

Uncivil Action?

A Consideration of the Legitimacy of Violence

By Lucia Knoles and Pleun Bouricius

From our comfortable moral positions and in our comfortable American lives, many of us condemn violent political and social action. Some feel violence is crime, no matter how you slice it. Others draw a line between sanctioned violence with a public purpose (war, police apprehending criminals) and the less regulated kind (terrorism, gang or ethnic/race war, rogue police). As soon as we step away from such convenient categories, however, the question of violence becomes a whole lot murkier very fast.

What about food riots? How do we draw the line between crime and necessary resistance? When does policing become state suppression? Are we sure that, given the same set of circumstances, we would not pick up a stick rather than argue? Where does arguing shade into fight? Is comparing a duly and newly-elected President Obama to genocidal dictators, as happened this past summer, in effect an incitement to assassination? Given that we celebrate the origins of our country in armed revolt, do most of us feel that armed resistance is an accepted method of last resort – last resort, but effective and legitimate? And how do we see others in this equation?

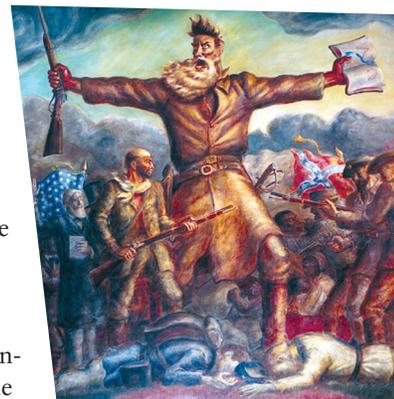
A short list of violent actors shows that serious consideration of how we think about the legitimacy of violent action is not only timely, but of the highest importance:

- The 9/11 hijackers
- Scott Roeder, accused of killing Dr. George Tiller in order to stop abortions
- People in New Orleans who tried to break down the gates around City Hall and punched sheriffs during City Council hearing planning the demolition of low-income housing.
- Former slaves who formed militia groups in the reconstruction south to protect their families—and their rights
- The Black Panthers
- The people in the streets outside the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention
- Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City federal building bomber

Whether you regard these individuals or groups as terrorists or heroes depends in part on your political allegiances. Your position on these individuals and groups also depends, however, on your view of violence as a response to political and moral issues.

If you think the American Revolution was legitimate, consider the attempt at a second version: One hundred and fifty years ago, John Brown led his sons and a small band of followers into Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Brown's plan was to destroy slavery by gradually building an army of freed slaves that would live and operate out of the Appalachian mountains, attacking slave owners until slavery no longer seemed tenable. Today, Brown's guerilla tactics might seem familiar and potentially quite effective.

Although branded a terrorist by most Americans in his day, Brown was hailed as a hero by some abolitionists, including Henry David



From *Tragic Prelude* by John Steuart Curry (1938-1940), illustrating John Brown and the clash of forces known as Bleeding Kansas, circa 1858.

To find out more about the Mass Humanities initiative *An (Un)Civil Action*, visit masshumanities.org.

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Joint study group of Boston College High School boys and Elizabeth Seton High School girls, as they prepared for a quiz show about last year's Big Read book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. Mass Humanities supports *The Big Read* in Boston.

Report on the Mass Humanities annual symposium,
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Symposium panelists Sarah Sewall and Rick Atkinson. Photo by George Abbott White.

Recent Grants

■ LJA: Funded through the Mass Humanities initiative, Liberty and Justice for All
▼ RIG: Research Inventory Grant

For application procedures and deadlines, visit: www.masshumanities.org

Greater Boston

\$5,000 to the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Cultures (MIT) of Cambridge to fund keynote speakers for a conference, *Adoption: Secret Histories, Public Policies*.

\$4,120 to the American Islamic Congress for the Fifth Boston Muslim Film Festival, *Cultures in Conflict?* Featuring controversial issues in the Muslim world, April 12-30.

\$5,000 to the Boston Chamber Music Society for a winter series of forums and concerts about the relationship between time and music at MIT's Kresge Auditorium.

\$4,700 to DUNYA of Brookline for a concert of Turkish Judeo-Sufi music at Brookline's Temple Beth Zion, followed by a panel of experts speaking on this tradition.

\$10,000 to the Filmmakers Collaborative of Waltham for research, a film treatment, and a trailer for a documentary about the early years of the Boston radio station, WBCN. ■ LJA

\$5,000 to Lesley University of Cambridge for programming and video production for the exhibit, *Loyal Lesley Daughters: An Oral History of Massachusetts' Women Teachers, 1925-1965*.

\$5,000 to the Lexington Historical Society to plan a 2010-2012 archaeological exhibit at Buckman Tavern, *The Reverend Hancock's Household: Early Colonial Life in Lexington*.

\$5,000 to the Massachusetts Center for the Book in Boston to support the adaptation of the national *River of Words* curriculum for Massachusetts implementation.

\$5,000 to the Public Media Foundation of Boston for development of an audio dramatization of Elinore Pruitt Stuart's *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*.

\$9,982 to The Welcome Project to produce *Exposed at Work*, a play about the language-based health and safety struggles of immigrant day laborers in Somerville. ■ LJA

\$6,135 to WUMB Radio/UMass Boston to purchase copies of the book *Fahrenheit 451* for The Big Read: Boston, a citywide, "one book" project. ■ LJA

Central

\$8,825 to the American Antiquarian Society of Worcester for programs in Worcester, Concord, and Boston, using Thoreau's "A Plea for Captain John Brown" to explore New England support for John Brown. ■ LJA

\$1,500 to Fitchburg State College Foundation for the reading and discussion series, *Reading Lois Lowry: Discussing Young Adult Literature*.

\$5,000 to the Museum of Russian Icons of Clinton for writing and recording an audio tour linking the museum's collection with Russian folklore and legend.

\$4,750 to the Worcester County Poetry Association for *The Places Poems Make*, a workshop for Worcester high school teachers exploring connections between poetry and local history.

\$5,000 to the Worcester Historical Museum for a conference for staff, board members, and community leaders to explore sustainable solutions for house museums in the 21st century.

Northeast

\$10,000 to the Cultural Organization of Lowell to support the Massachusetts Poetry Festival on October 16 and 17.

\$1,500 to the Lowell Historical Society to inventory 19th century cartoons and prints about Lowell resident and owner of the Middlesex Company, Benjamin Franklin Butler. ▼ RIG

\$5,000 to Middlesex Community College of Lowell for transportation, books, and a meeting for instructors for the *Changing Lives* through Literature alternative sentencing program.

\$5,000 to the Sargent Museum of Gloucester to plan an exhibition of the writing closet of Enlightenment author and early feminist Judith "Constantia" Sargent Murray. ■ LJA

\$5,000 to the Thoreau Farm Trust of Concord to develop an interpretive plan for the newly-restored birthplace of Henry David Thoreau.

Southeast and Cape Cod

\$10,000 to the Center for Independent Documentary of Sharon for research, script writing, and the production of a trailer for *The Bread and Roses* Project documentary. ■ LJA

\$5,000 to Spinner Publications of New Bedford for an interdisciplinary and multimedia high school curriculum that centers on Spinner's illustrated, abridged version of *Moby Dick*.

\$2,500 to the Truro Historical Society/Highland Museum to plan a hands-on exhibit based on the society's collection of Native American artifacts, including a portable "suitcase" exhibit.

Western

\$1,270 to the Amherst Historical Society and Museum to inventory collections related to the history of soldiers, their families, and Amherst's participation in times of conflict. ▼ RIG

\$5,000 to the W.E.B. DuBois Library at UMass Amherst to support its colloquium, *Radical Democracy and the Moral Economy of Social Change in the 21st Century*. ■ LJA

\$1,500 to the Holyoke Public Library History Room and Archive to inventory the records of the Parsons Paper Company, the first paper mill in Holyoke. ▼ RIG

\$10,000 to Old Deerfield Productions, Inc. of Deerfield for the writing of the libretto for a new opera entitled *TRUTH*, on the life of Sojourner Truth. ■ LJA

\$5,000 to The Trusteeship Institute of Shutesbury for the radio series *Back to the Future* by Sea Change Radio, examining historical precedents for sustainable energy use in New England.

Other

\$10,000 to the Western New York Public Broadcasting Association of Buffalo for the research and development of a documentary film, *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing America*.

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Mass Humanities promotes the use of history, literature, philosophy, and the other humanities disciplines to deepen our understanding of the issues of the day, strengthen our sense of common purpose, and enrich individual and community life. We take the humanities out of the classroom and into the community.

Mass Humanities, a private, nonprofit, educational organization, receives funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency; and private sources.



\$10,000 to the Underground Railway Theater to contextualize *Harriet Jacobs*, a play based on the autobiographical narrative of a former slave who settled in Cambridge. ■ LJA

Soldiers & Citizens

Military and Civic Culture in America

Two days before our November 7th symposium on the gap between military and civic culture in the United States, Nidal Malik Hasan, a U.S. Army major stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, walked into the Soldier Readiness Center and opened fire, killing thirteen people and wounding thirty others. This horrific episode captured the nation's attention and created a somber mood for the day's discussions. It also brought into harsh relief some of the very issues we had come together to examine.

Soldiers & Citizens: Military and Civic Culture in America brought more than a dozen prominent scholars, journalists and military professionals together before an engaged audience of 325 people at Boston College for a series of conversations examining how the different social, cultural and moral issues at play in our democracy affect and are affected by the military.

Our first panel, Diversity in Uniform, looked at how the issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion are dealt with in the military. The panel included Col. Chuck Allen, professor of cultural science at the Army War College and frequent contributor to the Washington Post's "On Leadership" blog; MIT Professor Missy Cummings, one of the Navy's first female fighter pilots and the author of *Hornet's Nest*; Nathaniel Frank, author of the definitive analysis of the military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, *Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America*; Mikey Weinstein, founder and president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation. It was ably moderated by UMass historian Chris Appy, author of two books about the Vietnam War.

The second panel, United We Serve, examined the pros and cons of the All Volunteer Force and the policy's impact on military culture. The panel included Col. Allen; former Assistant Secretary of Defense Larry Korb, author of some twenty books on military policy and national security issues; Paul Rieckhoff, founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and author of *Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq, A Soldier's Perspective*. Cullen Murphy—editor at large for *Vanity Fair*, former Mass Humanities board member, and author of *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*—moderated.

MSNBC's Rachel Maddow moderated the third and final panel, Cultural Influences: The Military, Politics and Society in 21st Century America. Joining Rachel on stage were three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and historian Rick Atkinson, author of *The Liberation Trilogy*; Andrew Bacevich, staunch critic of the increasing militarization of U.S. foreign policy and author of several books, including *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*; and Sarah Sewall, a former defense department official, lecturer at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and co-author of "Parameters of Partnership: U.S. Civil-Military Relations in the 21st Century."

All three sessions are available to watch, hear, and read online at the new Multimedia page of our Web site: masshumanities.org

Top to bottom: Andrew Bacevich, Rachel Maddow, Paul Rieckhoff, Charles Allen, Missy Cummings, Larry Korb, Nathaniel Frank, Chris Appy, Cullen Murphy, Mikey Weinstein. Photos by George Abbott White.

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"As one of two attendees wearing a military uniform, I would like to thank you for offering such a magnificent session as this."

— Patrick R. Jennings, Ph.D.
Sergeant First Class
1/182nd Infantry
MA Army National Guard



"I came because I wanted to hear Rachel Maddow unplugged. Instead what I got was an entire education in something I, as a peace activist, realize now I knew nothing about."

— Lynette Molnar



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Thoreau. Today, although the moral status of slavery is no longer in any doubt, professional and amateur historians continue to debate the moral status of Brown's actions: hero, villain, or madman.

Since issues of terrorism, the legitimacy of state violence (including torture), and political civility dominate our civic discourse, Mass Humanities is marking the anniversary of Brown's raid as an occasion for reflection on civic violence around the state. Entitled "An (Un)Civil Action: A Closer Look at Violence in Massachusetts History," these programs pair selections from the documentary, *John Brown's Holy War*, with local, and often more mundane, acts of violence.

On November 14, after watching the film at the Springfield Museums, Springfield Armory historian Richard Colton took us to the site of the 1787 stand-off between Daniel Shays' band of Massachusetts farmers, intent on getting to the arsenal, and the Massachusetts militia. Later, at Springfield Technical Community College, Amherst College Professor of History and American Studies Kevin Sweeney led us in a wide-ranging discussion of heroes and villains in the drama of the American nation. More about Shays' Rebellion can be found at STCC's Web site: shaysrebellion.stcc.edu.

This lyrical response to the insurgency that much later came to be known as "Shays' Rebellion" was published in the *Hampshire Gazette* on June 6, 1787. Jason Parmenter, one of the Rebellion leaders, was awaiting execution in a Northampton jail at the time. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Mr. BUTLER—Please to publish the following.

THERE is a word much used at this day, which is not explained by Johnson or Bayley: perhaps some idea of its signification may be found in the following:

A CROSTICK.

Insolvent debtors, aiming ne'er to pay;
Notorious gamblers risking all at play;
Seditious whigs, who think a man should die;
Unless his sentiments with their's comply.
Reveng'ful Tories, democracy disdain;
Great Britain, they think ought to rule & reign.
Enlarg'd jail-birds, men with five years pay:—
News-men, Court members, fervants run away.
The vicious ign'rant herd; for knaves fit tools;
Some may be honest, yet-deluded fools.

On November 21, at Assumption College in Worcester, historian John McClymer worked with the participants on understanding what Brown might have been aiming at, followed by an exciting discussion of the political climate in Worcester in the 1920's, one that favored sticks and stones. (Assumption College's *E Pluribus Unum* Web site has more information: www1.assumption.edu/ahc.)

You don't need to look far to find acts of civic violence in Massachusetts history, even leaving all matters Revolutionary aside: strikes turned violent, resistance to slave catchers, synagogue and grave defacing, school desegregation riots, general mayhem during the Boston Police Strike, strike suppression, house burnings. More educational events are being planned for other towns, notably North Adams, Lawrence, and New Bedford, for early Spring.