
Etceteras . . .

Moderation in Response to Provocation Is No Vice

ROBERT HIGGS

As I write, the news and social media are flush with commentary on recent riots at the University of California at Berkeley and in the surrounding area of the city. The rioters purport to be anarchists, although their actions mark them more as heedless vandals, and insofar as one may discern their underlying ideology, it seems to be much more communism than anarchism. My concern here, however, is not the nature or actions of this group, but the tremendous amount of publicity its actions generated. A modest investment in public mischief, it appears, can have a huge payoff in public notice.

In a world of continuous news coverage and instant, worldwide communication of reports, perhaps such an imbalance is to be expected. After all, the news media and various interest groups are hungry for readers and viewers, and truly important news is not continually breaking. In its absence, reports of threats and conflicts, especially violent ones, may serve the media's needs well enough.

We would do well to understand, however, that many individuals and groups whose troublemaking gains public attention are inconsequential in their ability to sway the powers that be and the policies that those powers make and enforce. The Berkeley rioters, like many other such actors, cannot hope for anything more than gaining the public's attention. If they do so, they have succeeded.

If their actions prompt some kind of public or—much better—official reaction, especially a violent repressive reaction, they have succeeded even more. Many impotent groups thrive on repression, which serves to validate their opposition to allegedly oppressive rulers, rules, or even cultures.

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Terrorists are the best example. Rarely do individual terrorists or terrorist groups possess significant resources to alter the regimes or policies against which their actions are directed. So, as a rule, the terrorists' immediate aim is simply to terrorize, to strike great fear in the multitude. If the government then responds with extensive measures ostensibly to suppress or destroy the terrorists, the terrorists have succeeded even more. (Note well: terrorism is a tactic, not an actor, and as such it can be carried out in some fashion by practically any determined adult. Hence, it is impossible to win a war on terrorism as such in any coherent sense.) Ponder, for example, the many billions of dollars in costs the American people have borne and the liberties of which they have been deprived by the U.S. government's so-called war on terror. Al-Qaeda's rate of return on its investment in the attacks perpetrated on September 11, 2001, has been truly astronomical. In this sense, one may say with good reason that the terrorists won.

If rioters and other vandals were to be ignored except by police, who respond simply by doing what they are supposed to do—maintain public peace and order—the troublemakers would have much less incentive to engage in their acts of destruction. They would garner fewer headlines and no round-the-clock news coverage and discussion in social media. With less incentive for the potential troublemakers, less such trouble would be made.

In regard to the terrorists, the world would have been spared countless horrors if the U.S. government treated the 9/11 attacks as crimes to be dealt with by police in the United States and elsewhere rather than as sufficient justifications for endless warfare, nearly all of it actually unrelated to the persons and groups involved in the attacks.

Public officials are opportunists, however, and nothing serves their quest for additional power, taxpayer money, and personal aggrandizement better than a war. So they are quick to turn every substantial crime into a rationale for a new war, whether it be a metaphorical one such as the so-called war on drugs or an all too real one such as the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. By now, many billions of dollars have been squandered in connection with the Iraq War, an undertaking that has yielded virtually nothing of value to the general American public, and many billions more will be expended in the future to care for physically and psychologically wounded soldiers, not to mention to expedite the U.S. government's ongoing engagement in the various other wars in the region that have come about at least in part because of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

If rioters were largely ignored by the public, and if they and terrorists were treated as mere criminals, the overreactions on which rulers thrive would be deprived of the essential oxygen of public support they need to burn hot and bright, and the general public would be placed at much less risk of losing at the hands of their own governments the wealth and liberties that the troublemakers themselves never had the power to take from them. Some of the most horrifying public policies in U.S. history—and no doubt in other countries' histories as well—may be placed under the rubric of fear mongering and regime overreaction. The public desperately needs to cultivate a greater appreciation of the prudence of moderation in responding to troublemakers' provocations.

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