

## Commentary

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# In America, we would rather just fight about it

I recently participated in a week-long forum on violence at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. It removed any small doubts I had about how thoroughly violence permeates American society.

For six days, papers, presentations, performances and documentaries started at 9 a.m. and did not finish until 10 p.m. Many of the participants



are devoting their lives to helping battered women, abused children, children kidnapped by one of their parents, children who lost

their fathers in war, children who are or were urban gang members, soldiers and veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, civilian victims of the violence in Northern Ireland. Latin American poets and musicians bore witness to the results of U.S.-supported governmental violence in Argentina and Chile.

People who have done violence and had violence done to them spoke with brutal honesty about their experiences. Experts in video game violence; medical researchers studying violence and the human brain; journalists covering the crime beat and covering Marines at Camp Pendleton and in Afghanistan; scholars of ancient Athens, Hiroshima, and modern Cambodia — all spoke with equal passion and clarity.

The most poignant account came from attorney and poet Charles Patterson, a Marine Vietnam veteran who handled the unsuccessful death-penalty appeal for Manny Babbitt, a fellow Marine who had fought alongside Patterson in the hell that was Khe Sanh. Babbitt was a victim of childhood violence and a person of severely limited intelligence. He was admitted into the Marines only because a recruiter took the examination for him. He was clearly undone by the prolonged violence at Khe Sanh. None of this mattered in putting him to death for a clearly accidental killing.

I spent the week after the violence forum as a distinguished visiting lecturer at the University of Victoria. The contrast was extreme. Canada is a country whose violence meter is set well below ours. It has no death penalty, no equivalent to our areas of urban poverty and perpetual violence, no national policy of preemptive warfare. Canadian citizens have not been set against one another for political gain on issues affecting the rights of women, gays and lesbians, the poor and the uneducated — or the defining right to keep religion out of politics.

All this was before Indiana Pacers player Ron Artest climbed into the stands in pursuit of a fan. It was before police in Fort Worth shot and killed

former University of Texas football captain Joey Ellis, who had a recent history of mentally disturbed violence, much of it directed at himself. And it was before the U.S. TV program "Extreme Makeover" decided to rework the appearance of the falsely convicted "Snaggletooth Killer," Ray Krone, who way back in 2002 became the 100th death row prisoner since 1976 to be proved unjustly convicted.

You have read about these things. You are aware that we are by now almost pathologically incapable of acknowledging the elephants stampeding through all areas of modern American life.

Pundits and commentators blame NBA players for not exhibiting restraint. Yet our own president uses gun-slinger metaphors while proclaiming "our" right to do far more than "sucker punch" a sovereign foreign nation whom we suspect might have intentions to harm us. We ourselves possess countless weapons of mass destruction and yet are deeply concerned about nuclear weapons in Iran. Do we all agree that Iran would be fully justified in attacking us?

President Bush and John Kerry repeatedly stated their resolve to "hunt down and kill" terrorists. Whatever happened to capturing and bringing to a due communal process of justice those suspected of terrorism? After World War II, we were scrupulous about putting on fair and open trial those who participated in the most abominable crimes in the history of mankind. Now we no longer even take the law into our own hands. We preach and practice vigilantism.

In the tragic death of Ellis, we read that the former Longhorn once "lorded over the nightclubs on Sixth Street" and walked the Forty Acres with the "aura of fame" afforded a star football recruit. Nowhere is there a mention of what kind of education Ellis might have received while a cog within my university's football factory, whose six-year graduation rates are the lowest in the Big 12. What preparation did Ellis have for life after the cheering and artificial privilege stopped?

And now we will have as U.S. attorney general the man who argued, apparently in some mental and moral alternative universe, that the Geneva Conventions on treatment of prisoners are "obsolete." He also wrote the first 57 execution summaries for then-Governor Bush, exhibiting a single-mindedness oblivious to extenuating circumstances or even the possibility of innocence.

It is fine that Krone will get a personal makeover. But what we need is our own national makeover, and it needs to be deep down in our hearts and souls.

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