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**Magazine**

# America Is Struggling to Sort Out Where 'Violence' Begins and Ends

First Words

By AMANDA HESS    AUG. 15, 2017

When did our national discourse become so consumed with the state of our national discourse? Rarely has so much public dialogue been dedicated to arguing over what can't be said, who can't say it and just how they shouldn't put it. It has always been politically profitable to frame your opponents' rhetoric as irrational, cruel, even dangerous. But our now-constant public skirmishes over speech have moved to another level entirely: These days, the closer you can situate your opponents' words to actual violence, the better.

When James Hodgkinson opened fire at a Republican congressional baseball practice in June — wounding Representative Steve Scalise of Louisiana, among others — he was killed in the attack and left no manifesto to explain his actions. But the shooting immediately became, for many, a chilling example of the consequences of someone else's rhetoric, and commentators raced to track down who that "someone" might be. A Newsweek headline asked if "anti-Trump rhetoric" inspired the shooter, noting that he had volunteered for Bernie Sanders's campaign. Elsewhere, the extremist right-wing radio host Bob Romanik boasted to *The Washington Post* that "I can't say for sure if this Hodgkinson guy listened to me, but he probably did." Stern warnings were issued about the dangers of overheated partisan talk, with an indignation that ranged between righteous and strategic. These

days, it can be hard to tell where sincere outrage ends and political positioning begins.

The same month, at Shakespeare in the Park in New York, a set of right-wing provocateurs staged actions during a Trump-themed production of “Julius Caesar,” rushing the stage and screaming, “The blood of Steve Scalise is on your hands!” and “Liberal hate kills!” The National Rifle Association released an ad painting the American left as a seething mass of deranged agitators who “smash windows, burn cars” and “bully and terrorize the law-abiding.” That same ad, with its call to “fight this violence of lies with the clenched fist of truth,” was then accused of stoking aggression more dangerous than anything it sought to criticize. And the president himself, said Representative Mark Sanford, a South Carolina Republican, was “partially to blame for demons that have been unleashed.”

Americans are mired in any number of urgent, messy fights at the moment. But chief among them is an often-cynical fight about *how* we fight, and whose strategies are tipping toward violence and extremism. This argument isn’t limited to shootings, punches or firebombs; it encompasses words and beliefs too. There is a rising idea that violence is embedded in everything from our social structures to our speech — that speech itself can *be* a form of violence, one every bit as meaningful as the physical kind.

**First Amendment doctrine** criminalizes a very narrow strip of abusive speech, like directly inciting violence or spewing credible threats. But some theorists have stretched the definition further, arguing that a stated opinion is capable of being a violent act. In the 1950s, the philosopher J. L. Austin wrote that speech, in addition to merely communicating facts about reality, could also mold it — as when two people say “I do” at a wedding, not so much describing their union as actively creating it. From Austin’s work came the beginnings of “speech act theory,” which the gender theorist Judith Butler would later riff on, arguing that language forces expectations about gender onto our bodies in “a pre-emptive and violent circumscription of reality.” Toni Morrison, in her 1993 Nobel lecture, argued that “oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.” Sociologists talk about “structural violence,” in which the whole organization of society can harm people in

ways that are often dismissed or excused — say, delivering drinkable water to one community and undrinkable water to another.

When people frame speech as a kind of violence, they're often trying to turn that kind of invisible, impersonal violence into something more visceral — identifying the individuals responsible and confronting them directly, sometimes physically. This is one predictable result of expanding the category of violence to include words and beliefs: It begins to feel reasonable, or even like a form of self-defense, to respond to words and beliefs with physical action. This year, after a right-wing campus group invited the alt-right instigator Milo Yiannopoulos to speak at the University of California, Berkeley, and demonstrations turned into a chaos of scuffles, fires and broken windows, Berkeley's student newspaper, *The Daily Californian*, ran a series of essays defending the use of violence in protests. "Asking people to maintain peaceful dialogue with those who legitimately do not think their lives matter is a violent act," one argued. Another: "I urge you to consider whether damaging the windows of places like banks and the Amazon student store constitutes 'violence' — and if so, what weight this 'violence' carries in the context of the symbolic, structural and actual violence" that Yiannopoulos represents.

A movement to redraw the lines between speech and violence is taking shape on the right, too. Last year, the conservative lawyer Larry Klayman filed a lawsuit against Black Lives Matter, Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama, accusing them of "inciting and causing serious bodily injury or death" to police officers. (The case was dismissed; Klayman has appealed it.) And last month, the political cartoonist Ben Garrison published a panel showing screeching liberals like Madonna ("BLOW IT UP!"), Kathy Griffin ("DECAPITATE TRUMP!") and Rachel Maddow ("TRUMP IS HITLER!") with their fiery rhetoric lighting the fuse of a bomb labeled "FAR LEFT TERROR."

In addition to accusing one another of actual violence, we are now, more and more easily, counting the tenor of speech as violence enough in itself. The accusation has become so familiar that in certain circles, it's curdled into a punch line — as when people post a picture of a bad outfit or a new celebrity couple and say, in mock outrage, "This is violence!"

**If speech is violence**, what should be done about it? When a masked anti-fascist demonstrator punched the white nationalist Richard Spencer in the face in January, a video of the assault prompted a popular meme and a moral question: Is it cool to punch a Nazi? Writing in *The Nation*, Natasha Lennard called the video “pure kinetic beauty” and argued that “if we recognize fascism in Trump’s ascendance,” then “direct, aggressive confrontation” is warranted. In an interview with Quartz, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek disagreed. “People say symbolic violence can be even worse, but don’t underestimate physical violence,” he said. Let the alt-right “represent the decay of common morality and decency,” he argued — progressives ought to “become the voice of common decency, politeness, good manners and so on.” Or as Michelle Obama put it during the 2016 campaign, “When they go low, we go high.”

Of course, that campaign failed. And to some on the outer edges of the political discourse, it’s not just O.K. to forsake “politeness, good manners and so on”; it’s a critical tool for fighting the powerful, for whom good manners often serve as a kind of shield. During the abbreviated public debate over the Senate’s health care legislation, Senator Bernie Sanders tried to drive home the human cost of repealing the Affordable Care Act with a tweet: “Let us be clear, and this is not trying to be overly dramatic: Thousands of people will die if the Republican health care bill becomes law.” Illness and death might seem like natural considerations when evaluating health care policy, but Senator Orrin Hatch’s office soon accused Sanders of being uncivil, “accusing those we disagree with of murder.”

Fetishizing civility has a way of elevating style over substance. Richard Spencer, the white nationalist, has found a place in our political discourse precisely because his bland demeanor and khaki collection perplex those not accustomed to seeing a racist resemble a frat boy at a formal rather than a Klansman in a hood. He adopts a civilized tone to advance opinions once considered beyond the bounds of civilized debate, advocating “peaceful ethnic cleansing,” as if that were an actual thing.

One temptation of making accusations of violence is that it seems capable of cutting through all the political noise, making an issue feel visceral and urgent. But with everyone redefining violence based on their existing political sympathies, it just as easily works to mislead and confuse — conflating structural inequality with

political name-calling, or equating the impact of artistic expression with the effects of a policy vote. What's often lost in the mainstream discussion of symbolic violence is that this is a power struggle as much as a rhetorical one. It's not just a fight over how we speak, but over who is speaking and what we will allow them to say — from those who express extreme positions in polite tones all the way over to those who express reasonable positions in impolite ones. A fight over politics is mixed up with a battle over tone, squabbles over whose rhetoric is out of line and who started it. It makes the political discourse louder, but not any clearer.

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