

Defiance, Not Terror

Supplanting Violence with Civic Resistance

**Remarks by Jack DuVall – State University of New York at Brockport
September 12, 2006**

Rising Up

Four months ago, a quarter million immigrants demonstrated in Los Angeles, to dramatize the contribution of undocumented workers to the U.S. economy. One newspaper interviewed a 54-year old Guatemalan house painter who was standing on the curb, watching the protest. "This is America," he said. "This is the first time in my life I have seen something like this. This is why everyone wants to be here."

That Guatemalan man identified the principle that gives democracy its staying power: The right of the people freely to express their minds, openly to seek relief from injustice, and fearlessly to hold government accountable for its action.

The immigrant protests challenged legislation making illegal immigration a serious crime. In spirit they reminded me of an event a hundred years ago -- a mass meeting convened in Johannesburg, South Africa, by Mohandas Gandhi, an Indian lawyer outraged by a new law requiring Indians to carry registration cards. "The Old Empire Theatre was packed from floor to ceiling," Gandhi later wrote. One speaker said they "must never yield a cowardly submission to such degrading legislation."

During a long campaign of noncooperation, Indians burned their registration cards, marched across borders, and thousands went to jail, Gandhi himself three times, to disrupt the laws' enforcement. In the eighth year of resistance, the laws were withdrawn. One piece of one empire of contempt for people's rights was erased, starting that night at the Empire Theatre. The date was September 11, 1906.

Gandhi said that he was influenced by the American writer Henry David Thoreau, whose essay, "On Civil Disobedience," had been published in 1849. Thoreau had said, "All men recognize...the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable." That echoed even bolder words spoken one year before by a one-term American congressman named Abraham Lincoln:

"Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the right to rise up and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better. This is a most valuable, a most sacred right, which we hope and believe is to liberate the world."

To apply this right in India, Gandhi returned home from South Africa and launched a great nonviolent movement against British rule. Millions marched, boycotted state monopolies, and quit state jobs. The scope of resistance sobered the few colonial leaders who understood what was happening. "England can hold India only by consent," said Sir Charles Innes, a provincial governor, "We can't rule it by the sword."

Gandhi's campaigns were the first stories of civic resistance reported worldwide by broadcast media. Ever since, the adoption of nonviolent action has accelerated. The Danes obstructed German occupiers in World War II by strikes and work slow-downs. African-Americans marched and boycotted until racial segregation was dissolved. Polish workers refused to leave their shipyards until they'd won the right to a free trade union.

Filipinos blocked a dictator's army units from attacking officers who had switched sides, and his regime was immobilized. Czechs, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under Soviet client regimes choked the streets of their capitals until their rulers called free elections. Black South Africans went on strike, boycotted businesses, and made their country ungovernable, until a new political system was established.

Six months ago, former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic died. *The New York Times* called him "a ruler of exceptional ruthlessness" who had created "a violence not seen in Europe since 1945." Five years ago, a nonviolent movement to dislodge Milosevic rallied Serbs to enforce a fair election. A million people converged on Belgrade, the military refused to crack down, and Milosevic had to resign.

Learning Defiance

These are not exceptional cases. In 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy in the last 35 years, nonviolent force was pivotal. People power opens the vise of arbitrary rule by disputing its legitimacy, escalating the cost of its operations, and splitting the ranks of its own defenders. Gandhi said that "the people, when they become conscious of their power, will have every right to take possession of what belongs to them."

Facing such power, repression often doesn't work. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt explained why. "Where commands are no longer obeyed, the means of violence are of no use...The sudden dramatic breakdown of power that ushers in revolutions reveals in a flash how civil obedience – to laws, to rulers, to institutions – is but the outward manifestation of support and consent." Lincoln had said, "No man is good enough to govern another man, without that other's consent." Now we know that no one is *capable* of ruling others without their consent, once they learn how to say no.

Two years ago, millions of Ukrainians learned how. The government of the outgoing president had given way to corruption and curbing dissent. In the midst of the campaign to replace him, the opposition candidate was poisoned. When vote fraud in the election on the scale of 2.8 million rigged ballots was found to favor the ruling party, a million Ukrainians came to the heart of Kyiv. Their planning and discipline impressed the military, and when orders came to crack down, the army and secret service refused. A new vote was ordered, the challenger won, and the Orange Revolution succeeded.

Last year, when millions of Lebanese took to the streets to demonstrate against Syrian occupation, many said they were inspired by the Orange Revolution. Suddenly autocrats all over the Middle East realized that they weren't exempt from people power. In Islamic countries generally, there are good precedents for nonviolent movements producing new civic power:

- In 1929, the Pashtun leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan founded his nonviolent "Servants of God" movement against British rule in what is now Pakistan. He

organized hundreds of villages and thousands of people, to boycott state stores and lie down in front of police lines holding the Koran.

- In 1985, in Sudan, weeks of nonviolent protests in Khartoum and Omdurman against the repressive rule of a dictator was capped by a general strike that paved the way for a bloodless coup.
- In 1987-88, in the first Palestinian Intifada, tens of thousands of civilians boycotted Israeli products, marched in demonstrations, refused to pay fees, and inspired military “refuseniks” in Israel to split public support for the occupation.

This year in Egypt, opposition parties boycotted parliamentary elections, and dissidents against authoritarian rulers in Iran, Tunisia, Eritrea and other Muslim societies are gaining confidence. The ranks of those turning to nonviolent defiance in the Islamic world are in fact far larger and more representative than those who turn to terrorism – because people power means people choosing freely how to think and live, and that urge is universal.

Means and Ends

Unfortunately we live in a world which still so worships the primacy and prerogatives of the state and which is so hypnotized by the spectacle of violence, that the evidence of what citizens can do is disregarded when it stares us in the face. Many believe that civic resistance isn't possible unless there is space for protest. But resistance isn't always overt or physical – a strike means not going to work, a boycott means not buying, and withholding fees or taxes means not paying.

Others insist that nonviolent action isn't possible if rulers are too repressive. But at the height of state violence against dissent in Argentina in the 1970s, a group of mothers of the disappeared surprised everyone by marching every week in the heart of Buenos Aires. The regime realized they couldn't arrest or beat up these women without alienating more people, so they were tolerated – and grew in number, and inspired other groups to organize. When fear receded, so did the regime's aura of invincibility. All governments face constraints on how they can act.

To be sure, defying a government that would jail you sooner than it would listen to you is a fateful transaction. About most transactions, Americans have a saying: “You get what you pay for.” If, instead of mobilizing the people to produce the kind of government which they want, you delegate the fight to an armed group which pays in blood to get what it wants, you may or may not get a government that listens to you. But history proves you will certainly get blood in the streets and civil strife.

“For me,” Gandhi said, “means and ends are practically identical.” Instinctively he followed Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a general law of nature.” If Kant and Gandhi were right, what does that suggest about the rationale for violence? Osama bin Laden says that “oppression...cannot be demolished except in a hail of bullets.” Lenin went further, saying that “real, nationwide terror” was needed to “reinvigorate” a country.

But since Lenin wrote those words, there has been no instance anywhere in which violent revolution or terror has liberated a people and launched a government

based on their consent. Gandhi saw the ineffectuality of violence first-hand. During an eleven-year period in just one Indian province, there were 101 violent incidents involving over a thousand terrorists. But none jeopardized British control of India. It was Gandhi who did that.

Violence circumvents the people. It uses the false assertion of the people's support without harnessing their action so as to demonstrate that support. It is action by a self-appointed few who subscribe to no standard of judgment not derived from certain fixed ideas. It is the work of the authoritarian mind. Terror is not the product of the people's power, and it almost never yields the people's rights.

The Market for Terror

The long litany of failure by terrorists on behalf of those they claim to represent is largely unknown in societies where they recruit new followers. So they are free to perpetuate the lie that only they know the way to freedom. On June 30 of this year, bin Laden said that the al Qaeda leader in Iraq, al-Zarqawi, had taught the world "practical lessons in how to take liberty by force...he taught humanity how to rebel against tyrants." And a few days later he told Iraqi jihadists, "you will put an end to...the injustice and the oppression. You will establish a just and true [government]."

But he also told them how they must fight: "Only iron can dent iron. Anyone who hopes to convince these apostates without weapons...is like a fool who tries to convince the wolves to stop preying on the cattle. It will never happen...except through war." Those who are mesmerized by the violence of their opponent are those who believe the claim that only war assures freedom.

Yet however the conflict is waged between terrorists and those whom they threaten, it would be a mistake to project the outcome solely by who brings the most iron to the arena. If that were true, terrorists wouldn't bother to win support and sympathy by appealing to popular grievances and calling for a new birth of freedom. The lure of terrorism is also its weakness: its ability to fight is not physical, it's political.

This week the White House released a new National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism. It concedes that "the principal terrorist enemy" has "ideological ends," and it argues that if freedom comes to the lands where terrorists operate, their cause will die. But there is not one persuasive sentence in this new National Strategy about how to respond to the ideological or political claims of terrorists. Instead the document bristles with priorities like these: "Attack terrorists and their capacity to operate," "deny terrorists entry to the United States," "deny weapons of mass destruction to rogue states and terrorist allies," and "eliminate physical safehavens."

Military action to quell terrorism may be necessary, but it will only reduce the immediate supply of terrorists, not the long-term political demand for what they do. In the world of oppressed people, there is a high demand for liberation. But in any market, the best way to reduce the demand for what your competitor does is to sell a better product or service. And the most effective liberation service that history offers is not terror or any form of violent insurrection, it's mass civic resistance – which has several advantages that are easily explained to those who want to be free:

(1) It has a far better record of freeing people: no one has ever been liberated by terror, but tens of millions have been liberated through nonviolent movements;

(2) People power involves all groups in liberating a nation, including women, minorities, workers and merchants, and not only young men with more testosterone than rational judgment;

(3) It doesn't depend on highly theatrical tactics and media coverage to try to make its enemies afraid, as if states with trillion-dollar armies could be frightened;

(4) It doesn't push its most courageous fighters to destroy themselves but salvages their experience and reinvests its manpower in more ingenious ways to continue the struggle.

(5) It does not have to glorify death. Bin Laden has said, "Death is truth." That reminds me of how a Serbian nonviolent leader explained why Milosevic and his regime lost the people's faith: "Their language smelled like death," he said. Nonviolent organizers know something that terrorists don't: Death isn't popular.

Terrorism will decline only insofar as its perceived necessity as a strategy for liberation is supplanted by other, more successful strategies – as the people of societies where terrorists now thrive marshal a new kind of force to liberate themselves. So any plan to reduce terrorism must include giving help to civic resisters in all these nations. Terrorism will recede as they succeed.

Two weeks ago I met a number of brave young nonviolent resisters in a Muslim nation in Asia governed by a dictator, whose regime's repression and corruption are also opposed by radical Islamists. There is a competition for liberation going on right now in that society. The radical Islamists tell the people: Don't believe these democratic groups, they will only deliver you from the dictator to the imperialists. But more than half of the women of that society -- and everyone who wants to be able to have a voice in how they are governed -- know that the radicals would only exchange one form of closed society for another.

We have a choice. Will we limit our defiance of terror to finding and killing terrorists, allowing those who do not realize they have a choice of how to fight relegate that fight to those who are in love with violence? Or will we help those who want their rights to learn the way that Indians and Poles and Filipinos and Chileans and South Africans and African-Americans won their rights?

No one we could help this way wants their future to be consumed in the fire of what Gandhi called "the cult of violence." No one shocked by the violence five years ago in New York and Washington should fail to help others avoid that fire. If we expect the world to help us quell the threat our leaders say we face, we should take the opportunity to help the world shift decisively away from sympathy with those who make that threat.

Do we really believe, with Abraham Lincoln, that people have the right to rise up against any form of domination? Do we really believe, with Gandhi, that they have the power? What they do, and how they do it, will determine if the world will free itself of violence.

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