

## The Particular in the Void

One of the pervasive logical fallacies of the time might be called the particular in the void, and its most notable manifestation is the viewing of America's history of violence as though it were in a vacuum both temporal and geographical.

Until recently, the argument runs, Americans had largely forgotten their violent past. In part this oversight is said to have occurred because of the generally accepted, and generally optimistic, idea of the United States as the land of opportunity and prosperity, a stable society, a political and economic model for the world.

We are not so sure about this "historical amnesia" thesis. Few pupils over the years, especially with the help of the movies and TV, could have escaped awareness of the large measure of violence entailed in the winning of the West. Nor does it seem there has been any attempt to suppress knowledge of the bloody Civil War riots or the various union-management confrontations, not to mention more recent events.

The new school today, at any rate, holds that, in the words of Michael Wallace, "the use of violence has been a fundamental and grim characteristic of the American past." Others appear to be contending that the phenomenon, or the excessive degree of it, in the U.S. is somehow almost unique in the world.

Mr. Wallace, who teaches American history at Franconia College in New Hampshire, is too serious a scholar to accept the uniqueness theory. Yet even he, in an article in the current American Scholar magazine, gives U.S. violence such awesome weight in the unfolding of the nation that it is quite possible to get the feeling that bloodthirstiness is something unusual or unusually pernicious here.

Discussing violence by categories, Mr. Wallace considers particularly its racial, economic and ethnic aspects. His examples are graphic and often horrendous. Among his conclusions is that violence, however irrational it may seem in execution, has frequently been purposive; that is, a deliberate effort on the part of one group or another to wrest advantages the prescribed political process is slow in delivering.

Very well; still, it is easy enough to refute, not Mr. Wallace, but the whole latter-day preachment that American

violence is something peculiar and something for which all of us should hang our heads in unremitting shame.

World history, availed William James, is a bath of blood. Few spaces in recorded time are without war or wars somewhere on the globe. In all ages and all societies unspeakable cruelties, for innumerable reasons or non-reasons, have been visited on individuals and groups. It is far from demonstrated that our era, world-wide and not just America, is necessarily worse than some of its predecessors.

There has always been violence to the spirit as well as physical violence; even without physical torture men have been tortured by the denial of intellectual freedom. Today we see it in egregious degree in the Communist world.

Surely yearnings for liberty underlay this month's revolt of the masses in Poland, although triggered by high prices. Such yearnings were brutally repressed by the Soviets in Czechoslovakia. In the Soviet Union itself, once again after a relatively moderate period, those who cherish free inquiry are being hounded and persecuted.

So to single out American violence as especially virulent is fairly meaningless. What matters is not so much the violence, deplorable though it often is, as how well the institutions have worked even in despite of this seemingly innate trait of the human being wherever found.

By and large, and again in relation to other societies past and present, the conclusion would have to be that American institutions have worked remarkably well. Historically this is one of the most stable of societies, one of the most free, the most rewarding materially and in many ways spiritually and culturally too. These past few years have been traumatic, and yet at the moment there are some indications that the nation is settling down, that the strength of the institutions is being proved again.

Naturally it would be unthinking to become unduly sanguine. The U.S. may be destroyed from within, as Lincoln feared, and conceivably that process is already under way. We only say it is a destiny by no means foreordained. And that is the trouble with all this harping on the violence of America's past, that it obscures the potential of America's future.