Point: Violence Can Be Justified To Protest Government Policies

Thesis: Governments that profoundly violate basic human rights surrender the exclusive right to use organized violence.

Summary: The use of violence to protest government policy is a “revolution” when it succeeds or a “crime” when it fails. The measure of whether violence is justified lies in the cause that led to its instigation. Although governments are supposed to retain the right to use force to quell violence through police action and the armed forces, history reveals that there have been times in which civilians opted to use force to protest heavy-handed government policies that rose to the level of human rights violations. Even America’s Founding Fathers used force to break from the control of the British. Successful rebellions lead to changes in governmental policies that are more favorable for citizens, and this principle is generally what rebels point to in order to justify their protests. There are scores of political conflicts in the contemporary world testing that proposition.

Introduction
The Declaration of Independence, drafted primarily by Thomas Jefferson and signed by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, is the formal statement of the thirteen American states in existence at that time declaring their independence from British rule and their birth as a new nation known as the United States of America. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson penned these famous words:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.”

These words are even more remarkable because the fledgling nation was still at war with Great Britain, a conflict known as the American Revolutionary War. It was not until 1783 that American independence and the sovereignty of the United States would finally be recognized by the British at the Treaty of Paris.

Jefferson laid out the justification for the use of force, even rising to war, by the American states, which were former British colonies, to overthrow despotic rule by the British:

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”

Jefferson’s eloquent language might be reduced to a less elegant, although shorter, sentence: There are circumstances under which citizens have the right to revolt.

The long history of humankind has been marked by an equally long history of governments, both good and bad. Many tyrannical governments resorted to the use of force to stop protests or even prevent protests through policies that caused citizens to become too fearful to speak out against unjust policies of a regime. Although most people accept that it is the right of governments, and not private citizens, to retain a national army and an armed police force. However, this principle leads to an important question: When is the use of violence by citizens against the government ever justified?

Many civilizations have answered that question by resorting to violence when a government’s policies were so restrictive or unfair that citizens were no longer willing to live under such a regime. For instance, in the 1940s, some Americans looked with admiration on the French Resistance, citizens who attacked the troops and facilities of German Nazis occupying France. However, ten years later when the Algerians were fighting for independence from French rule, they were called “terrorists” by the French.

**Violence and Government**

The United States has also witnessed episodes of violent protests against government policies. The Kent State shootings, also known as the May 4 massacre, occurred at Kent State University in Ohio in 1970. Many students were protesting against the American invasion of Cambodia. Ultimately, the protests
became violent and the Ohio National Guard fired at the students, killing four and wounding nine others. Almost exactly one year later on May 3, 1971 thousands of activists descended upon Washington, DC in an attempt to shut down the Federal government in protest of the Vietnam War. The Nixon Administration ordered 10,000 federal and National Guard troops to break up the protestors and keep the Capitol functional. Ultimately, although the protests were intended to be non-violent, thousands of activists were arrested in various skirmishes with police forces. Such mass arrests and police sweeps would later be found unconstitutional by federal courts. However, some movements-such as the Civil Rights movement-have been successful largely through the use of non-violent protests.

In sum, the real question is not whether violence is sometimes warranted against a tyrannical government. Rather, the question is whether violent protests are the most appropriate means of expressing dissatisfaction with government policies. History has shown that the answer to this question is not always clear. However, as in the case of the American Revolution, sometimes violence is necessary to overthrow unjust governments in order to create a free society in which citizens are able to pursue life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Ponder This

1. If, as the author suggests, the victors in violent conflict often determine whether violence was justified, is there any way to tell in advance whether violence is justified?

2. Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that when a government’s behavior “evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism,” it is the people’s right to throw off that government. By what means is such a design discerned?

3. Is violent resistance against a foreign occupation army, such as the Nazi Germans in France during World War II, the same situation as violence against a native government with which an individual or group disagrees?

4. In a democracy like the United States, what recourse does a minority have if its rights are consistently violated?

5. Some Muslims living in Europe might argue that they are the objects of discrimination and that their religion demands that they take up “the sword” to convert non-Muslims. Can religion be used to justify violence?

Bibliography

Periodicals


These essays and any opinions, information or representations contained therein are the creation of the particular author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of EBSCO Information Services.

~~~~~~~~

By George Wright

Co-Author: Heather Newton

Heather Newton earned her J.D., cum laude, from Georgetown University Law Center, where she served as Articles Editor for The Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics. She has worked as an attorney at a large, international law firm in Washington, DC, and an editor for a legal publishing company. Prior to law school, she was a high school English teacher and freelance writer and her works have appeared in numerous print and online publications.

Copyright of Points of View: Violent Protest is the property of Lakeside Publishing Group, LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.