

# Cultural Daily

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## America Loves a Bully

Adam Leipzig · Sunday, March 18th, 2012

Joan Graves, head of the MPAA's ratings board, [writing to defend the R rating](#) for the film *Bully*, has said, "Our ratings reflect how we believe a majority of American parents, not just from large cities on the coasts but everywhere in between, would rate a film."

She's probably right. That scares the hell out of me.

Let's be honest about why a movie with a half-dozen "bad" words or a nipple-slip gets rated R, while horrific violence routinely earns a PG-13.

We Americans say we abhor violence, but we're really quite comfortable with it. Violence has always been a signal part of American society and yes, to some extent it's a Red State/Blue State issue.

Our history of violence goes a long way back, to the Revolutionary War that incepted our nation, and continuing through the many military actions our country has taken over the years. Yes, other countries were founded with a war, and many have engaged in military actions on foreign shores. But most countries have not engaged in civil wars, as America did, for four long, bloody years; we fought ourselves over issues that, in some ways, parallel today's politics, with the southeast at odds with the northeast. America's Civil War not only had the [highest number of casualties of any US war](#), but had the highest number of deaths as a percentage of our population: six times more deadly than World War II, the next most deadly war in terms of US casualties.

There's an inherent violence in the American swagger, the bellicose way we approach negotiations, our armies of litigious lawyers, and the political clout of the gun rights lobby. [Americans own more guns per capita](#) than people of any other nation, and while guns may or may not be for protection and sport, as the NRA claims, there's no arguing that the gun is the most compact and effective mechanism of violence ever devised.

Here's the Red/Blue divide.

According to a [recent poll](#), [Republicans](#) heavily favor US military action against Iran, strong military spending and keeping America's military presence overseas ([America has a military presence in 148 nations](#), three-quarters of the countries in the world). Democrats oppose all of these things. To draw us back to *Bully*, the same people who object to movie F-bombs don't mind real bombs; they also want to limit women's reproductive rights, some are OK with forced trans-vaginal ultrasound, most oppose gay marriage, and historically they have not raised objections to plenty of violence in our entertainment.

America's dominant religious traditions have long accepted violence but deplored sexuality and certain kinds of speech. The evangelical Christian/Tea Party/Red State bloc has its roots in Puritanism, which taught that anything pleasurable was the devil's work – sex and music

especially. The Right is comfortable censoring sex and language, but not violence, because sex and language transgress their preferred religious ethic while violence does not. The Right doesn't feel violence will undermine our way of life – and their method of dealing with it is generally more violence. On the other hand, sex and language (all the “bad” words relate to sex) feel truly threatening to them: witness the battles over gay marriage.

So what should we do about our movie ratings system? I believe parents should be able to make informed decisions about what their children see. I believe our entertainment affects us. I believe movies, plays, art, and music can uplift, inform and heal. But if they can heal, they can also harm. That's why I'd keep most violence away from kids, and be far more open about language and sexuality – the aspects of being human that are self-expressive and creative, as opposed to destructive.

In America, throughout our history as well as today, violence barely causes a ripple, while sex and language provoke tidal waves. That's what really scares the hell out of me.

*Image from the film Bully, courtesy The Weinstein Company.*

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