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The Mindless Menace of Violence



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[This is a time of shame] and a time of sorrow. It is not a day for politics. I have saved this one opportunity -- my only event of today -- to speak briefly to you about the mindless menace of violence in America which again stains our land and every one of our lives.

It's not the concern of any one race. The victims of the violence are black and white, rich and poor, young and old, famous and unknown. They are, most important of all, human beings whom other human beings loved and needed. No one -- no matter where he lives or what he does -- can be certain whom next will suffer from some senseless act of bloodshed And yet it goes on and on and on in this country of ours.

Why? What has violence ever accomplished? What has it ever created? No martyr's cause has ever been stilled by an assassin's bullet. No wrongs have ever been righted by riots and civil disorders. A sniper is only a coward, not a hero; and an uncontrolled or uncontrollable mob is only the voice of madness, not the voice of the people.

Whenever any American's life is taken by another American unnecessarily -- whether it is done in the name of the law or in defiance of the law, by one man or by a gang, in cold blood or in passion, in an attack of violence or in response to violence -- whenever we tear at the fabric of our lives which another man has painfully and clumsily woven for himself and his children -- whenever we do this, then whole nation is degraded. "Among free men," said Abraham Lincoln, "there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet; and those who take such appeal are sure to lose their case and pay the cost."



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Yet we seemingly tolerate a rising level of violence that ignores our common humanity and our claims to civilization alike. We calmly accept newspaper reports of civilian slaughter in far off lands. We glorify killing on movie and television screens and we call it entertainment. We make it easier for men of all shades of sanity to acquire weapons and ammunition that they desire.

Too often we honor swagger and bluster and the wielders of force. Too often we excuse those who are willing to build their own lives on the shattered dreams of other human beings. Some Americans who preach nonviolence abroad fail to practice it here at home. Some who accuse others of rioting, and inciting riots, have by their own conduct invited them. Some look for scapegoats; others look for conspiracies. But this much is clear: violence breeds violence; repression breeds retaliation; and only a cleaning of our whole society can remove this sickness from our souls.

For there is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly, destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions -- indifference, inaction, and decay. This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men because their skin has different colors. This is a slow destruction of a child by hunger, and schools without books, and homes without heat in the winter. This is the breaking of a man's spirit by denying him the chance to stand as a father and as a man amongst other men.

And this too afflicts us all. For when you teach a man to hate and to fear his brother, when you teach that he is a lesser man because of his color or his beliefs or the policies that he pursues, when you teach that those who differ from you threaten your freedom or your job or your home or your family, then you also learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies -- to be met not with cooperation but with conquest, to be subjugated and to be mastered.

We learn, at the last, to look at our brothers as alien, alien men with whom we share a city, but not a community, men bound to us in common dwelling, but not in a common effort. We learn to share only a common fear -- only a common desire to retreat from each other -- only a common impulse to meet disagreement with force.

For all this there are no final answers for those of us who are American citizens. Yet we know what we must do, and that is to achieve true justice among all of our fellow citizens. The question is not what programs we should seek to enact. The question is whether we can find in our own midst and in our own hearts that leadership of humane purpose that will recognize the terrible truths of our existence.

We must admit the vanity of our false distinctions, the false distinctions among men, and learn to find our own advancement in search for the advancement of all. We must admit to ourselves that our own children's future cannot be built on the misfortune of another's. We must recognize that this short life can neither be ennobled or enriched by hatred or by revenge.



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Our lives on this planet are too short, the work to be done is too great to let this spirit flourish any longer in this land of ours. Of course we cannot vanish it with a program, nor with a resolution.

But we can perhaps remember -- if only for a time -- that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short movement of life, that they seek -- as do we -- nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and in happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment that they can.

Surely this bond of common fate, surely this bond of common goals can begin to teach us something. Surely we can learn, at least, to look around at those of us, of our fellow man, and surely we can begin to work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again.

Tennyson wrote in *Ulysses*:

*[Moved earth and heaven,] that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

Thank you, very much.