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Remember, Remember — The Right to Rebel

An essay on opposing violence without surrendering the right to resist oppression, and on judging causes, means and the people who bear their costs.

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The journey

Suppose I am travelling into Copenhagen with no intention of hurting anyone. I am not going there to fight. I want people to be able to move through a city without having to think about violence at all.

Now suppose I see someone being attacked. I could call for help, alert others, create a chance to escape or try to interrupt what is happening. What is safe or possible depends on facts I do not know in advance. My peaceful intention does not remove another person's danger.

I am against violence. I am not against rebellion. I do not want my arguments to become invitations to hurt people. Yet I will not demand that somebody facing danger behave as though my hoped-for future has already arrived.

That is the distinction I want to hold onto: how we respond to the violent world we encounter, and what kind of world we choose to build.

The fifth of November

In 1605, conspirators led by Robert Catesby planned to blow up the English Parliament during its ceremonial opening. Guy Fawkes guarded the gunpowder. Their intended victims included the king and the political leadership gathered there; they also intended to seize Princess Elizabeth. The conspiracy was discovered before the planned explosion. UK Parliament: the plot (https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentaryauthority/the-gunpowder-plot-of-1605/overview/the-plot-and-its-discovery/conspiracy-and-deception/); Parliamentary record (https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentwork/offices-and-ceremonies/collections/clerk-of-the-hoc/gunpowder/).

In 1606 Parliament established an annual commemoration of the plot's failure. Centuries later, the Guy Fawkes mask, through *V for Vendetta* and subsequent protests, acquired a nearly opposite public meaning. A celebration that an attack on the state had failed could supply the imagery of resistance to state power. UK Parliament: commemoration (https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentaryauthority/the-gunpowder-plot-of-1605/overview/aftermath/commemoration-/); Smithsonian on the mask (https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-guy-fawkes-figurehead-of-the-gunpowder-plot-avoided-the-full-horrors-of-execution-by-hanging-drawing-and-quartering-180985899/).

The transformation is fascinating. It is not a moral acquittal. Restrictions on Catholics were real, but a credible grievance and a plan to kill political leaders are separate things to evaluate. Equally, the government's legal authority did not make all its actions just. A symbol can carry a cause while hiding the people who would pay for its methods.

What a right to rebel means

Rebellion need not mean armed insurrection. A banned newspaper, a strike, mass non-cooperation and a public refusal to obey can challenge authority. So can sabotage and attacks on people. Calling them all rebellion identifies a challenge to power; it does not make their methods equivalent.

Nor does resistance have to wait for a single, immediate assault. Oppression can be sustained through censorship, imprisonment and recurring threats. People can have a moral claim to organise against those conditions even when nobody is attacking them at that particular moment. Whether a movement may deliberately injure someone remains a further question. Acute self-defence is one case to examine, not the definition of every legitimate rebellion.

A legal right, a moral permission and a political demand can also diverge. Germany's Basic Law, for example, recognises a right **for Germans** to resist anyone seeking to abolish its constitutional order, **if no other remedy is available**. That specific constitutional provision does not settle the moral legitimacy of every tactic, and it was not the law governing East German demonstrators in 1989. Basic Law, Article 20(4) (https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html).

Four questions therefore need separate answers: may people resist authority; can a particular harmful act be justified; must anyone risk themselves in resistance; and what must we do to protect somebody else? A right to resist should not quietly become a duty to kill or a duty to be killed.

For this discussion, *violence* means deliberate physical injury or a credible threat of it. *Force* is broader and can include restraint without an intention to injure. Boxing remains physically violent even with consent and rules; consent changes its moral character, not the possibility of injury. The issue here is principally nonconsensual harm used to dominate or impose political outcomes.

January 6: belief is not verification

On 6 January 2021, some people protested peacefully in Washington. Others entered the US Capitol unlawfully, and some assaulted police officers. The unrest interrupted the electoral vote count. The National Archives records the result as 306 for Joe Biden and 232 for Donald Trump, with certification completed at 3:44 a.m. on 7 January. An appeals court's later decision in *United States v. Webster* records a jury conviction for an assault on an officer, among other offences. These are distinct facts, not a description of everyone present. National Archives (https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/2020); Court of Appeals, 28 May 2024, p. 2 (https://media.cadc.uscourts.gov/opinions/docs/2024/05/22-3064-2056407.pdf#page=2).

The claim that an election was stolen requires evidence. In a December 2020 AP interview, then-Attorney General William Barr said investigators had not found fraud on a scale that could change the outcome. That was an attributed assessment, not proof that every investigation had ended or every possible grievance was false. Conviction does not become verification merely because somebody acts on it. AP interview reproduced in DOJ records, PDF p. 11 (https://www.justice.gov/oip/foia-library/foia-processed/general_topics/meetings_%26communications_barr_06_10_22/dl#page=11).

On 20 January 2025, President Trump commuted fourteen named sentences and pardoned other covered people convicted of January 6-related offences. Clemency changed legal consequences; it did not establish that the election was stolen or settle the ethical merits of each person's conduct. White House proclamation (https://www.whitehouse.gov/Presidential-actions/2025/01/granting-pardons-and-commutation-of-sentences-for-certain-offenses-relating-to-the-events-at-or-near-the-united-states-capitol-on-january-6-2021/).

Warsaw: no duty to martyrdom

Warsaw in 1943 presents a different kind of threat. Jewish residents faced renewed German deportations after earlier transports to the Treblinka killing centre. Armed fighters resisted, while other inhabitants hid and refused to assemble for deportation. German forces crushed the uprising in May. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw-ghetto-uprising).

It is difficult to tell people under those conditions that they must remain defenceless. It is equally difficult to impose a duty to fight on those who hid or had no realistic chance to defend themselves. Defending the possibility of self-defence is not the same as saying everybody must fight.

My desire for a nonviolent world does not make me the judge of what people facing such danger must sacrifice to keep my principle pure.

Denmark: more than one kind of resistance

The Danish resistance under German occupation in 1940–45 makes the question harder. Its activities included clandestine publishing and sabotage. Printing a forbidden newspaper, destroying equipment and killing a person require different assessments, even when undertaken against the same occupying power. Nationalmuseet: types of resistance (https://modstand.natmus.dk/ModstandstyperForklaring.aspx).

Aage Trommer and Charlie Krautwald describe the delaying effect of railway sabotage as minimal while emphasising the political significance of resistance. Their observation is not a measurement of every sabotage operation. It identifies a distinction: military delay, political effect and moral justification are different questions. A durable symbol cannot, by itself, establish that an action's foreseeable costs were justified. Lex: Danish resistance, “Sabotagens rolle” (https://lex.dk/Modstandsbev%C3%A6gelsen_i_Danmark_1940-1945).

The occupation cannot be reduced either to an immediate attack on one person or to an ordinary disagreement over an election. It raises the wider question of resisting institutions that maintain coercion over time. Any judgement about a particular act still needs its own facts: the target, available alternatives, risks to

others and what participants could reasonably know beforehand.

Leipzig: rebellion without a weapon

On 9 October 1989, about 70,000 people demonstrated in Leipzig against East Germany's one-party system. The authorities had prepared to suppress the demonstration but did not do so. The Federal Archives describe regional hesitation over uncontrolled escalation and uncertainty within the SED leadership. Bundesarchiv (https://www.bundesarchiv.de/themen-entdecken/online-entdecken/storys/die-stasi-im-jahr-1989/oktober-1989/).

This was resistance to a political order, not simply intervention in a street assault. It shows why rebellion cannot be defined by its weapons. Its peaceful outcome also depended on decisions within the system it challenged. One success cannot promise that nonviolent action always wins; nor would failure alone have made the demonstrators' methods wrong.

The war and the scientist

The fictional world of *The Terminator* makes one situation unusually clear: Skynet's machines wage lethal war against human survivors, who resist. The story supplies an active threat rather than asking us to accept a movement's disputed forecast. *Terminator 2* then complicates the apparent clarity. Sarah Connor believes Miles Dyson's research will make the catastrophe possible. She shoots him at home but cannot bring herself to execute him. John and the Terminator explain the danger, and Dyson agrees to help destroy Cyberdyne's work. AFI synopsis (https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/67074).

The change of plan avoids his attempted execution; it does not create a harmless ending. Police subsequently shoot Dyson during the operation, and he dies detonating the explosives. The distinction is between a person's causal role in a feared future and their intention to bring it about. An urgent cause does not make every proposed target culpable.

Fiction can stipulate knowledge of the future. Real people do not have that certainty. This is a test of preventive violence, not a reason to harm any actual researcher, institution or technology company.

The cause and the means

There is a serious conditional argument for limited defensive harm when a grave threat to life or bodily integrity is real and immediate, no less harmful viable protection is available, and the response is limited to stopping the threat. What someone could reasonably know before acting, foreseeable harm to others and accountability afterwards all matter. Philosophers disagree about the grounds and limits of that argument. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: self-defence (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-defense/); pacifism (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pacifism/).

In cases of persistent oppression, there is a further burden: how is a proposed violent act supposed to protect people, compared with the less harmful alternatives? The right to challenge an unjust order does not answer that question. A promised better government is not sufficient justification for injuring people in order to install it.

“We had no choice” carries a burden of proof. Leaders may exaggerate a threat, overlook less harmful alternatives or accept risks that fall on somebody else. Destroying an object is not automatically assaulting a person, but it can endanger workers, passengers and bystanders. Those choosing a tactic cannot assume that others have accepted its costs.

Reprisals require a further distinction. Responsibility for choosing to punish uninvolved people remains with those who carry out that punishment. Foreseeable retaliation matters to consequences, but it cannot automatically give an oppressor a moral veto over resistance. Otherwise even a peaceful strike could be condemned whenever authorities threatened to retaliate. That distinction does not release a movement from examining the risks it creates and the harm it can avoid.

A principled pacifist can object that claimed necessity repeatedly opens the door to killing and that innocent people should not pay for somebody else's cause. Someone defending limited protective force can reply that refusing intervention may leave an innocent person exposed to an aggressor. Both positions must explain who bears the harm and what alternatives actually exist. My personal position remains: I do not want violence to be our solution.

Emergency powers also need an ending. When a threat recedes, measures justified as temporary protection must not quietly become permanent authority. Otherwise a movement can reproduce the domination it opposed.

What the law distinguishes

Denmark's Penal Code separates *nødværge* in §13, concerning necessary and limited defence against an ongoing or imminent unlawful attack, from *nødret* in §14, concerning otherwise punishable acts needed to avert threatened harm, provided the offence is of comparatively minor significance. Section 253 imposes a qualified duty to assist someone in evident danger to life where this is possible without particular danger or sacrifice to oneself or others. These are distinct rules about particular situations, not a general legal permission to wage rebellion. Official text, §§13–14 (https://www.retsinformation.dk/api/pdf/251053#page=5); §253 (https://www.retsinformation.dk/api/pdf/251053#page=57).

The world we choose

My destination is not a world without disagreement, anger or competition. People might still choose combat sports, knowing that consent and rules do not remove the possibility of injury. What I reject is a social order that treats injury, threats and domination as normal ways of settling disagreements.

We should not ask victims of today's violence to behave as if tomorrow's society already exists. But emergency responses cannot become the whole design of that society. The work is also to build trustworthy ways to settle disputes, challenge power and protect people before an emergency arises.

That is what I want to remember beneath the mask: the cause, the means and the people who bear the consequences. I can oppose violence without asking others to accept oppression. No more violence. Not as a description of the present. As a future worth making possible.

— Dennis Hedegreen, still checking

RELATION MEMORY

NEARBY The Question May Be the Bug · Related epistemic caution: perceived significance or conviction cannot alone establish an explanation or intended justification.

NEARBY I Don’t Know · Related distinction between what a person believes or reports and what the evidence establishes.

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