

# Sticks and Stones: Free Speech and Violent Protests

By Fr. Dave Heney

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***Recent demonstrations over aggressive police actions or Supreme Court nominations are often, ironically, also aggressive and violent. How can we correctly understand the right of free speech and the violent actions of protest groups no matter what their cause?***

America was founded by immigrant Europeans who deeply remembered one of the most violent wars in Europe; *The Thirty Years War*...from 1618 to 1648. All of Europe was engaged in vicious battles over issues arising from the Protestant Reformation. This was a war fought over ideas, and much death and destruction followed. *The founders of our country were firmly resolved that no such a violent conflict would ever happen here.*

They founded a country where your ideas would actually be *...protected!* You could say anything you wanted. *However, you could not physically harm anyone.* You would just have to get used to hearing all kinds of speech, knowing that you would have the protection of the state from any physical harm. ***To get anything done you would have to persuade ...and not physically coerce.***

The First Amendment added to our Constitution affirmed your free speech, while local laws protected you from any physical threat or coercion.

This reminds me of the childhood rhyme that parents would teach their children if they ever faced a bully at school, ***“Sticks and stones can break my bones ...but words can never hurt me!”***

Jesus affirmed the same idea whenever anyone *“Hits you on the right cheek.”* (Matt. 5:39) What does He mean? Well, to hit you on the right cheek means you must use the back of your hand ...which is an insult to your dignity, *and not actually a physical attack.* Jesus affirms that since your dignity comes from God, *no person* can ever take it away, so the hit is not actually felt as a wound at all. Therefore, no need to strike back.

A physical attack is entirely different, and can include forceful defense by yourself or the state.

*Our founders were deeply religious and knew this Gospel passage well and made it a basic constitutional idea to regulate the difference between insulting words and violent actions.*

**The best answer to hate speech is *...more speech!***

The Supreme Court has ruled on this issue many times and always favored the right to free speech even if hateful and disturbing, as they ruled in the famous 1927 Whitney v. California case, *“If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.”*

Exceptions are made for public safety, such as *maliciously* shouting “fire!” in a theatre. But *sincerely* shouting fire, even if mistaken, is protected speech. You have a right to your opinions, even if misguided. As long as you do not physically threaten anyone, your speech is protected.

***There may be a lot of reasons to speak for or against police actions or moral and political issues ...there are no reasons ever for violence.***

If any group is using violence to advance their cause ...then you know for sure they are wrong!

This is a time of heightened political sensitivity in our nation today where events are often magnified or even falsely manipulated for partisan political reasons.

Therefore, it is a time for calm reflection and wisdom ...and especially respect for human dignity, which we know always and only comes from God.

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