

AMERICAN POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND THE PARADOX OF TOLERANCE Relativism, Language, and the Fragility of Democratic Life

Lorenzo Gallo

1. A Murder That Reveals More Than It Explains

The assassination of Charlie Kirk in September 2025 shocked the United States not only because a young political activist was killed during a public speech but also because of the moral confusion that followed. Almost immediately, the event split public opinion into opposing narratives. For some, Kirk became a martyr to free speech; for others, he was portrayed as a provocative figure whose death was explained, if not tacitly justified, by the controversial climate he allegedly helped create.

What proved most disturbing was not disagreement itself, which is inherent in democratic life, but the growing inability to identify the act clearly for what it was: a serious moral evil. When the violent removal of a political opponent becomes morally ambiguous, society has already lost a common ethical language. The deeper question, therefore, is not only who committed the crime but also what cultural conditions made such violence seem acceptable.

A similar moral breakdown is evident in the two assassination cases of René Good and Alex Petti, a mother of three and a widow, and a respected practicing nurse, respectively, reportedly killed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. This double event, despite its legal and political complexity, has been interpreted by some not simply as a tragedy to mourn, but as an “understandable” outcome of escalating social conflict. What makes these episodes especially troubling is the emerging cultural tendency to interpret lethal force as a form of moral communication: violence is no longer simply condemned, but explained as justified, even necessary, within ideological struggle.

When the state itself—or those acting under its authority—becomes implicated in politically charged acts, the danger intensifies. The line between law enforcement and factional hostility becomes blurred. Democracy cannot endure when the language of rights is

replaced by the logic of elimination and civic life is reorganized around enemies rather than fellow citizens.

2. Polarization and the Collapse of Dialogue

The reactions following these assassinations, especially that of Charlie Kirk, reveal the deep polarization shaping contemporary American society. Political leaders accused one another of inciting hatred; institutions disciplined employees for making controversial statements; and social media amplified outrage, leaving little space for reflection.

Against this backdrop, a significantly different moral voice emerged from religious witnesses who emphasized restraint, dialogue, and forgiveness. Notably, Kirk’s widow, Erika Kirk, gave a poignant public testimony in which she forgave her husband’s assassin during the funeral rites. Her words sharply contrasted with the surrounding rhetoric of retaliation and resentment. They expressed a moral vision that is increasingly rare in today’s political discourse, one in which violence is never justified by grievances and forgiveness is seen not as weakness but as strength.

3. A Cultural Shift Beneath the Surface

To understand how political violence becomes believable, one must look beyond immediate events to deeper cultural changes. Western societies today are not just changing quickly; they are experiencing a shift in their core beliefs about truth, freedom, and the human person.

Moral norms, once seen as objective and based on reason, are increasingly viewed as contingent, negotiated, or self-made. This shift has philosophical roots in ideas that emphasize will over reason and self-creation over human nature.

The consequences are profound. When moral truth is relativized, violence loses its absolute prohibition and becomes susceptible to ideological justification.

As Fyodor Dostoevsky warned with prophetic insight and clarity, “If there is no God, everything is permitted”.¹

4. Relativism and the Transformation of Tolerance

Within this cultural context, tolerance has undergone a significant transformation. Historically understood as a virtue enabling peaceful coexistence amid disagreement, tolerance is now often reinterpreted as unconditional acceptance of all views—except those that claim objective truth.

Joseph Ratzinger warned that a culture which rejects truth ultimately produces new forms of coercion, enforcing relativism as an unquestioned norm.² Detached from truth, tolerance loses its moral foundation and becomes unable to distinguish persuasion from coercion.

Karl Popper, although not a religious thinker, arrived at a similar conclusion in what he called the “paradox of tolerance”.³ A society that values tolerance cannot endlessly tolerate movements that aim to destroy the very conditions of tolerance. If tolerance turns into a refusal to defend moral boundaries, it ultimately leads to its own destruction.

Political violence, therefore, does not merely contradict tolerance; it often emerges where tolerance has already lost its ethical meaning.

5. Language, Technology, and the Erosion of Meaning

Political violence is rarely spontaneous; it is often prepared by the corruption of language. George Orwell famously observed that “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought”.⁴

In the digital age, this insight has become even more relevant. Social media platforms, guided by engagement algorithms, split public discourse into isolated echo chambers where disagreement is seen as a threat.

In such an environment, words stop serving as bridges and instead become

weapons. The basic ideas of justice, freedom, and dignity are used with incompatible meanings. The outcome is not just misunderstanding but moral confusion. As Dominic Preziosi has argued, when shared language breaks down, citizens stop being speakers and become enemies.⁵

Technology intensifies this dynamic by surrounding individuals with personalized informational ecosystems. What seems like empowerment often leads to isolation, reinforcing the illusion that one's perspective is the whole of reality.

This fragmentation is reinforced by a broader sociological trend identified by Robert N. Bellah and his colleagues. In *Habits of the Heart*, they described the rise of "expressive individualism," a moral outlook in which personal autonomy becomes the primary source of meaning and the fulfillment of obligations.⁶ Bellah noted that America was caught in a harmful paradox: a culture that praises individual freedom, no longer grounded in a shared morality, risks weakening the social bonds needed to sustain it. As shared moral language declines, public life becomes more vulnerable to polarization, resentment, and ultimately violence.

6. The American Vision and Its Challenge

The current crisis sharply contrasts with the vision of political life set forth in the American founding. The Declaration of Independence grounds political rights in a moral order that precedes the state, affirming that all individuals are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights.⁷ In this view, human dignity is not given by political authority but acknowledged by it. Freedom of speech requires a moral culture that can handle disagreement without force. The American constitutional tradition holds that liberty depends on virtue and cannot exist without it.

Political violence indicates the collapse of this vision. It shows the failure of reason, language, and shared moral values. When persuasion turns into force, opponents are no longer fellow citizens but hurdles to remove.

Yet even during moments of crisis, other possibilities stay visible. Acts of forgiveness and restraint act as signs that there's still another moral horizon open, as shown in the testimony of Charlie Kirk's widow.



7. Recent Developments: Fear, Security, and the Temptation to Use Coercion

These dynamics extend beyond individual acts of violence and increasingly shape public policy.

Recent debates over immigration policy reveal how fear and polarization influence political decisions. Proposals to expand large detention centers, already underway, capable of holding thousands of migrants for extended periods⁸, similar to Japanese detention camps during WWII, have raised serious ethical concerns. Religious leaders, including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, have warned that such measures could normalize practices that undermine human dignity.⁹

A parallel dynamic is evident in international affairs. Preventive military actions conducted by the United States and Israel against Iranian targets have prompted warnings from diplomatic and religious authorities. Cardinal Pietro Parolin has cautioned that such strategies risk destabilizing the framework of international law.¹⁰ Pope Leo XIV has likewise stressed that war must not be regarded as an acceptable means of resolving political disputes when peaceful alternatives remain possible.¹¹

These developments indicate that the paradox of tolerance goes beyond cultural debate and affects how political power is exercised. A society that sees security mainly as removing supposed threats legitimizes increasingly coercive actions against perceived political enemies, such as migrants and foreign nations.

For this reason, the Christian moral tradition insists that the defense of social order must remain inseparable from the protection of human dignity. The Second Vatican Council teaches that indiscriminate violence against populations constitutes a grave moral evil¹², while the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that the use of force must remain subject to strict moral limits.¹³

6. Conclusion: Democracy Between Speech and Violence

The assassination of Charlie Kirk may be remembered not only as a tragic act of political violence but as a revealing moment in the moral history of contemporary democracy. Violence does not arise in a vacuum; it is often the culmination

of a process in which truth is obscured, language is corrupted, and tolerance is redefined.

When shared moral language disappears, disagreement ceases to be a form of civic engagement and becomes a struggle for dominance. Recent debates over immigration and military policy show that these patterns go beyond personal relationships and increasingly influence how political authority is exercised.

The future of democratic life depends less on procedural reforms than on the recovery of its moral foundations: a commitment to truth, responsible dialogue, and recognition of the inherent dignity of every person. Institutions can regulate power, but they cannot generate the moral culture that sustains them.

If democratic societies are to preserve the primacy of the ballot over the bullet, they must seriously consider how to restore the ethical conditions that make freedom meaningful. Without such a renewal, neither tolerance nor democracy can endure.

NOTES

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 589.
2. Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 18–21.
3. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1945), chap. 7, note 4.
4. George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 348.
5. Dominic Preziosi, “Charlie Kirk and the Corruption of Political Language,” online article, September 17, 2025.
6. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 142–163.
7. *The Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776.
8. See reporting on U.S. immigration detention expansion proposals, including plans for large-scale facilities capable of holding thousands of migrants, in major outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Associated Press*, and *Reuters* (2025–2026).
9. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Letter on the Protection of Migrants and Asylum Seekers* (Washington, DC, 2026).

10. Pietro Parolin, *Vatican Secretariat of State, briefing on Middle East tensions*, 2026.
11. Leo XIV, *Angelus Address on Peace and International Responsibility*, Vatican City, 2026.
12. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 80.
13. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§2307–2317.

Bibliography

- Bellah, Robert N., et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by David McDuff. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Leo XIV. *Angelus Address on Peace and International Responsibility*. Vatican City, 2026.
- Orwell, George. “Politics and the English Language.” In *Essays*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.
- Parolin, Pietro. *Remarks on Escalating Middle East Tensions*. Vatican Secretariat of State Briefing, 2026.
- Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. London: Routledge, 1945.
- Preziosi, Dominic. “Charlie Kirk and the Corruption of Political Language.” September 17, 2025.
- Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes*. Vatican City, 1965.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Letter on the Protection of Migrants and Asylum Seekers*. Washington, DC, 2026.
- The United States of America. *The Declaration of Independence*. July 4, 1776.
- Major U.S. media outlets (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Associated Press*, *Reuters*). Coverage of immigration detention expansion proposals, 2025–2026.