); available from <http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/1995/pdf/t259.pdf>.
6. Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2001* (accessed 24 December 2002); available from <http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook>.
7. California Penal Code Section 12022.53. Florida has a similar law.
8. The term "conservation of violence" was used in reference to the violence of economic systems by Pierre Bourdieu in *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: The New Press and Polity Press, 1998), 39-40. The term was applied to violence within a family system as "Intragenerational Conservation of Violence," by Bruce D. Perry in "Violence and Childhood Trauma: Understanding and Responding to the Effects of Violence on Young Children" (Cleveland, OH: Gund Foundation, 1996), 67-80.
9. A convenient listing of the top one hundred U.S. defense contractors and their involved subsidiaries can be found at http://www.dior.whs.mil/peidhome/procstat/p01/fy2001/tab2_01.htm (accessed

- 28 December 2002). For 1,200 dollars one can purchase a CD-ROM database of all 208,000 registered defense contractors in the U.S. at <http://www.aerospaceanddefensestrategies.com/DefenseContractors.htm>. (accessed 28 December 2002).
10. "Indonesia: The Violence in Ambon," *Human Rights Watch*, March 1999 vol. 11, No. 1(C), and "Overcoming Chaos and Murder in Maluku," *International Crisis Group Asia Report* No. 10, 19 December 2000.