Ladies and gentlemen,

Abraham Lincoln once said: ‘It is hard to lead a cavalry charge if you think you look funny on a horse.’ It takes belief and faith, it takes self-confidence and persistence, to lead a cavalry charge against injustice – and John Lewis has displayed all of those qualities. He has led many charges. I have for a long time been intensely interested in American politics, the civil rights struggle, and the rise of an incredibly strong field of African-American politicians and activists – from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Jesse Jackson, Jr.; from Andrew Young to Barack Obama to, indeed, John Lewis, and so many others. It is a great honor for me to stand here next to one of these greats, a true hero.

‘A man who won’t die for something is not fit to live,’ said Martin Luther King, Jr. But should a man – or woman – also be willing to kill for something? In short: Can it ever be right to use violence? On this day committed to non-violence, it is my task to ask that uncomfortable question.

Let us imagine three models as we approach this question:

First, we have the total renunciation of violence. This can be instrumental and pragmatic in nature, based on a belief that such a stance is the one that eventually brings the best results for mankind – or the greatest good for the greatest number, to use the utilitarian maxim. It can also be based on a belief in personal virtue, such as the Stoic ideal of tranquility or undisturbedness; in other words, it can be a way of living that one aspires to, and wants to inspire in others – certainly Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. both come to mind, as does John Lewis. Or it can be deontological, meaning that it is built on a sense of absolute duty: a duty not to kill, be that a duty to God or to other human beings – or both. Indeed, all of these approaches can be religiously based or secular; whatever their origin and motivation, we often call such views pacifist.

Then, we have the belief that willingness to use violence constitutes the only realistic course to a stable, if not peaceful world. This view, admittedly more often instrumental than based on principle or virtue, can also be grounded in religious belief, most clearly in the Christian teaching of original sin: that human beings are such that violence or the threat of violence is oftentimes needed to maintain stability, preserve power, or prepare for the worst in terms of totalitarian or terrorist onslaughts. This view, which comes in many shapes and forms, often goes by the name of political realism, and a version of it was famously held by Reinhold Niebuhr, the American theologian who has inspired many American politicians. It is sometimes labeled ‘hawkish,’ and indeed it can come across as militaristic and almost amoral in its willingness to flout everyday standards of ethics for the sake of power or stability. Many realists themselves, though, will insist that they do not glorify violence, but merely seek to live in accordance with the demands of this world.

In between the two we find the view that goes by the name of ‘just war,’ the view that war is indeed morally deeply problematic, yet can sometimes be employed for the sake of justice, to fight the great evil of injustice, as long as proper restraint is shown. To many it is a scary, almost immoral concept –

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1 Slightly edited, October 2011.
2 Henrik Syse is Senior researcher at PRIO and Editor of Journal of Military Ethics
in a way worse than realism – ripe to be exploited by those wishing to cloak their greed for power behind a moral façade. To others, it simply makes no sense: how can something bad be just? Can there be a just war? Would that not be akin to ‘noble theft’ or ‘wonderful adultery’? But the many thinkers who have contributed to the idea of just war, including one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s greatest inspirations, Saint Augustine, insisted that the two can go together: that we can use violence, not for the sake of preservation of power, but for the sake of justice and in the spirit of love.

And so, that is the question I am posing today: Within the vista drawn up for us today by John Lewis, is there any room for justified violence? Or should we eschew violence altogether, either from principle, because of virtue, as a witness to the world, or simply because we believe that the world becomes a better place through an insistence, even if unilateral, on non-violence?

‘Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that,’ said Dr. King. ‘Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that,’ he added. But can the use of armed force be driven by love, by an unselfish spirit, and by a pure concern for the other? Or, to pose the question slightly differently and more realistically: Even if such pure motivations may be unrealistic and hard to come by, could one imagine a world where we can intervene in Libya, in the Balkans, even in Afghanistan, in a way that conforms to moral principle and does less harm than good – in short, that preserves the moral ideals held by John Lewis?

Let me make this problem even more difficult for you. They say that there are two human beings on this planet who wake up every morning with a tortured conscience, not because they commanded armies to use armed force, but because they did not: then-Vice Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, and then-President of the United States Bill Clinton. John Lewis has met them both, and knows at least one of them well. Many of us admire both of these figures for much of what they did and said. But in the spring of 1994 they failed, along with so many others, to appreciate fully the drama that was unfolding in Rwanda, as bands of Hutu militias and civilians gradually started what became one of the worst acts of genocide in the post-Cold War world.

The case is difficult. What if we had sent troops there? What if 20,000 soldiers from the United States, Norway, and other countries had flowed into Rwanda – and, say, 500 of them had died, of which, say, 30 were Norwegian youngsters, killed with Machete knives – and that 50,000 mostly Tutsi civilians had been massacred, as opposed to the 500,000 or more that we know today actually died? Does anyone in this room believe that we would have called it a success? Would we have said that violence turned out to be the solution? I dare say not.

And therein lies the great problem. Even if we believe that a willingness to employ armed force can sometimes represent the only solution to protracted conflict, and can be carried out in a way that respects those rules that flow from the just war tradition, the use of armed force is always messy, deadly, and costly.

I say this with a two-pronged intention, both of them related to what John Lewis has said. Firstly, ethically speaking, it seems – arguably – that we are sometimes forced in our world to at least contemplate the use of armed force. But when we do so, we must be honest about its possible consequences, clear about our intentions, and committed to our principles. The United States’
involvement in Iraq from 2003, which I know Congressman Lewis opposed, seems to have failed on all these counts.

But secondly, and even more importantly, those of us who would have it that force can sometimes be used for a good purpose, must be clear about its last-resort character. An old saying insists that ‘If the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.’ or to put it into our context: ‘If the only tool you see as really representing determined action against evil is the use of armed force, then every problem will give you an excuse to use it.’ How often did we not hear, before the Iraq invasion of 2003 that we could not stand idly by and do nothing? All alternative ways at maneuvering oneself out of a terribly difficult stand-off with Saddam Hussein, was seen indeed as doing ‘nothing’. Non-violence was seen as equivalent to non-action!

Our time needs a whole new respect for, and also a strengthened research interest in, non-violence, even among – or maybe especially among – those who are not themselves pacifist. We need not least to learn more, I believe, from small-scale and regional successes in building peace, and see what lessons they carry for other stages, and the global stage. We need to invest much more in understanding the possibilities of non-violence, while at the same time not abandoning the standards that must guide the use of armed force, in those cases where we are forced to employ it. This schizophrenia is well illustrated by PRIO: a research institute which has as one if its stated goals to do research on non-violent transformation of conflict and the building of security by non-violent means, yet hosts a Journal of Military Ethics and publishes books on the right use of armed force. It is an institute committed to its founders’ vision of a more peaceful world, and an opposition to the power of what US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, himself a military man, 50 years ago described as the threat of the military-industrial complex; yet it also houses people who believe that NATO and other regional alliances dedicated to military defense can play a constructive role in combating violence and building the peace that we all seek.

The problem, of course, is that weapons, seemingly, always speak the loudest, and drown out other voices. Indeed, as I sat in this very building just a bit more than two months ago, my colleagues and I were disturbed by probably the loudest bang I have ever heard – on July 22, just a few blocks from here. Yet, within a few days of that monstrous thunder, that sound was overshadowed and made inaudible by flowers, the holding of hands, prayers, and strong words committed to non-violence. Indeed, non-violence can drown out terror and evil.

As Benjamin Franklin said: ‘We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.’ That is a crucial lesson from the non-violent fight of John Lewis, and it is a lesson we must never forget as we together strive – pacifists and those of us who believe that force can be used justly – for a more peaceful world.