

Defiance and Liberation

The People's Power and the People's Rights

Remarks by Jack DuVall
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One hundred years ago, a mass meeting was convened in Johannesburg, South Africa by Mohandas Gandhi, an Indian lawyer outraged by the government's proposal that Indians carry registration cards. "The Old Empire Theatre was packed from floor to ceiling," Gandhi wrote. Their most important action was to pass a resolution saying they "solemnly determined not to submit to the Ordinance." One speaker said that they "must never yield a cowardly submission to such degrading legislation."

They never did, during a long campaign that Gandhi led, of non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Defying the state, Indians burned their registration cards, marched illegally across borders, and thousands went to jail, Gandhi himself three times. They disrupted the government's racial laws and drove up the cost of enforcement. In the eighth year of civic resistance, the government withdrew the laws they had opposed. One piece of one empire of contempt for people's rights was pulverized, starting that night at the Empire Theatre. The date was September 11.

Gandhi said that one of those who influenced his thinking about defying injustice was 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." Just one year before that, Congressman Abraham Lincoln, speaking in the House of Representatives, had said:

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.

On the same day Lincoln spoke those words, Sicilians were protesting in the streets of Palermo against a repressive king, and while Thoreau wrote, Czechs, Germans, Austrians, the French and other Europeans were rising up to demand political rights. But their revolts turned violent, helping regimes to crack down, and old systems were restored. Defiant spirits in Europe waited till the next century to reach successfully for liberation.

Consent or Violence

The man whose story and example quickened their eventual achievement was Gandhi. The year that Europe started the "great war" that collapsed one of its two great empires, he returned home to India from South Africa and soon launched a great nonviolent war against British control of his homeland. Millions marched, refused to pay

taxes, quit their colonial jobs, spun their own fabric to avoid buying English cloth, and began to realize that to take control of India, they first had to refuse the terms of British control. 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."

But that consent evaporated. The great political thinker Hannah Arendt defined the process well:

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 law, to rulers, to institutions – is but the outward manifestation of support and consent.

Gandhi's campaigns in India were the first stories of mass civic resistance to be reported worldwide by broadcast media. Ever since, the rate with which people have applied this new force has accelerated. The Danes obstructed German occupiers in World War II by strikes, work slow-downs and otherwise bedeviling Nazi war plans. African-Americans defied and dissolved legal segregation. Polish workers refused to leave their shipyards until they'd won the right to a free trade union, from which the ruling party never recovered.

A few years later, Filipinos blocked a dictator's loyal army units from attacking officers who had switched sides, the military was immobilized, and with it, his regime. Chilean generals declined to let President Augusto Pinochet steal a plebiscite, enabling his people to push him out. Czechs, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under Soviet client regimes choked the streets of their capitals until their rulers resigned. Black citizens boycotted South African businesses and made the country ungovernable, until a new political order was established. Gandhi had said that "the people, when they become conscious of their power, will have every right to take possession of what belongs to them."

In every one of the nations I have named, governments based on the people's consent still rule today. This is not accidental. Civilian-based movements often produce sustainable democracy because ordinary people are the means of change: When you march, strike or sit in, you become a stake-holder in the results of what you achieve – *you've* done it, not a foreign government or a violent vanguard.

The most fateful political transaction in which people can engage is to defy a government not based on their consent. About most transactions, Americans have a saying: You get what you pay for. How you buy something can determine if you get to keep it. If you use someone else's credit card, to whom will you owe your future? If, instead of mobilizing the people to produce the kind of government which they want, you delegate the fight to an armed band 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 almost certainly get recrimination, vendettas and civil strife. Or even dictatorship.

"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, suggesting violence not only as a means of liberation, but also as a social good.

If you think violence is good, then I suggest you go to Hollywood and work for Quentin Tarantino. But is violence really effective in political affairs to reach a greater good? In the speech that made him a national leader, Abraham Lincoln, denying the Southern charge that his ideas would promote slave revolts, derided the claim that insurrection would work. “An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them,” Lincoln said. “He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution.”

Since Lincoln spoke those words, there is no instance anywhere in which violent revolution or terror has liberated a people and launched a government based on their consent. Over the last three and a half decades, in 20 of 67 transitions from authoritarian rule, violence was used at some point by political oppositions. But in only four of those nations do people have rights today. Yet in 31 of 47 nations where no opposition violence occurred during transitions, the people now enjoy political rights.

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 jarred the British raj. By the time terror had evolved to the point of deliberate state policy under the Nazis, Gandhi called it “a deep-seated disease,” a “cult of violence.” It had become an end itself, no longer if ever a rational means to a political end endorsed by the people.

In his first message to America after the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden said that his young jihadists “have no intention except to enter paradise by killing you.” In other words, their motivation had been drained of political content, for if the only reason to kill is to be killed, the killer has discarded any concern for the living. Whatever else it may be, liberation is not about the dead.

So 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. Karl Marx called the “democratic concept of man” false, because it holds that each person “has value as a sovereign being,” and he called that postulate “an illusion.” If you do not value another person’s life, then of course you are free to take it away.

How reasonable is it to believe that annihilating lives can enhance life, that destruction opens the door to progress, that hate is the gate to harmony? If you do not think that those are reasonable propositions, then you can’t believe that violence should be the means to liberate the people. Violence is not the product of the people’s power, and it almost never yields the people’s rights.

True Events or False Beliefs

Four days ago, while incarcerated in The Hague during his trial for genocide and crimes against humanity, the 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.” In 1989, as the Poles, Czechs, and other East Europeans were shaking off communism with people power, Milosevic took over the Yugoslav dictatorship and used it as a platform to ignite wars and corrupt the economy.

Eleven years later, tired of blood and ruin, a nationwide, nonviolent movement to dislodge Milosevic was spurred by a youth group, Otpor, to unite behind an opposition presidential candidate and divide the loyalties of the regime’s defenders. When Milosevic appeared ready to ignore the election results, a million Serbs converged on Belgrade, the military sat on their hands, and he had to go.

The same year, a youth group called Kmara in Georgia began organizing to resist the oligarchic rule of a president who also had stopped listening to the people. Eduard Shevardnadze had been foreign minister of the defunct Soviet Union, but while hailed overseas as a moderate, he sank his government into nepotism and bribery – to the point that Georgia was called the first “blackmail state”.

In 2001, Kmara invited an Otpor veteran to come visit, to discuss how a nonviolent strategy can convert public alienation into mass civic action. Helped by international NGOs that transferred skills in independent media and vote monitoring, and inspired by a documentary film on the nonviolent rout of Milosevic, a hundred thousand Georgians poured into the streets of the capital on November 20, 2001 to challenge election fraud. The president ordered a crackdown, the military refused, and three days later he resigned.

Three years later, a comparable series of events unfolded in Ukraine. President Leonid Kuchma was retiring. His administration had succumbed to corruption, restricted press freedom, stood accused on good evidence of having murdered the country’s most prominent independent journalist, and almost surely had poisoned the presidential candidate challenging his chosen successor. In polls in 2004, only one out of four Ukrainians liked the way Kuchma had run the country, but 40% believed they might have to protest to defend their rights. They did.

When vote fraud in the presidential election on the scale of 2.8 million rigged ballots was revealed (with the help of international observers) and it favored the regime’s candidate, a million Ukrainians came to the center of Kyiv and would not leave until a new vote was ordered. Systematic planning and strict nonviolent discipline – earmarks of a strategic civilian-based campaign – impressed the secret service and army, and they blocked orders to use violence. Pressured as well by the European Union, the Ukrainian government relented. A new vote was held, and the challenger won. The Orange Revolution had opened the door to government based on the consent of the people.

As the new president took power, critics in the Russian government, which had shoveled money into the campaign of the regime’s man, began to attack the legitimacy of what had happened. Even nine months later, Vladimir Putin was suggesting that the losing side in Ukraine had been “cornered” by “unconstitutional activities” and suggested that civic resistance could turn a country into “a banana republic where the one who shouts loudest is the one who wins,” as if too many voices in the public space could spoil the plans of those who hold power. Well, yes. That’s called democracy.

One writer in *The Guardian* suggested that people power was the result of a decades-long American plot to topple regimes the U.S. didn’t like, based on a “network

of interlocking foundations and charities...transferring millions of dollar to dissidents” – as if the Filipino people had little to do with the ouster of a dictator who Washington supported, as if the Chilean people had nothing to do with retiring a president whose military received American support, as if the Mongolians and the South Africans and the East Timorese and every other people who used nonviolent strategies to win their rights were part of some vast global conspiracy.

This is, of course, a fantasy, concocted to support other, preconceived beliefs that don't have much to do with the facts of this history: In 50 of 67 transitions from democratic to authoritarian rule in the last 35 years, nonviolent civic forces were pivotal. To believe that outsiders engineered any appreciable number of those transitions is absurd. To believe that any were decisively influenced by Washington is to misunderstand the dynamics of nonviolent conflict.

People power opens the vise of authoritarian rule by disputing its legitimacy, escalating the cost of its operations, and splitting the ranks of its own defenders. None of that can be done by foreign hypnosis, advisors with Harvard degrees, or any form of remote control. Only local organizers can devise effective nonviolent tactics – such as strikes, boycotts, blockades and demonstrations -- by weighing the risk of repression against the benefit of added pressure on the state. Only local strategists can develop a rousing proposition about the need to fight for abrogated rights, to persuade people to put their jobs on hold and their lives at risk by joining a mass movement.

Gandhi said that self-rule for a nation begins with self-rule by individuals. He knew that the greatest asset in gaining freedom is the free and disciplined mind of every person who wants to speed that liberation. The skills, strategies and dauntlessness of the men and women who compose the force we call people power are the foundation of its victories, nothing else. Those who insist that something else explains the “colored revolutions” or the end of apartheid or the fall of communism ignore the purpose and the perseverance of the people who defied governments that defiled their dignity.

The opinion that ordinary people cannot mount a meaningful struggle, and that only some external agency can do it for them, reduces citizens to mere pawns. Implicit in this are two beliefs, which would reinforce apathy and inhibit action: first, the belief that we are all prisoners of nebulous larger forces and power-holders, that we are tossed around like seaweed on the tides of history; and second, the belief that things change only by material intervention, especially new techniques or money, rather than by changing the minds of individuals through gaining approval of new ideas.

If you believe that big, sinister forces, like military superpowers or big corporations or secret medieval societies control your destiny, and that they can't be overcome except by deadly weapons wielded by cunning revolutionaries, then you are not going to be impressed by any historical evidence of how people have defied almost every kind of subjugation and won their rights without resort to violence. In fact, you will do everything you can to explain that liberation any other way.

Or if you're the one who is doing the subjugating, by shrinking the space for civil society, imprisoning dissenters, and torturing bloggers or women wearing clothes you don't like, then you may also insist that civic resistance was dreamed up by the CIA, by anyone other than your own people – because you'll be very anxious to discredit and

stall its appearance. Those who deny that the people have power of their own and should use it are those who are threatened by people learning how to use it.

There is one more group of people power deniers: the residual defenders of 20th century revolutionary violence. The book that Peter Ackerman and I published in 2000, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*, received just one extremely negative review, from a writer in a radical Australian newspaper who bitterly rejected our criticism of the Bolsheviks and insisted that working people “need to be armed” to defend their interests. The review was entitled, “By Any Means Necessary,” and that gave away its underlying belief.

If you believe that power is lodged in social structures and faceless institutions rather than in the consent of people whose cooperation they require, you may readily believe that the only means of removing oppressors is to dismantle those institutions by destroying those who defend them. But unless you love to kill for its own sake, sanctioning violence to do that destruction requires you to believe that the ends justify the means, and that the values of those for whom you kill should be subordinated to your value judgments about both means and ends.

This is nothing more than the manifestation of a deeper belief, that certain normative propositions are right in an absolute sense and demand unquestioning acceptance. No one who joins a nonviolent movement is expected to adopt as incontrovertible the ideas of the few who lead the movement, because people power rests on participation by the many. Without adherents who are persuaded by the merit of the ideas and strategies proposed for a movement, it has no life. They cannot be coerced to approve those ideas, because it is unreasoning coercion that is the heart of whatever oppression they strive to resist – and they would not knowingly substitute one tyranny of mind for another.

Liberating Minds

Abraham Lincoln said that slavery or despotism amount to one proposition: “You work, I’ll eat.” Conflict between a repressive government and those who resist is a struggle, he suggested, between two principles: “One is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle...No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation...or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.”

Those who use violent repression and those who tout violent revolution are both attached to that principle, for they would not give the people the opportunity to set the course of history – they would reserve that for themselves. This is not a modern attitude. It is at least as ancient as the pens beneath the Colosseum which can still be seen, where the Romans kept slaves they later sacrificed in public combat. But the history of ideas did not end in Rome. The acceptability of the ancient urge to dominate would eventually begin to ebb, once the scientific revolution beckoned.

One of its heralds, Francis Bacon, in the 16th century declared that science was “not a belief to be held but a work to be done,” and he thought of that work as “a work for the peoples.” Thought had to be liberated from absolute belief before free inquiry and experiment could open up power from new ideas. The anthropologist Loren Eiseley said

that Bacon knew that these discoveries would come slowly “by infinite and continuing effort, out of minds whose dreams must rise superior to the existing world...” The scientific challenge, Eisley wrote, “was to break with the dead hand” of dogmatism, “to arrest and touch with hope the popular mind.”

We settled on our title for *A Force More Powerful* (the book, the television series, and now the video game) when we read of Gandhi’s meeting with African-American ministers in 1937. One of them asked the Indian leader whether nonviolence was active rather than passive. Slightly agitated, Gandhi replied, “It is the greatest and the activist force in the world...a force which is more positive than electricity, and more powerful even than ether.” It was as if he thought of it, not as religious or even political, but as a kind of science, with laws to be applied and power to be derived.

The legendary journalist Edgar Snow, who saw Gandhi shortly before he died, said “it was Gandhi’s urge to liberate man which set him apart from the mass of mystics who seek only realization of self.” To that I’d add: It was the strategies which Gandhi’s work inspired, enabling people to liberate themselves, which set him apart from the mass of dogmatists employing violence to dominate.

Those who’ve amplified Gandhi’s legacy by consummating nonviolent struggles for rights, democracy and self-rule include Europeans, Asians, Latin Americans, Africans and North Americans, and those who fight this way for rights today include Arabs, Central Asians, and Polynesians, as well as Africans and Asians. Civic defiance is a global phenomenon, even as its strategies develop in the basements and the barrios of a thousand different villages and cities.

Liberation that arises from nonviolent conflict is therefore indigenous, self-organized, representative, and consistent with the means to achieve it. The promise that this form of power offers, to displace those who bring violence – occupiers, regimes, terrorists, insurrectionists - has never been more welcome. The demand for people power is flourishing, because the demand for rights has never been more prevalent.

Many Americans thought that their experiment in democracy faced an existential threat when half the country seceded because a president who resisted the extension of slavery was elected. Abraham Lincoln said that “the central idea” pervading the Civil War was the necessity of showing “that popular government is not an absurdity.” “If we fail,” Lincoln said, “it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves” – because, at that time, there was no other government based solely on the people’s consent. “I do feel that the liberty of the world is placed in our hands to defend,” a Massachusetts soldier wrote to his wife in 1862, “and if we are overcome, then farewell to freedom.”

America’s purpose has not changed. Our economic prosperity and military power are not the means to any enduring effect which we may have upon the world in the time we have remaining as a force for good, because anything material is transitory. We stand for nothing, if we do not stand for people’s rights. But freedom is not a brand that can simply be marketed, and the knowledge of ideas and strategies for nonviolent defiance that can help people free themselves is not our property. It belongs to the world. The question is what we choose to do, to the extent that we possess the knowledge and the opportunity, to share that understanding.

Apart from anything our government may do, as individuals we should not flinch from this responsibility. Do you believe, as I do, that anyone who knows how to alleviate suffering should relieve it? Then let us help others learn how to do so. Do you believe, as I do, that anyone who knows how to avert violence should forestall it? Then let us show others how to do so. Do you believe, as I do, that anyone who sees a thoroughfare to equal rights and justice should point the way? Then let us post a sign there.

“To work in...the People,” Walt Whitman said, “this, I say, is what Democracy is for; and this is what our America means.” I say that all of us, through our associations and foundations, through our libraries and universities, through all appropriate organizations and major institutions, should work to aid any people anywhere who cannot speak, who cannot write, who cannot teach, who cannot march, who cannot strike, who cannot represent the truth about their nation, without their government depriving them of all these rights or even of their lives. Their passion to be free and independent should not ever be in doubt. Nor should our willingness to help them.

It is not for us to win people their rights. They will be won by those who stand up to domination and learn to liberate themselves. It is only for us to stand with them and be thankful that there are such women and such men standing in expanding numbers everywhere today.

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