



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Book Review:
***A History of Force* by James L. Payne**
by George C. Leef

A History of Force by James L. Payne (Sandpoint, Idaho: Lytton Publishing, 2004); 296 pages; \$23.95.

Tune in to most news broadcasts and you will probably hear one or more stories dealing with the use of force: armed conflicts in the Middle East; crimes; riots; and more. It often seems that we live in a violence-saturated world. Perhaps so, but political scientist James Payne argues in his new book, *A History of Force*, that over the long sweep of history, human beings have become significantly less inclined to use force. Optimistically, Payne concludes, “As far as we can tell from the historical record, we live in a much more peaceful world than has ever existed. Humans are less vicious, less inclined to inflict physical injury than they used to be.” Not only are things better than they used to be with regard to violence, but they are, the author believes, going to continue to improve.

Payne arrives at his conclusions from an impressive survey of human history. He takes in all corners of the world and great spans of time. Payne is a solid, careful scholar and that fact makes all the more fascinating his argument that mankind is steadily moving away from force and violence in our relationships. Americans facing all the numerous mandates and prohibitions of our constantly expanding government may be surprised to hear that the long-term trend is toward less coercion in society, but Payne’s thesis deserves a fair hearing.

The author himself is quite aware that his contention is apt to raise eyebrows. Our world is undeniably one in which the use of force is widespread, from global military conflicts and terrorism to the haughty authoritarianism of our government officials. But Payne contends that we tend to “see” more force than we used to for a number of reasons. One is that it often suits the interests of various institutions (e.g., the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) to exaggerate the degree of conflict in the world. It always helps with fundraising to be able to claim that the problem that an organization is supposed to solve is one that’s rapidly growing.

Furthermore, there is now far more information available in all aspects of life, including the use of force. Payne writes,

Because there is so much more information about recent violence, tabulations will exaggerate the extent of modern bloodshed compared to that of the past.... Soaked in wall-to-wall coverage of violence, the public believes that we live in an incredibly bloody and dangerous world. The truth is that, compared with the past, we live in an astonishingly peaceful one.

To make his case, Payne begins with a general (and emphatically true) observation about the use of force, namely that its use is “harmful or inappropriate.” From that, he contends that humanity is moving along a learning curve, slowly grasping the truth that it gets better results from peaceful modes of interaction than from coercive ones. We are, after all, a rational species, and just as we have learned to discard more primitive, less effective technologies when we found ones that worked better, it is reasonable to suppose that we would also come to discard less effective kinds of human interactions. Payne’s argument is that we are slowly and haltingly learning that force is the wrong tool to accomplish our objectives.

Coercion in history

In the past, many tribes believed that plundering neighboring peoples was a good way to live. Now, however, only a relatively small number of individual criminals choose to live by plunder. No doubt that is progress.

Payne documents his case by examining many violent practices that have become extinct or are in clear decline. Human sacrifice, for example, used to be widely practiced in the ancient world with no qualms. Now it is extinct. It died out independently in nearly all parts of the globe long ago and Payne contends that its disappearance was due to human development. His point is buttressed by the fact that, once abandoned, human sacrifice has never made a return in any society. Payne regards that as evidence of a rising “inhibition against sadism” among humans. He readily acknowledges that we still have sadists among us but believes that sadism is in irreversible decline.

The same, Payne argues, is true of genocide. Ancient history is replete with bloody massacres between people just because they perceived each other as enemies. “In its ancient heyday, genocide was supported by the ‘best’ people, by the forward-looking, community-minded leaders,” he writes. Those leaders advocated genocide as a means of keeping the religion and culture of “their” people pure. By massacring every last man, woman, and child of the offending tribe, the “threat” would be removed. As recently as the 17th century, “most people, including elites, viewed the mass slaying of ethnic or religious opponents as an acceptable practice.” In modern times, however, the growing revulsion against violence has made genocide less and less thinkable. No, it hasn’t disappeared — witness the Rwandan genocide in Africa just a decade ago — but Payne believes that genocide is dying out.

A decline in the use of force?

Warfare in general, Payne argues, is becoming less common and widespread over time, as are imperialism, political murder, torture, slavery, capital punishment, and violent revolution. The decline in the use of many kinds of force seems clear.

Let us agree that the use of violence seems to be waning, but does that mean a general renunciation of the use of force? Humans may be less inclined to turn to the sword, the gallows, and the torture chamber than in our earlier history, but are we also turning away from other uses of force that are not bloody, but nevertheless coerce people? The acid test would seem to be taxation, and Payne also finds a trend away from that. “In spite of the growing modern dependence on tax monies, support for the tax system seems to be declining,” he writes. To make his point, Payne notes that the IRS now allows people to pay taxes in installments and that its attempt to extend withholding to dividends and interest was defeated in 1983. “The historical drift against taxation will continue, eventually leading to the discontinuation of the practice,” he maintains.

I wish that I could be as optimistic. Government now takes more of the income of Americans than at almost any time in our history. Great majorities of the people today believe that taxation is justified for everything from the provision of roads and police to “public education” and an immense array of wealth transfers. Moreover, most people approve of a wide range of coercive governmental actions to regulate behavior, for example, the war on drugs and “insider-trading” laws.

Are humans really turning away from the use of force in general — or only away from its more archaic and brutal forms? The 1040 form is less painful than the rack, but it is still an application of force. The EPA doesn’t have the fearsome powers of the Gestapo, but it nevertheless can confiscate property and even have people jailed for ill-defined “environmental crimes.” Are we turning away from force per se, or only away from force that involves blood and pain?

We might ask the question this way: Some kinds of force are waning, but does that mean that freedom is waxing? In some ways, we certainly are more free than we used to be. For example, in the United States and much of the rest of the world, we have stopped coercing people on the basis of their religious beliefs, as was formerly common. That’s good. On the other hand, however, in earlier times, no government agency could dictate to an individual what he did with his own property. Such restrictions, which are backed up with threats of force, are now quite common. So in other ways, we are less free than formerly. The overall trend regarding freedom is not clear.

In sum, while Payne argues convincingly that there is a long-run movement away from many kinds of violence, I’m not convinced that he thereby shows a long-run growth in freedom.

Good books, however, often leave much room for argument. *A History of Force* is a fascinating and provocative book, one that I recommend highly.

George C. Leef is the director of the Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in Raleigh, North Carolina, and book review editor of [The Freeman](#).

This article was originally published in the June 2004 edition of *Freedom Daily*.