

Fierce Urgency for the Rights of All

Democratic Power and the Choice of Conflict

[Published in the journal BRIDGES, Spring/Summer 2007]

By Jack DuVall

“A Great Promise to All People”

In January 2007, the president of the United States announced that twenty thousand more American troops were needed to continue the war in Iraq, which he said was part of “the decisive ideological struggle of our time,” for freedom and democracy in the Middle East.¹

Forty years before, in Riverside Church in New York City, another American leader spoke of similar themes and another war. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “all over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression.” But he said that the war in Vietnam, then in progress, was not a way to assist that revolt, that America needed to engage in a “positive thrust for democracy” by taking “offensive action in behalf of justice.”² And of course he spoke of America’s own nonviolent movement for rights -- which he had led -- as an example for the world.

Seven years before, Dr. King had sent the Rev. James Lawson to Nashville, Tennessee to open a new front in the struggle against the last great American domestic oppression, racial segregation. Jim Lawson organized students from black colleges to stage a rolling series of lunch-counter sit-ins and department store boycotts that destroyed the willingness of that city’s business community to defend segregation, dissolving the racial system of a city that had called itself “the Athens of the South.”

All across the South, more sit-ins and boycotts, civil disobedience and mass marches were staged in city after city, raising the cost of racial discrimination, awakening the conscience of Americans everywhere, pressuring the federal government to intervene to stop brutality against protesters, and plunging segregation into a terminal crisis – all without firing a single shot.

In his speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington three years later, Dr. King said that “the time to make real the promises of democracy” had come, that the “time to make justice a reality” had arrived – for everyone.³ If one citizen is deprived of rights, the rights of all are jeopardized. The nonviolent movement for the social and political liberation of African-Americans reinforced the rights of all Americans.

On his route to Washington from Illinois before his inauguration as president, Abraham Lincoln gave a talk to the New Jersey Senate. He spoke about the men who had fought with George Washington in the American war for independence from Great Britain. “I am exceedingly anxious that that thing which they struggled for,” he said, which “held out a great promise to all people of the world to all time to come – I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made.”⁴

Thirty months into the American Civil War, Lincoln restated that idea. He said that America was dedicated to a “proposition,” that all are “created equal.” And then he asked Americans to offer “increased devotion” to the cause for which those who died to save the Union had given “the last full measure” of devotion: “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”⁵

Several times after that, before or during wars fought in Europe, the Pacific and the Middle East, U.S. presidents called on Americans to give the last full measure of devotion for that same cause, on behalf of their own nation or the people of other nations. But since Dr. King spoke at the Lincoln Memorial, history offers evidence that it is no longer necessary for men and women at arms to die, to create or restore government by the people.

When Jim Lawson’s students demonstrated at the Nashville city hall in 1960, a guitar player led protesters in singing a song that black women strikers had first used in South Carolina. It was called “We Shall Overcome.” In the following forty years, that song was sung by protesters at the height of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and in the movement against a dictator in Indonesia.

But the civil rights movement here gave more than a song to the ensuing cascade of nonviolent revolutions elsewhere. Thanks to its time and location, Dr. King’s movement won the first nonviolent victory reported by the modern mass media. The troops in Dr. King’s army made the world take notice that nonviolent force could be more powerful than violent coercion.

“Marvelous New Militancy”

Thirteen years after Dr. King’s speech in Riverside Church, Polish workers sat down and refused to leave their shipyards until they won the right to a free trade union – which spelled the beginning of the end of communist rule. Six years later, Filipinos mounted a “people power” revolution and dislodged a dictator. Two years later, a nonviolent coalition of Chileans refused to allow Gen. Augusto Pinochet to stay for a third term. One year later, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under Soviet-dominated regimes choked their cities’ streets until rulers called new elections. Half a world away, black citizens boycotted South African businesses, went out on strike, and made that country ungovernable, until a new system of equal rights was established.

In 2006, 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.”⁶ Five years before, a nonviolent movement to dislodge Milosevic was spurred by a youth group, Otpor, to rally the public to enforce a fair election. A million Serbs converged on Belgrade, the military refused to crack down, and Milosevic had to yield power.

In all these cases, people power opened the vise of arbitrary rule by disputing its legitimacy, escalating the cost of its operations, and splitting the ranks of its own defenders. Strikes, mass protests, and civil disobedience are among the tactics that prevent the state from monopolizing information and dictating events. Gandhi said that “the people, when they become conscious of their power, will have every right to take possession of what belongs to them.”⁷

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."⁸ Lincoln had said, "No man is good enough to govern another man, without that other's consent."⁹ Now we know that no one is *capable* of ruling others without their consent, once they know how to say no.

In 2004, millions of Ukrainians learned how to resist, and did so, in the most recent case of nonviolent resistance accomplishing political change at the national level. Leonid Kuchma, president for ten years, was stepping down. His rule, which began with economic reform, had given way to corruption and curbing dissent. Ukraine's leading independent journalist was decapitated, and the president was implicated. In the midst of the election campaign to replace Kuchma, the opposition candidate was poisoned. When vote fraud on the scale of 2.8 million rigged ballots was revealed, a million Ukrainians came to the heart of Kyiv and wouldn't leave until a new vote was ordered. Their planning and discipline impressed the military.

One general later observed, "Every soldier is also a citizen...Many guys from our office...would leave work in the evening, change their clothes, and go to the Maidan [the main demonstration space] to join the revolution." That was made easier by protesters chanting slogans like, "A Ukrainian soldier is a patriot, not a killer."¹⁰ When orders came to crack down, the army and secret service refused. Nonviolent resistance had neutralized the ability to rule by intimidation. A new vote was ordered, the challenger won, and the Orange Revolution succeeded.

Nine months later, Russian president Vladimir Putin was still complaining about how the candidate he preferred had lost. He suggested that the losing side had been "cornered" by "unconstitutional activities" and said that civic resistance could turn a country into "a banana republic where the one who shouts the loudest is the one who wins," as if too many voices in the public space could spoil the plans of those who hold power.¹¹ But that's the point: Democracy works when a majority of voices prevails.

When millions of Lebanese took to the streets to demonstrate against Syrian occupation in 2005, 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. Today, there is vigorous nonviolent action underway against authoritarian rulers or military occupiers in Zimbabwe, West Papua, Western Sahara, Egypt, Iran, Tunisia, Tibet, and a score of other countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Dr. King had a phrase he would have used to describe all this. He spoke of the "marvelous new militancy" that had expedited the struggle for civil rights. But King knew that such a cause required undaunted devotion. "I am not unmindful," he told hundreds of thousands at the Lincoln Memorial, "that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulation...battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality."¹²

In July 2006, I met a serene, articulate Iranian man who had been tortured for publishing words that his government did not like. A month later I met with a nonviolent democracy campaigner in the Maldivé Islands; she had been branded by her

government as a terrorist and put under house arrest. Several weeks later, our Center sent alerts out to mobilize protests about the threatened torture of a leader of Women of Zimbabwe Arise, a nonviolent civic group in that country, who fortunately was released.

Those of us who rarely use creatively the political space that exists in American society would do well to realize that a struggle against injustice is not really represented by newspaper ads for impeaching the president or someone screaming in the back of a congressional hearing room. Any struggle that is truly existential – about rights that belong to every person -- should summon what Dr. King called “fierce urgency.”¹³ It represents the decision, in the words of the great Czech dissident Václav Havel, of whether you are going to live the lie that life is normal, when you do not have your rights, or whether you are going to “live in the truth,” and open up what Havel called the “incalculable power” that can come from mass civic action.¹⁴

“You Must Do It”

In 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy in the last 35 years, indigenous nonviolent force -- not military power or violent revolt -- was the pivotal factor. Nevertheless Americans invaded Iraq in 2002 to remove a dictator and transform the Middle East.¹⁵ Violence was used to make political changes. Through 2006, over 60,000 Iraqi civilians died in that endeavor – equivalent to the population of Palo Alto, California, or Santa Fe, New Mexico – and another 1.8 million fled the country as refugees.¹⁶

Must it always be that many have to flee or die when action to depose dictators or thwart terrorists is taken, if other means exist to pursue the same ends? In speeches requesting more troops for Iraq, the leaders of the U.S. government said that war-fighting had to be “augmented” so that America could prevail in this ideological struggle, as if ideas could be promoted by shooting those who hate them.¹⁷

In Alfonso Cuarón’s riveting motion picture, “Children of Men,” a police state in Britain in the year 2027 is challenged by violent guerrillas who murder innocent people in pursuit of a woman they think will help discredit the regime, and tanks pulverize apartment buildings full of civilians while trying to kill guerrillas. From the action of either side, the result is not freedom but rubble.

Having invaded Iraq and opened the door to chaos, Americans could not conscientiously abandon responsibility to restore order, if the means to do so would not escalate the suffering. But to assume that the cost of military action, however great, was justified, because the war had to be intensified to wage a global struggle, ignores the reality that unlike civic force, the legitimacy of armed offensive action does not arise from the action or consent of its intended beneficiaries, the people. The justice of a cause cannot in fact be fully measured by the stated intentions of its proponents – it must also be judged by the manifest effect on those whose rights or whose lives are at issue. Wars are just if they defend life, not if they take it for the political purposes of those who start the wars. In light of fifty years of nonviolent liberation, a war for democracy that is not a war of self-defense is a contradiction in terms.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the lesson which American actions in Iraq seemed to teach the Middle East was best represented by the words of a member of the Iraqi parliament, who spoke on Al Jazeera on December 29, 2006: “Democracy can be

established in our region only through force,” he said, “and only America can do it.”¹⁸ Is it any more surprising, then, that many say that if democracy did not prevail in Iraq, despite the will and force of a superpower, it could not take root in the region? But that would be true only if the people of the Middle East are somehow different from Indians, South Africans, Ukrainians, Filipinos, Salvadorans, African-Americans and every other people who have established or redeemed democracy through their own civic resistance. We should not extol democracy with our words while making people believe through our action that they cannot achieve it by themselves.

Marcus Garvey, an early voice of black liberation, told his followers: "Up you mighty race. You can be what you will, but you must do it."¹⁹ That is also what Mohandas Gandhi told his fellow Indians in their struggle for independence from the British Empire. Self-rule, he said, had to start with self-organization. Enjoining that, he made the means of conflict consistent with the ends he sought. Government by the people is achieved by movements of the people. And they have to be nonviolent, for that is the only way they can rally a majority and thus claim truthfully to represent the people. The quest for democracy in the Middle East was never properly an American project. It belongs to the people of the Middle East.

But what does belong to Americans, and to any people who believe in the rights of all, is the work of teaching how democracy is really won. In his magnificent Jefferson Lecture at the National Endowment for the Humanities six years ago, Princeton historian James McPherson reminded us that Abraham Lincoln believed that the Civil War which saved American democracy “involved not only ‘the fate of these United States’ but also ‘the whole family of man.’ It was a struggle ‘not altogether for today’ but ‘for a vast future also’” -- which Dr. King, a proud and willing heir of Lincoln, instinctively saw.²⁰ It was why King demanded that Americans engage in a “positive thrust” for democracy throughout the world.

Today such a thrust is needed even more, because both old and new actors who would dominate the people of their societies have intensified the violence they habitually employ to maintain repression or mount insurrection.

The Market for Terror

Osama bin Laden, the patron saint of 21st century Islamist terrorism, has said that “oppression...cannot be demolished except in a hail of bullets.” Lenin, the prototype for 20th century revolutionaries, went further, saying that “real, nationwide terror” was needed to “reinvigorate” a country. But rebels or freedom fighters who have emulated those two figures have only fostered fear, carnage and tyranny – and there has been no instance in over a century in which violent revolution or terror has liberated a people and launched a government based on their consent.²¹

“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? 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.²²

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.

Yet 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. Thus they are free to perpetuate the lie that only they know the way to freedom. On June 30, 2006, bin Laden said that the deceased 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]."

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.²³

Yet however the conflict is waged between terrorists and those whom they threaten, it would be a mistake to project the outcome solely on the basis of who brings the most iron to the arena. If that were true, terrorists wouldn't bother to seek support and sympathy by appealing to popular grievances and calling for a new birth of freedom. The representational requirements of terrorism also represent its weakness: its capacity for conflict is not really physical, it's political. So instead of becoming mesmerized with the supposed woes of "asymmetric conflict," in which states can supposedly be undermined by well-timed exhibitions of extreme violence, governments and groups that wish to displace terrorists can engage them on the level of political contention.

In September 2006 the White House released a new National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism. It conceded 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 was 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 safe havens."

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. 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) 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.

(2) Civic resistance 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;

(3) Nonviolent movements don't push their most courageous fighters to destroy themselves but salvages their experience and reinvests their manpower in more ingenious ways to continue the struggle.

(4) Civic power does not have to glorify death. Bin Laden has said, "Death is truth." That is reminiscent 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.²⁴

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.

In 2006 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.

Those who live in free societies 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 have 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 of 2001 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.

King said "it would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment" in the fight for freedom. The question is how that fight should be conducted. More than forty years after Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke under the gaze of Lincoln's statue, there is a robust strategic model for the nonviolent production of democratic power which is now universally accessible and directly competitive with the older model of violent coercion performed by insurrections, terrorism or invasions.²⁵

“The Security of Justice”

Dr. King said that the “whirlwind of revolt” would not stop until the “security of justice” had been attained. But he taught Americans another way to reach that goal, and we must teach it now to the people of a new century.²⁶

If we would defend America from terrorists by reducing their appeal to people who refuse to live any longer in humiliation, and if we wish to see the day when democratic victory is universal, then the ideas of Lincoln, the strategies of Gandhi, and the practices of King must be taught wherever violence is still accepted as the only way to power.

Lincoln’s insight was that equal rights could only be assured if government were based on the people’s consent. Gandhi saw in that equation a strategy for liberation: The British are ruling us for their own benefit, he told Indians, so why should we help them? They can rule only if we let them. King and his movement made those who ruled America choose between retaining segregation at the cost of giving up business as usual, or giving up segregation and returning to domestic tranquility. His followers took away the consent that injustice needed to endure.

Resist oppression, drive up its cost, and you divide those who enforce it. Then power flows away from those who deceive the people to those who represent the truth. Civic resistance undoes the ability of government to lie successfully. Nonviolent power grows in proportion to the distribution of truth. Therefore it cannot subvert legitimate order, because the struggle it wages must be open. The hearts of those who join the cause will not otherwise be reached.

I believe that everyone now alive is witnessing, whether they know it or not, the pursuit of a very great cause: the formation of a common global civil society, based not on an empire of arms but on individual consent. If this world isn’t free and open, we have no chance to save the forests and the oceans, to remove disease and hunger, to release the full potential of every human being, because the old mortal habits of prejudice and avarice, ignorance and savagery -- which justify the guns and jails and borders that drive us wide apart – will abort this embryonic world. I believe that all of what stifles and divides humanity will eventually disappear. But not until our rights -- to speak, to write, to vote, and to resist -- are universal.

We have a choice. Would we delegate to those who are in love with violence the task of liberation? Or do we believe, with Lincoln, that the people have the right to overturn any form of domination, and with King, that they have the opportunity?

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