Students are rightly puzzled by the explanations of the *argumentum ad baculum* they meet in many logic texts. They are told “The *argumentum ad baculum* is the fallacy committed when one appeals to force or the threat of force to cause acceptance of a conclusion”, and that “the use or threat of 'strong-arm' methods to coerce political opponents provide contemporary examples of this fallacy.” The student is often given examples of this sort:

I have exhausted my patience with you, Mr. Findley. I have done all I can to persuade you that selling the plans for the bombsight to my government would be the right thing for you to do. I'm afraid you now leave me no choice. Let me tell you this, if you do not give us the plans, your crippled wife, you blind daughter, and your poor bedridden mother will be — shall we say — sent to happier place. Now what do you say, American pig?  

But such explanations (and examples) are puzzling. How can physical force or the threat thereof be an argument? What are the premises? And if an argument, why a fallacy? If someone “argues” that I should turn over the plans to a bombsight or else he will kill my family, why would it be illogical for me to do so?

In this paper I will defend the view that there is indeed a fallacy *argumentum ad baculum*, but that its nature has been misunderstood. It has been misunderstood because people have focused upon what I shall call direct threats rather than indirect scare tactics. I want to clarify the nature of this fallacy, as I believe it is more prevalent and more insidious than most logicians suspect.

I will begin by reviewing a few basic concepts. None of the definitions I give are very novel or controversial; they are all straight out of mundane logic texts.

An argument is a set of premises together with a conclusion. A fallacy is just a logically flawed argument. Any argument is either logically
good or else it is fallacious. (By “logically good” I mean either
deductively valid or inductively strong. If the reader wishes to add a
third type of evidential relation, such as “retroductive-plausibility” he is
free to do so.)

Arguments are used to do various things. The paradigm use of an
argument is to persuade the listener that the conclusion is true. But one
can use an argument to explain why a certain conclusion is true (where
the listeners are antecedently convinced that the conclusion is true).
One can use an argument to joke, as Lewis Carroll was wont to do. And
one can use an argument to cause the listener to act.

Of special importance for our discussion is the so-called practical
syllogism, which can be roughly formulated as follows:

(1) Act A would accomplish X’s goal better than the alternatives
open to X.

(2) X wants to accomplish his goal.

X ought to do A.

There is some controversy about the logical status of the practical
syllogism. In order to avoid begging some important questions, I will
assume that the practical syllogism is logically good. But I will insist
that we recognize how uninformative this argument is. The “ought” in
the conclusion is simply the prudential “ought” not “ought” in any
moral sense. (You morally ought not murder people even if it benefits
you.) With practical syllogism, one should pay close attention to detect
any equivocation in the use of the word “ought”.

Quite often, life is logically sweet: we attempt to cause action by
persuading with a logically good argument. But also quite often, we use
nonarguments to cause action. By “nonargument” I mean anything
from pushes and shoves to shouts to statements. For example, I may
stop my child from reaching for an electric cord by pulling her away
from it, or by shouting “No!” at the top of my lungs, or by making the
statement that electrical current can hurt her.

Using a nonargument to cause (or stop) action is good or bad
depending upon motives and circumstances. I don’t want to spend more
time on ethical issues than is necessary; however, clarity about these
matters will prove useful in what follows.

Using a nonargument is morally justified only if certain obvious
conditions are met. First, the harm done must be commensurate with
the good which results from the action. Thus, a slap may be justified to
stop my child from swallowing a tack, but striking her with a stick