



Center for Conflict Analysis  
and Resolution

Working Paper 2

# Group Violence in America

by

**Richard E. Rubenstein**

Professor

of

Conflict

Resolution

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George Mason University

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## About The Author: Richard E. Rubenstein

Richard E. Rubenstein is professor of conflict resolution and public affairs at George Mason University, and is a core faculty member of the Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. He is an internationally recognized expert on political violence and the author of such works as *Rebels in Eden: Mass Political Violence in the United States* (1970), *Left Turn: Origins of the Next American Revolution* (1973), and the highly acclaimed *Alchemists of Revolution: Terrorism in the Modern World* (1987).

Rubenstein was educated at Harvard College, Oxford University, and Harvard Law School. Before joining the faculty at George Mason University, he was successively a practicing lawyer, professor of political science at Roosevelt University in Chicago, and professor of law at Antioch School of Law in Washington, D.C. He has been an advisory consultant to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, assistant director of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs, and visiting professor of American studies at the University of Provence in Aix-en-Provence, France.

The text of this article will appear in slightly altered form as a chapter in *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives on Collective Action, Terrorism and Rebellion*, edited by Ted Robert Gurr (Sage Publications, forthcoming). Permission to publish it in working paper form is gratefully acknowledged.

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## About The Center

The Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University has as its principal mission to advance the understanding and resolution of significant and persistent human conflicts among individuals, groups, communities, identity groups, and nations. To fulfill this mission, the center works in four areas: academic programs consisting of a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Conflict Analysis and Resolution and a Master of Science (M.S.) in Conflict Management; research and publication; a clinical service program offered through the Conflict Clinic, Inc., center faculty, and senior associates; and public education.

Associated with the center are three major organizations that promote and apply conflict resolution principles. These are the Conflict Clinic, Inc., mentioned above; the Consortium on Peace Research, Education and Development (COPRED), a network organization; and the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution (NCPCR), offering conferences and workshops.

Major research interests include the study of deep-rooted conflicts and their resolution; the exploration of conditions attracting parties to the negotiation table; the role of third parties in dispute resolution; and the testing of a variety of conflict intervention methods in a range of community, national and international settings.

Outreach to the community is accomplished through the publication of books and articles, public lectures, conferences, and special briefings on the theory and practice of conflict resolution. As part of this effort, the center's Working Papers offer both the public at large and professionals in the field access to critical thinking flowing from faculty, staff, and students at the center. The Working Papers are presented to stimulate critical consideration and discussion of important questions in the study of human conflict.

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## Foreword

“Group Violence in America: The Fire Next Time?” is the second working paper of the Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

Both writings will come as a surprise to those who think of conflict resolution as being essentially a process, a process by which parties to conflicts are brought together and helped to transform their relationships. In fact, conflict resolution, as defined by the center in its Mission Statement, is more than a process. It is an approach to social relationships at all levels of interaction, from the family to the international, that seeks to take into account inherent human aspirations and needs of development, and that seeks to isolate those environmental constraints, political, social, and economic, which frustrate the attainment of such development.

With such a perspective, conflict resolution is by definition a challenge to conventional approaches to public policies, in that its focus is on the person, not on institutions, except to the extent that institutions should be adapted to the needs of persons.

This raises the time-honored question of the individual and the social good. But that question has in the past been posed by those who have an interest in the preservation of institutions in order to justify their positions. Now the question is being posed more to tilt the balance in favor of the person.

It was for this reason that the first working paper posed the question whether conflict resolution was a political philosophy. Given that it is concerned with resolving deep-rooted conflicts, that is, conflicts over fundamental human needs for identity and recognition that emerge, for example, in ethnic and class struggles, and given that it recognizes that such resolution may be possible only through structural change and fundamental policy changes, it follows that conflict resolution is in the arena of political analysis and change.

Let it be noted that this does not make it “liberal” or “conservative,” “right” or “left.” These terms are meaningless when applied to conflict resolution. Conflict resolution is conservative in that it seeks to preserve and to promote those social values that make civilizations possible, but it also recognizes that unless certain human needs are met, there can be no social stability. Societies will be destroyed by their own inner violence.

This present working paper by Richard E. Rubenstein starts with the political realities: a historically violent America. He makes a deep analysis of the nature and sources of this violence. Groups seeking their identity, in a political-social environment that denies it to important sections of the population, evolve their own means. Since there is no way in which those seeking their identity can come together and organize at a national level, they adopt means which are within their grasp: local organization and, frequently, local violence.

There being no means of imposing law and order from the top, Rubenstein, having described the nature of the problem, explores means of dealing with it. He finally arrives at

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the question posed in a theoretical framework in the first working paper: can analytical problem solving conflict resolution techniques cope with this group-dominated, violent America? Perhaps another paper can seek to answer this question by describing the institutionalization of conflict resolution that would be required, and how precisely the processes would be applied.

Provocative, yes. Important, yes. Pointing to the future, yes. An extension of the center's Mission Statement, yes. And for these reasons the center faculty, staff, and students appreciate the contribution made by Richard Rubenstein in this working paper.

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John W. Burton, Associate  
Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution  
W. Jennings Randolph Distinguished Fellow,  
United States Institute of Peace

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## Group Violence in America

Contrary to the assumptions of "consensus scholarship," the United States has experienced frequent outbreaks of civil violence by and against domestic groups seeking satisfaction of their basic needs and interests. In form, out-group violence has tended to be spontaneous, collective, and of relatively low intensity; in content, it has generally aimed at securing group identity, recognition, and development. Rebellious groups in America often behave like nations seeking independence or local autonomy. Especially during periods of multi-group revolt, the response of the authorities has been to combine violent repression with political recognition in an effort to admit "responsible" group members to positions of influence.

Although out-group needs remain unsatisfied, a number of factors are presently inhibiting a revival of massive group rebellion. Nevertheless, particularly in view of the failure of traditional reform methods to alter the conditions of life of the growing American underclass, the prognosis is for further violence, perhaps of a less restrained type. This in turn poses the risk of greatly intensified repression. It therefore becomes essential to develop new methods of conflict resolution capable of exposing and dealing with the root causes of group violence in the United States.

### Consensus Scholarship and Historical Amnesia

The tumultuous decade that began with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and ended with the resignation of President Richard Nixon took most Americans by surprise. Students of American history and society were, on the whole, as unprepared as any other group for the racial uprisings, student revolts, volatile antiwar demonstrations and state violence of the period. Social scientists—not ordinarily a reticent group—were rendered temporarily speechless by events that seemed to contradict fundamental, widely held and cherished assumptions about the nature of American society. In 1968, the year of the Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy assassinations, the Chicago and Washington racial uprisings, and the Democratic National Convention rioting, Clifford Geertz confessed that American social scientists did not understand the causes of domestic political violence. "Domestic disorder," he wrote, "is a product of a long sequence of particular events whose interconnections our received categories of self-understanding are not only inadequate to reveal but are designed to conceal."<sup>1</sup>

Geertz's dismay reflected the failure of consensus scholarship, the dominant school of American social thought in the postwar period, to predict or explain the disorders of the sixties. For years, leading scholars had insisted that the United States was a pluralistic society characterized by shared social and political values and a "genius" for compromise.<sup>2</sup> American society, they held, was blessed by a blurring of divisions between a multiplicity of economic, social, political, and ethnic groups. For one reason or another—either because the land was

fertile and the people hard-working, or because no true aristocracy or proletariat ever developed on American soil, because the United States was a nation of immigrant groups, or because the two-party system worked so well—any sizeable domestic group could gain its share of power, prosperity, and respectability merely by playing the game according to the rules.<sup>3</sup> In the process, the group itself would gradually lose coherence and be incorporated into the great middle class. The result, the scholars said, was a pattern of economic, social, and political mobility and stability unique in world history. In America, rising domestic groups had not been driven to violence, nor had the “ins” generally resorted to excessive force to keep them “out.” The conclusion drawn by many was that the United States, having mastered the art of peaceful change, could in good conscience presume to lead the world.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, the spectacles of ghetto areas aflame, policemen hunting down Black Panthers and mauling student protesters, and gunmen murdering popular leaders produced some reevaluation of the optimistic premises of consensus scholarship. The report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Report), published in 1967, was a major intellectual as well as political event of the period; it declared that the policies of racial integration pursued actively by the federal government since World War Two had failed, and that racial violence was a product of the division of America into “two societies,” one white and one black.<sup>5</sup> Two years later, the more comprehensive staff reports of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (Eisenhower Commission) documented the history of crime and political violence in the United States,<sup>6</sup> and reflected on what now seemed endemic problems of racism,<sup>7</sup> police brutality,<sup>8</sup> abuse of and disrespect for legal procedures,<sup>9</sup> political rigidity,<sup>10</sup> popular propensity towards the use of firearms,<sup>11</sup> and political assassination.<sup>12</sup> With the tempo of violent conflict rising through the early 1970s, some injudicious scholars (myself among them) saw the social tremors of the period as heralding a major earthquake. They predicted the death of consensus, and a transition from conflict between segmented “out-groups” and local authorities to more massive, popularly based struggles between larger groupings (e.g., social classes) and the state.<sup>13</sup> In all of this, there was a strong flavor of “anti-exceptionalism.” That is, it seemed that America had become as afflicted by historically rooted social problems as the Old World, and might as readily produce revolutionary or reactionary alternatives to the collapsed consensus.<sup>14</sup>

Yet even while talk of revolution filled the lecture halls, most of the serious scholarly work of the period focused in less apocalyptic fashion on what might, after all, prove only a temporary breakdown of civic norms. There was, in fact, little concerted effort to replace the consensus model of American society and politics with any other model. The most important theoretical contribution of the decade was the general theory of political violence put forward by Ted R. Gurr in 1970, which saw group violence as the predictable outcome of a widening gap between a group’s “value expectations” and the political system’s “value capabilities.”<sup>15</sup>



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This theory of relative deprivation was well-documented on a trans-national basis.<sup>16</sup> It was politically neutral, although its subtext, so to speak, was liberal in the broad sense that it could be interpreted as placing primary responsibility for disintegration on systems rather than on deviant groups. Having awakened legitimate expectations of group progress, those who failed to deliver the promised satisfactions could expect trouble.

As a predictor of group violence, relative deprivation seemed a useful theory. As a guide to action once violence had erupted, its utility was less apparent. What type or degree of reform or coercion (if any) would terminate a group rebellion? If the expanded American system could not satisfy lower-class expectations, could it simply lower them?<sup>17</sup> Would American blacks be satisfied, for example, if new opportunities were offered to politicians, business people, and professionals of color? Would state coercion itself, applied with great intensity to selected groups of militants, have the effect of dampening the expectations of the less militant?<sup>18</sup> In the 1970s such questions were answered affirmatively in practice. Like most of the other theoretical efforts of the era, then, relative deprivation left the consensus model, which assumed a high degree of popular malleability, systemic adaptability, and state control, still standing.

Indeed, the 15 years of relative social peace that followed the end of the Indochina War seemed to demonstrate precisely those characteristics. *Popular malleability*: the wave of racial protest peaked with the passage of civil rights and voting rights legislation and the opening up of new opportunities to the black middle class. *Systemic adaptability*: a Republican president ended the war in Southeast Asia, and with it the major manifestations of the "youth revolt." *State control*: the intelligence agencies and police proved quite capable of severing the connections between militant groups and the masses, and of co-opting, imprisoning, or killing their most volatile leaders. In fact, it seemed that the American consensus, like some giant amoeba, had simply reached out and engulfed the rebellious groups and their official adversaries alike. While Richard Nixon toasted Mao Tsetung in Peking and Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow, partisans of the New Left found their political ideas rejected by the same public that avidly consumed their cultural products. In 1972, the Democratic Party, having allowed itself to be taken over by the intruders, suffered a crushing defeat. By 1976 (after absorbing most of the newcomers), it had recrystallized around its old political axis and regained the presidency.

To be sure, American society since the early 1970s has been peaceful only in the sense that it has been relatively free of major riots, civil disorders, and assassinations. Anomic individual violence (particularly crime), state violence (particularly against the underclass), and what Johan Galtung calls "structural violence" have, if anything, intensified.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, with the decline in violent or violence-provoking mass protest, the prevailing view in scholarly as well as popular circles is that, the period of disorder having ended, a "normal" state of consensus has been restored. Once again, it is considered realistic to assume that American society lacks the potential for serious internal conflict involving mass violence.























































