

# Civil resistance and the language of power

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[Jack DuVall](#) [1] 19 November 2010

“If you want to build a ship, don’t gather your people and ask them to provide wood, prepare tools, assign tasks. Call them together and raise in their minds the longing for the endless sea.” – Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

### ***Who has power?***

One of the first people who understood how power could be produced by civil resistance was the great African-American abolitionist, [Frederick Douglass](#) [2]. In the years of his work before the American Civil War, which was an age of universal, brutalizing racism, even white abolitionists were dismissed as dreamers. But Douglass was no dreamer. He operated with cold, furious logic. The power of oppressors “concedes nothing and it never will,” he said. You can find the “exact measure” of injustice that will be imposed on people, he explained, by measuring how much they will submit to. And the injustice will go on until it is resisted. “The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress,” he declared.

Douglass saw that if submission were replaced by civil resistance, the people could pierce the shroud of oppression, shifting power in a way that few in the world would have comprehended. A half-century later, in the course of enjoining Russians to resist military conscription, Leo Tolstoy came to the conclusion that “public opinion” would, in the future, “change the whole structure of life” and make violence “superfluous.” In other words, what people believed and what they did to act on those beliefs could change the conditions they faced, and therefore violent intervention on behalf of change would be unnecessary.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Mohandas Gandhi read Tolstoy avidly, corresponded with him, and was galvanized by news reports of civil resistance against British rule in Ireland and against the Tsar’s rule in Russia. Experimenting, as he put it, with campaigns of nonviolent resistance against racist laws in South Africa and later against British rule in India, Gandhi expanded the repertoire of tactics that people could use to challenge oppression: tactics of protest such as petitions, marches and walk-outs; tactics of noncooperation, such as boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience; and even tactics of disruption, such as blockades and seizures of property.

### ***How are people roused?***

To enlist and unify the people involved in these campaigns, Gandhi summoned a durable, passionate commitment from millions of Indians to the cause of *swaraj*, or self-rule. He did this by listening to them to ensure that their beliefs and grievances were reflected in what his movement stood for, and by talking with them about the importance of the cause and why their action was essential. In other words, he gave them an argument, a proposition for them to consider. The core of it, as reflected in many different themes and ideas, was this: “The British are ruling this country for their own benefit, so why should we help them?”

Embedded in that simple proposition were three central ideas about the rationale for the movement for Indian independence, ideas that foreshadowed the same basic rationale for change used by leaders of later, successful movements that rallied mass participation elsewhere in the world. First, Gandhi identified who was responsible for India’s problems: the British, who had long tried to mollify Indians with the phony excuse that British control was benign. Second, Gandhi defined the reason

for what was wrong with India: the people were being governed unfairly, and they had no say in how they were governed. Third, he suggested that the people themselves, by tolerating the British as rulers, and by not resisting their rule, were facilitating the injustice that all Indians felt. Just as Frederick Douglass had done 70 years before, he told his people that the power to liberate them was in their own hands.

If the terms of your life are dictated by others, but if you have the power to revoke those terms, then the question of the moment is for no else but you to answer: Will you act? This is the existential moment facing every person living with oppression. Thirty years after India gained its independence, [Vaclav Havel](#) [3], the Czech theorist and leader of civil resistance, said that everyone who lives under tyranny but doesn't resist is living a lie, the lie that life is normal – and that everyone who resists instead lives “within the truth.” Everyone who tells the truth denies in principle a system based on lies, Havel argued, and therefore threatens that system “in its entirety.” And that is why totalitarian rulers have to arrest every dissident, as Havel himself was arrested, twelve years before he became president of his country.

Deciding to resist after those you trust have summoned you to act has changed the lives of millions, but it may be less momentous than continuing to resist. Strategic thinking about civil resistance can identify ways to minimize the risks of repression, yet people in many nonviolent movements have known that they were exchanging political dissent for personal jeopardy if arrest was possible. A few years ago, the American civil rights leader [James Lawson](#) [4] told me why he thought that so many of his colleagues were relentless despite the risk of arrests and beatings. He cited [Fannie Lou Hamer](#) [5], the leader of voter registration drives in Mississippi, who was pulled from her car by police one night, beaten almost to death, and after 30 days in the hospital, went immediately into another voter registration drive. “Why did she do that?”, Lawson asked me, and he answered: “Because she believed that if she kept working, the movement would succeed, and that if she didn't, the movement would fail.” Her sense of what would happen to herself had become inextricably tied to her sense of what would happen to the movement. Certitude about the cause is the key to resilience.

## ***Where do movements exist?***

In the late 1970's, the military junta that ruled Argentina fought leftists and dissidents with brutal tactics. Unmarked sedans would appear in the night in front of their houses, and they would be ‘disappeared’, never to be seen again. On April 30, 1977, fourteen ‘[mothers of the disappeared](#)’ [6] [7] went to the central square of Buenos Aires, in front of the presidential palace, and began to protest. They had one question: Where are our sons and daughters? The regime decided to let them march around the square, because arresting mothers might have angered others. But the mothers kept coming back, until they were a movement – which encouraged others opposed to the violence and incompetence of the regime to move into active resistance until eventually, under the stress of many events, Argentina's dictatorship disintegrated.

Where did this movement start? In a public square in Buenos Aires? No, in the minds of the fourteen Argentine mothers who conceived a difficult question to pose to the generals who ran the country. Some who enjoin nonviolence as a response to injustice suggest that the behavior of people in conflicts must be converted, from belligerence to acceptance of others' humanity, for nonviolent power to emerge. But behavior is first of all a function of volition: What I decide to do, in the precinct of my own thinking, is the impetus for my action. “Any response that places man in the center of our current worries,” [Hannah Arendt](#) [8] argued, “and suggests he must be changed before any relief is to be found is profoundly unpolitical. For at the center of politics lies concern for the world.”

To turn the people's concern into action, [Abraham Lincoln](#) [9] said that we must begin with “reason – cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason.” Lincoln knew that the content of his cause, saving the union of American states, had to be instilled in the motives and acts of the people. “With public sentiment, nothing can fail,” he said, “without it, nothing can succeed.” At a memorial service when Lincoln was assassinated, the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson said of Americans that Lincoln had “the thought of their minds articulated by his tongue.”

In our time, the philosopher John Rawls insisted that every citizen has “a duty of civility to appeal to

public reason.” This is what Gandhi, Vaclev Havel, Corazon Aquino, Desmond Tutu and other champions of civil resistance did – and in the process, they made Indians, Czechs, Filipinos, South Africans and many other peoples into conscious, dedicated pursuers of rights and democracy. People move their bodies once they move their minds.

## **Power from ends**

Today the leading democracies are home to political consultants who tell candidates running for public office that they should trigger voters’ emotions rather than wasting time on making arguments about policies much less ideas. Some of these consultants begin with biological explanations, insisting that language in politics should manipulate people’s reflexive feelings in order to push them into certain choices at the polls. But the history of civil resistance offers little support to these explanations of how political convictions are shaped and translated into loyalty or support for a campaign.

If we fail to reflect the real substance of a cause in the language used to recruit people to join that cause, we reduce language to propaganda. Those who would instrumentalize language and convert it into semaphores about transitory feelings do not recognize that it will enlist political fervor not if it blurs but if it crystallizes ideas about purpose, identity, nationhood and other concepts that resonate with people’s most deeply held beliefs – and therefore act causally on their development of commitment and certitude, which are the fuel for the rise and resilience of movements. Activate zeal for the ends of political action and you will draw power from those who are activated.

I came to this conclusion not only after noticing how the language of supposedly mature democracies has deteriorated into manipulating voters’ momentary likes and dislikes (so well represented by Facebook’s ever-present option to “like” every comment that appears on your “wall”), but also because I noticed that scholars and practitioners of nonviolent struggle have different views about how to teach or train those who are new to the subject. Is it possible to capture the essence of civil resistance in mechanical formulae about how to use tactics in particular circumstances? Should tactical action neglect to invoke a campaign’s core ideas and values or fail to telegraph the campaign’s purpose through that action? Can a campaign be effectively planned if its leaders assume that people are ready to be mobilized, without first ascertaining what the people think and how the content of the campaign’s goals can be expressed to represent that thinking?

The unconscious tendency to downgrade the language of a movement – from an expression of its primordial purpose in changing the existing political order, to a “message” that exploits listeners’ immediate discontent – is driven mainly by the assumption that a campaign or movement exists for the sole purpose of capturing political power as an end in itself, rather than as a means to the end of transforming society or the nation. If you capture power without first firing the minds and enlisting the work of those who will be stakeholders in the new order, you may have staged a *coup de main* (nonviolent or otherwise), but you will not have engaged the people in helping to exercise genuine democratic power.

Instrumentalizing language also tempts making a fatal strategic mistake in the effort to accomplish political change, either through movements of civil resistance or campaigns of conventional political action, and that mistake is breaking the linkage between means and ends. For civil resistance to work, it has to shred the legitimacy of power-holders whom it opposes and model a higher legitimacy based on representing the real aspirations of the people. But the fastest way to forsake that advantage is to resort to means that are not seen as legitimate.

No participant in a movement can “become the change you want to see” unless he or she takes action that is consistent with the political values and social vision held by the movement. That is not only an argument for nonviolent discipline (since violent resistance usually does not produce nonviolent order). It is also why the language of a campaign has to be based on rational propositions rather than deceptive or misleading allegations. If you lie your way to power, popular consent to your power is unlikely to survive the discovery of your deceit, and to believe otherwise is to make cynicism a justification for expediency. No campaign can represent people it misleads, because then their participation is based on false beliefs instead of shared ideas.

One common variation of the inconsistency between means and ends is found in how campaigns use language to channel the rage of those who are deprived of rights or live with inequalities. The political psychologist [Roy Eidelson](#) [10] argues that shared outrage has lasting political force when “it insists on explanations for what’s wrong and it seeks accountability for the wrongdoing.” In other words, popular passion can be summoned, but only by using rational arguments to define the changes that are sought as well as the vices to be overturned. In doing that, a movement does what the writer [Adam Gopnik](#) [11] says that Lincoln did: it “turns reason into a new kind of passion.”

If it would be heeded, the call for civil resistance must propose that a society or nation can be changed only as people join and remain with a movement to make it change. The power of the language that a movement employs, to call forth power from people who want their freedom, will come only as it invokes the ideas and exhibits the values at the root of their existence as a people.

In his last letter to Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy said that he felt it was possible that the work that Gandhi was doing, abjuring violent force, could lead to similar action by all the peoples of the world. In the paintings and photographs of him near the end of his life, Tolstoy looked like a prophet. In that letter to Gandhi, he became one. Tolstoy had no way to outline how he envisaged such power except through the language of his books and letters. Gandhi had no way to awaken the Indian people to the power they already possessed, and no way to teach them how to use it, except through the language he used to summon the people’s resolve to change their future.

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 About the author

Jack DuVall is Senior Counselor and Founding Director of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. He was the Executive Producer of the two-part Emmy-nominated PBS television series, “[A Force More Powerful](#) [12] ” and co-author of the [companion book](#) [13] of the same name (Palgrave/St. Martin’s Press 2001).

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