

apply to the use of force. Yet ultimately decisions about when to use force must rest with the politicians. They are still the only people who can declare war on external enemies; they are the only people who can call in the police on internal ones.

Weber’s fear was that this would encourage politicians to be irresponsible in their use of violence. He meant two things by this. One form of irresponsibility is to shy away from violence altogether, in the hope that politics can do without it. Politicians might start to believe that politics is a reasonable, rule-governed, morally acceptable activity. It isn’t. Sometimes politicians have to do nasty things because every state will face real threats to its peace and security. The people who always play by the rules are either saints or bureaucrats, and Weber was adamant that both saints and bureaucrats make bad politicians. (He thought the professions that made the best politicians were lawyers and journalists, since their members are used to twisting the rules to suit their own purposes.)

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The other form of irresponsibility, however, is to over-indulge in violence, on the grounds that the politician is not performing the violence him- or herself. It is being done in the name of the state, for some higher purpose that transcends mere individual responsibility. Politicians who think like this can end up wallowing in violence since they do not personally have to face the consequences: it is their decision but it’s not their violence, because the machinery of the state does all the dirty work. Weber wanted politicians to remember that if it’s their decision, it is their violence. Politicians can’t evade responsibility for the nasty stuff they do by pleading politics, even though it was politics that made them do it.

This is the dilemma of ‘dirty hands’. Politics is impossible if you