



Violence All Around by John Sifton.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015. Pp. xii, 323. ISBN 978-0-674-05769-2.

Review by Walter G. Moss, Eastern Michigan University (waltmoss@gmail.com).

Violence All Around contains reflections on violence, primarily occasioned by author John Sifton's work and observations with Human Rights Watch (HRW) after the World Trade Center terrorist attack in 2001. His preface states that

this isn't a book about how I learned that militaries are ridiculous, wars hellish, politicians deceitful, and all that. I don't want to carp and blame. This is a book about how I first started to look more closely at a human phenomenon—violence—that lies near the heart of almost everything I witnessed after September 11. In my work in the years after 2001, investigating war crimes, crimes against humanity, terrorism, torture, bombings, and the chaos of lawlessness, the unifying topic was violence. Ultimately, I found myself reflecting on violence itself—what it is, what it does, and how we think and speak about it. (ix)

Most of his witnessing occurred in Afghanistan, but the author also spent time in other countries of concern to HRW, like Egypt, and his last chapter, "Change," deals with the uprisings of the "Arab Spring" in 2011. Ten other chapters discuss the author's experiences in New York and Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002; past conquests and their consequences, especially regarding the ancient Afghan city of Balkh; the relationship of violence and distance; the limits of remote violence, including military air power up to the present use of drones; the theatrics of war; the various meanings of violence and the misleading Bush administration rhetoric after 9/11 to justify its war on terror; the use of torture; the history of nonviolence and its relationship with violence; and the extent to which governments and laws employ violence or the threat of it.

In general, Sifton believes historians have rarely treated violence adequately. He writes that historian John Keegan "noted that many of his colleagues would write on diverse military subjects—weapons, strategy, terrain, the personalities of key generals—everything, it seems, but violence itself" (xi-xii).¹

Sifton draws heavily on his own personal observations and those of other HRW workers. He is a lawyer by training, the son of a federal judge in Brooklyn, and a grandson of one of America's most prominent twentieth-century theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr. His chapter on nonviolence discusses at length Niebuhr's "Christian realism," which maintained that violence may at times be needed to counter some even greater evil. But Sifton believes President Barack Obama, a great admirer of Niebuhr's thinking, has failed to grasp the compatibility of the nonviolent ideas of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. with those of Niebuhr, who "probably would have been horrified by the hyperpatriotic jingoism of the Bush era" (213).

Like Niebuhr, however, Sifton believes governments should sometimes use violent means to prevent, for instance, terrible violations of human rights. Thus, he recalls, when he was in Kosovo in 1999, he favored the NATO bombings of Serbia, which was oppressing the Kosovars. He also approves of

1. That said, it should be noted that books like Michael C.C. Adams's *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 2014) have done a great service by emphasizing war's tragic carnage, something too often unstressed by military historians. See William Astore's review at *MiWSR* 2015-063.

President Obama's "commonsensical" words about Syria in September 2013—"America is not the world's policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act" (230–31).

Sifton often faults the George W. Bush administration's responses to the 9/11 attacks, criticizing Bush's statement to Congress warning other nations: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." He thought "al-Qaeda's naïve resentments and America's naïve responses, seemed unhinged... [T]he affairs of the day seemed puerile, an agenda set by children—very dangerous children for sure, but children all the same" (19). Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's speeches were "overheated ... bloviating about the 'enemy'" (137).

The author excoriates the CIA under Bush, especially for its secret torture centers in various foreign countries. In general, the administration's reaction to 9/11 "was essentially a mash-up of words and actions and opinions in which nothing was hard and fast, everything was up for grabs" (246). By contrast with the rules and traditions of war followed by the military, "with the CIA ... there are no uniforms ... only secrecy, hubris" (249). He mentions a 2012 Joint Chiefs' report that acknowledged that US operations in Afghanistan for most of Bush's two terms had been "ill-planned and poorly executed" (145).

Although less critical of the Obama administration, Sifton still faults, for example, its escalating use of drones, which sometimes kill innocent people, from some fifty CIA-directed attacks in 2009 to more than twice that number the next year.

The book is clearly meant for a general audience. It is more impressionistic than psychologist Steven Pinker's exhaustive, more historically detailed, fact based, and psychologically probing study,² which finds that, contrary to common opinion, violence has in fact declined over the centuries. Pinker's purview extends to domestic violence, individual homicides, rapes, and capital punishment, while Sifton concentrates on wartime violence as well as terrorism and (especially American) responses to it. He also omits discussion of violence done to the natural environment and by unjust economic, social, and political systems.

Although some critics think Pinker is too optimistic, he believes violence can continue to be abated by human characteristics like empathy, self-control, conscience, and reason, as well as a number of historical forces: a more enlightened use of legitimate force by states and judiciaries, the promoting of international trade partnerships, more scope for feminine cultural influences (men being more prone to violence), a cosmopolitanism fostered by increasing mobility, literacy, and access to mass media, and the application of more reasoned approaches to human problems.

Sifton offers further generalizations: "Recorded histories are dominated by wars and murders because wars and murders have consequences: not only do people die, but governments fall, borders are changed, and survivors are obliged to embrace new religions or ideologies. Violence makes things happen" (ix). And, truly enough, "The larger cause of mass violence has always been something simpler and overarching: the sense of certainty among rulers, whether religious or secular, that their vision is the best" (211). Dogmatism, rigid ideologies, and religious intolerance have certainly spawned much of the world's mass violence.

Though less sanguine than Pinker, Sifton shares his view that the flow of blood in wars and other forms of conflict will lessen only if we humans become more empathetic about the plight of others. Political theorist Martha Nussbaum and writer Wendell Berry, among many others, have made similar

2. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (NY: Viking, 2011).

arguments. Sifton quotes the philosopher Richard Rorty about the need to appeal to the emotions and imagination of would-be perpetrators of violence to help them “feel differently about their victims,” for instance by telling sympathetic stories about potential victims. Rorty advises “human rights workers [to] tell the sad stories, or take sad pictures, to invoke sentimentality” (72). Like him, Sifton has little confidence in appeals to reason as a means of curtailing violence.

Telling stories can also help shame the perpetrators of violence and those who tolerate it. “All that rights advocates can do, facing the specter of historical flux, is assemble facts and narratives that embarrass or strike at the heartstrings of the main players in history’s events.... It is not much. But it is better than nothing” (269).

In contemplating how little any one individual, group, or nation can do to change the course of history and how complex and unmanageable that process is, Sifton sounds at times like Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. He writes of the changes in Egypt and Libya beginning in 2011 that, “At bottom, historical events had driven themselves as they always do: innumerable human acts of courage in standing up to repression, a concatenation of causes and effects that had made tyrants’ decades-long rule untenable, to a point where other violent entities had ... shunted them aside” (285).

Violence All Around is a salutary and sincere reflection on its subject, especially as regards the American response to the 9/11 attacks. But it does not fulfill its author’s promise to deal with “what it [violence] is, what it does, and how we think and speak about it” (ix). The many mass shootings in the United States in 2015, including the murder of nine people at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, are just one reminder that violence extends far beyond war, terrorism, and government responses to it. A truly comprehensive view must ask, for example, why the United States displays so much more domestic gun violence than most other developed countries.