



Yes, politics is violent and always has been

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Last week, reacting to a shooting that left Republican Congressman Steve Scalise in critical condition, Vox.com founder [Ezra Klein](#) [tweeted](#), “It’s easy to forget what a blessing it is to live in a country where politics rarely leads to violence, and how fragile that blessing is.”

Klein, backpedaling, later [acknowledged](#) that “America has a history of resolving politics through violence” and that “[p]olitics itself is often violent.”

Yet he persisted in holding that “[t]he great gift of politics is it gives us a way to make difficult decisions without resorting to violence to decide.” Such a strange and shallow understanding of the relationship between politics and violence requires a series of corrections more thorough than the one I will undertake to offer here.

It is nevertheless necessary to sketch the defects in thinking of the kind evidenced by Klein’s tweet, for it is far more dangerous than may be apparent at first.

People like Klein — by which I mean the intelligentsia, well-educated and situated in a broad consensus of ostensibly reasonable centrists — are desperate to ignore the bloody realities of politics, invested in the ahistorical fantasy that politics is “the things that we choose to do together.”

In the past, the violent character of the political order, its origins in military conquest, was not obscured. It was rather readily acknowledged, an all-pervading source of pride and virtue, embedded in every aspect of the social, cultural, and economic DNA, apparent in every oath and tradition.

In his book “The Military Revolution and Political Change,” Brian M. Downing explains that “[t]hough frequently thought of as an economic system, feudalism was primarily a military system with a supportive manorial economy, the former bringing about the latter.”

This was before today's crude and largely meaningless distinctions, when every relationship implicated both the political and the economic, every obligation both the public and the domestic or familial.

The lord, quite literally a warlord, was a military leader and an economic one. There was no pretense that politics was anything but violence, no need for one to undertake the contorted theorizing through which today's "explainer" class attempts to cleanse politics of violence.

We needn't stop our backward glance at feudalism. In a lecture at Columbia University, historian Charles A. Beard, famous (or infamous, depending on your viewpoint) for his pioneering "new history," pondered "the real origin of the state," finding it in conquest.

Beard rejected the winsome notion, attributed in his address to Rousseau, "that the state originated in a compact made in prehistoric times by free individuals." "General Blücher," Beard explains, "echoed the spirit of the ancient founder of the state when, on viewing London from the dome of St. Paul's, he exclaimed, 'Was für Plunder!'" He goes on to remark that war begets the king. Beard was, of course, right.

What is politics but war's continuation, its domestication, as it were, dividing and distributing its spoils?

Today's intellectuals fail to understand history's most important lesson, that government, far from being our friend, has been since its birth humanity's mortal enemy (carving out, of course, a narrow exception for the small, rich and powerful band that has always brandished it).

They furthermore fail to understand that merely labeling a group of institutions "the public sector" does not and cannot change the fact that they remain human institutions, susceptible to all of the same moral challenges as private groups.

They do not realize that once they have successfully gathered powers and prerogatives together in the hands of their deified government monopolies, those agencies will proceed to act much like other monopolies, like the unscrupulous corporations they hate.

And why wouldn't they?

Alas, all that we see then is how power behaves when it is unchecked and undivided, allowed to consume the peaceful institutions of civil society.

All of the guarantees, so carefully drafted by the right experts in law and the social sciences, so certain to protect against abuses of such concentrated power, readily disintegrate when they are seriously tested.

And recall that many of the most brutal and authoritarian dictatorships are, as a matter of law, subject to what appear to be rather liberal written constitutions. The reader is invited to examine the constitutions of such states as the Soviet Union and even North Korea. There are other examples.

Matched against political realities and the destructive power of etatist ideology, though, ink and paper appear to be quite impotent indeed.

Today's "explainers" are really much more like obscurantists, beholden to a morally upside-down political philosophy in which history's most violent form of human organization is charged with giving peace, law and order. Sometimes they let this show, though only a few trained eyes seem to notice.

Politics is merely a process of sanctification, the superficial fluctuations that disguise a very old system of organized violence. Politics comprises the seedy battles between largely corrupt interests to access control of that organized violence, that they might impose their will through it. It is not enough, then, to admit that politics may be violent or that it incorporates violence; politics is violence and nothing else — violence artfully emphasized, dressed up to conceal its nature, but violence always and everywhere.

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