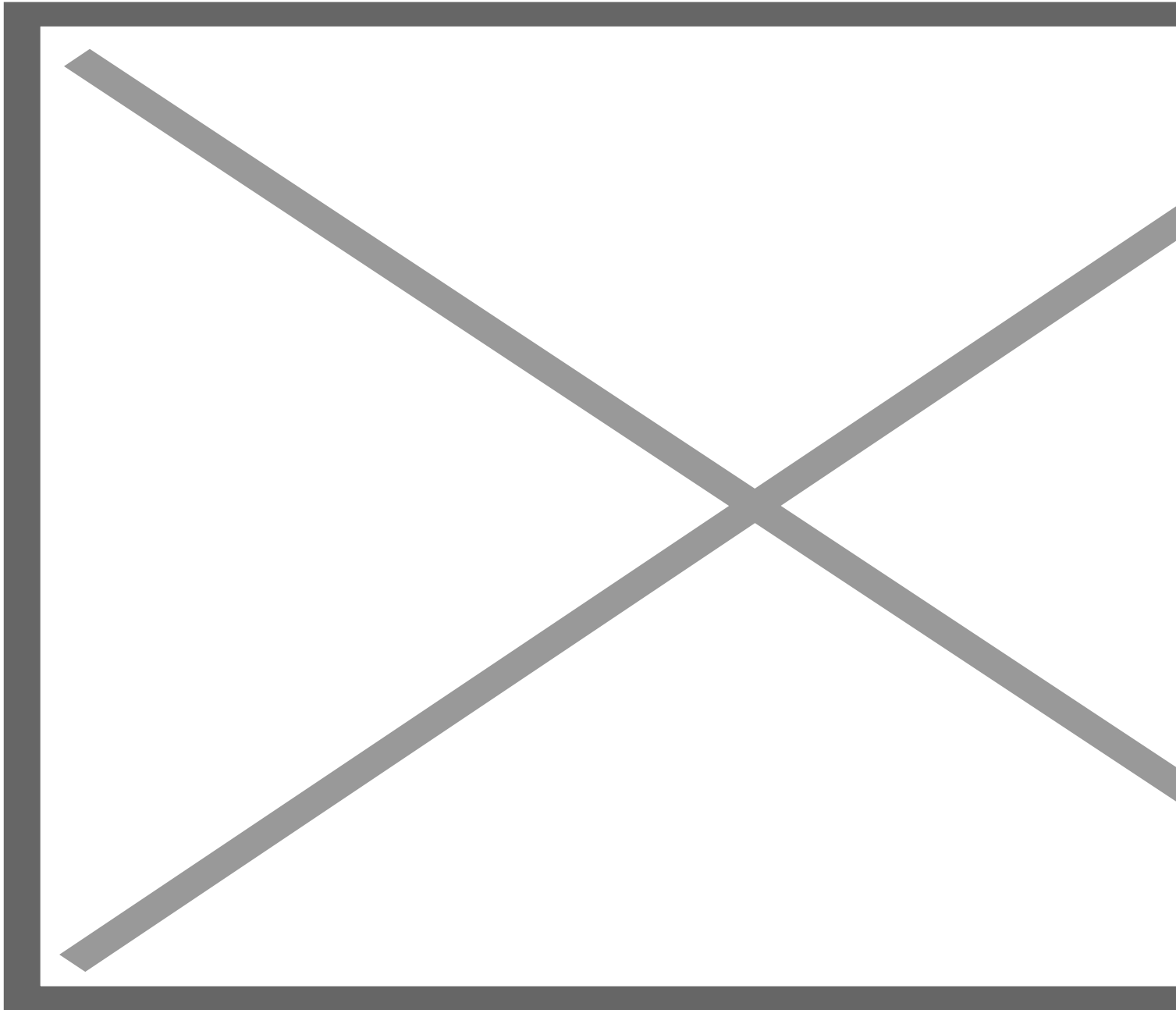


Spectator violence is a form of moral injury

Something critical has broken in the American psyche: Misanthropy has taken root.

by [Lilia Ellis](#)
April 28, 2026



US Secret Service agents respond near President Donald Trump during the White House Correspondents Dinner, Saturday, April 25, 2026, in Washington. (AP Photo / Alex Brandon)

Ours is the age of exceptional violence. Violent crime is at historic lows, murder rates are dropping across the country, and yet, acts of public violence which would have once been shocking are now regular. On Saturday evening, a gunman attacked the White House Correspondent's Dinner in an attempt to assassinate President Trump. What followed was perfectly unsurprising. Within minutes, accounts on social media were spreading absurd conspiracy theories about a "staged" attack, just as they had following previous assassination attempts on the President. Others wished for more shootings. Strikingly, the alleged gunman's manifesto cites his Christian faith and desire to protect the oppressed as his motives; twisted as his logic may be, he is hardly alone in endorsing political violence for these reasons. A national dynamic like this would have been unthinkable just ten years ago. Now, assassination attempts, conspiracy, and death wishes are part of the fabric of public life. Something critical has broken in the American psyche.

We have long known the degrading effects of violence. In her classic essay "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force" French philosopher Simone Weil makes the point that violence is dehumanizing to all, not just those on its receiving end: "force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates." Force, Weil says, turns people into things. It turns the victim into an object (in the most extreme case, a corpse) and makes the wielder lose their humanity. She points out that it is almost impossible to use force with moderation; violence pulls us on further and further into the extremes. As Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, "all who take the sword will die by the sword."

Weil, though, could not have envisioned what the social media age would mean for our relationship to force. The contemporary landscape has blurred the line between wielder, victim, and spectator. Killers write detailed manifestos filled with meme jokes and social media references; assassins like Luigi Mangione receive thousands of letters from their social media fans; and mobs of internet users on the far-left and far-right alike craft detailed conspiracy theories that simultaneously deny and celebrate violent acts. The social media users who stay at home receive their share of dehumanization whenever they celebrate or deny violence. And with posts dreaming up new targets and romanticizing killers, they certainly will bear part of the blame for inspiring the next killing. Social media gives the illusion of separation, but online actions have real world consequences, and there is no simple way to wash one's hands clean. When political violence becomes a spectator sport, is it really surprising that new killers keep cropping up?

Even when we close our browsers and delete our accounts, violence still has a hold over us. It wounds the soul to live through a time when senseless violence is a regular and even celebrated facet of life. [An NPR poll last October](#) found that 30 percent of Americans (a similar share among Republicans and Democrats) believe political violence may be necessary to fix their country's ills. No longer is political violence relegated to the fringes. A widespread pattern of violence, celebration, and conspiracy makes it harder to trust our fellow citizens and more bent on hating those who are not like us. And because we are social beings, created to love one another, every act of violence and every celebration pulls us from our nature. It is divisive and dangerous, yes, but it is also what psychologists call moral injury: a wound to our sense of moral goodness. We are not meant to watch attempted killing after attempted killing play out before our eyes on 24/7 news feeds. Extraordinary violence overwhelms.

America's growing appetite for violence is part of a larger breakdown in its moral fabric. The times *feel* overwhelming, but the feeling is reflected in real problems. Pew Research Center's work shows Americans' trust in one another is near all-time lows; US Census data shows a steady decline in rates of volunteering for charities; research by Lending Tree found that nearly 30 percent of Americans admit to stealing items at self-checkout (highest among young people). Misanthropy is spreading roots. As a consequence, Americans are getting lonelier and lonelier, and more and more miserable. We are not even surprised reading statistics about record high rates of mental illness, or record low percentages of Americans who feel hopeful about their future. How

can we have a common democracy when we no longer believe we owe things to each other? How can we go about our lives peaceably when a third of the people in this country believe they have the right to become judge, jury, and executioner for their political enemies?

Ironically, highly visible political violence has taken center stage in public life at precisely the time that silent, all-too-ordinary violence is reaching a new peak. Since the Trump administration cut life-saving AIDS treatment funds, [AIDS has resurged in Zambia](#) and elsewhere. Hundreds of thousands of people will potentially die. The story out of Zambia was tucked into the back pages of the *New York Times*; complex policy consequences halfway across the world do not fit into clickbait headlines or 240-character tweets the way domestic death threats and conspiracy theories do. Reason, care, and nuance are rare birds indeed. Medieval scholastic theologians frequently spoke of “habits of the soul,” arguing that our behavior today shapes how we live tomorrow. When we build up our collective capacity for anger, suspicion, and hatred, we ought not be surprised when compassion and reason wither away.

Of course, the soul’s habits work in both directions. When we choose evils, we become more evil; when we choose goods, we become more good. Nothing about declining moral standards is inevitable, but compassion and reason do need their vocal defenders. Christians, especially, ought to be moral exemplars. Jesus modeled what it is like to choose love in a world that rejects it, and his teachings remain as necessary as ever. As he teaches in the Sermon on the Plain in Luke’s Gospel: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.” We really do have to love everyone. Difficult as it may be, the love Jesus taught is our last, best chance to push back against the rising tide of hatred and brutality.

Extraordinary violence has become ordinary and normalized. It is the air we breathe. For that reason, it takes real effort to resist dehumanization. To fight the normalization of political violence, we must denounce it repeatedly and keep our humanity held high, whatever the circumstances. It is essential, not just for our democracy but for our souls.