On Punching Nazis

written by John Halle | February 27, 2017

Over the past couple of weeks, social media has filled up with breathless accounts of far right leaders having gotten their comeuppance by being physically assaulted or, in a recent case, murdered in an act of domestic violence.

While it's hard to have much sympathy for the victims, some of us are disinclined to celebrate. One should never express pleasure in killing or inflicting violence, no matter how loathsome, dangerous or "deplorable" the victim is. Or so the story goes, one whose roots go back to the enlightenment.

To be clear, that does not mean that violence is never justified. For example, it was probably necessary to kill Nazis-possibly even to kill millions of them. It was also entirely legitimate for the African National Congress to militarily engage the South African army, and to kill as many of them as possible just as it was for the Sandinstas to target the security forces of the Samoza dictatorship.

But publicly proclaiming one's joy in having done so-or, even worse, to have made jokes about the tens of thousands incinerated in Dresden, the necklacing of government informants, or retribution against landowning families in retaliation for their generations of predation–this is in a different category.

Insofar as the movements did so then, they sacrificed their claim to moral authority and the same can be said for those doing so now. In some cases, it was no more than the usual suspects attempting to harness a viral meme to promote their own agenda or sects. One would hope that those considering enlisting with them will think seriously about who they are getting involved with. Those celebrating violence perpetrated against views they regard as beyond the pale have only a small step to take to justify retaliation against those with whom they have less extreme disagreements. If they were in charge, many of us would find ourselves on the receiving end as did the leftist opponents of some of the left regimes they look back to with some nostalgia.

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Of course, not all of those excited about "punching Nazis" were pursuing an agenda. Whether we admit it or not, many of us will experience a visceral thrill from seeing our enemies getting pounded on by our friends. Indeed, this would appear to be a hard-wired response to a stimulus, similar to a dog salivating when it sees a bone, moths attracted by a light source, or our leg muscles flexing when we receive a tap on the knee cap.

Accepting that we have involuntary reactions, however, doesn't require that we act on them. We might want to blurt out an insult when our boss or spouse annoys us just as certain testosterone addled males will be inclined to grab an attractive woman "by the pussy." But it should be obvious

that these sentiments are best left unexpressed, either in our actions or our words.

The same goes for public statements with respect to acts of violence undertaken in the heat of the moment. We should disassociate ourselves from them, making clear that our positions are based on a considered assessment of the facts rather than our immediate emotional reactions to some real or manufactured outrage.

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All this should be painfully apparent to the left now more than ever since the reason why we are confronting an emboldened far right is, in part, because of our failure to sufficiently control our emotional reactions only a few months ago.

All of us knew, or should have known, that preventing a far right victory involved transcending our feelings of disgust at having to vote for yet another lying neoliberal warmonger. Instead, too many of us capitulated to them with the result that white supremacists and neo-Nazis and their sympathizers now have significant influence in all three branches of the federal government.

That the left needs to learn to act strategically using the entirety of its brain rather than its amygdala in responding to political reality is a lesson that we fail to learn at our, and the world's, peril.

Assuming that we can win arguments with our fists rather than our words is just another sad indication of our continuing failure to learn it.