

Liberation Without War

The Emerging Era of Nonviolent Conflict

*Remarks by Jack DuVall - August 26, 2003
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When the apostle Paul was arrested and thrown into prison, the chief captain of the Roman unit that had detained him ordered him to be whipped as part of being interrogated. When a centurion started tying him up, Paul asked him, "Is it lawful for you to whip a man that is a Roman citizen?" So the centurion went to tell the captain – who came down to Paul's cell. "Tell me, are you a Roman?" asked the captain. Paul said, "Yes." And the captain remarked, "It took me a great deal of money to buy my freedom," showing skepticism that Paul – who probably looked like a penniless slave -- was a Roman, and therefore automatically free. Paul replied: "I was free born."

In that exchange was represented one of the most fundamental divisions in human thinking: Between those who believe that only an external agency or force – money, personal influence, violence -- can deliver people from subordination or oppression, and those who understand that each individual has the innate right to be free and the ability to become free.

Che Guevara, the violent Latin American revolutionary who was wrong about so much, was right when he said: "I am not a liberator. Liberators do not exist. The people liberate themselves." But what the people can do to liberate their nations from tyranny, injustice or military occupation has received far less attention than what terrorists or conquerors have done or tried to do. The conventional historical wisdom is that superior military force or charismatic strong men, or both, are necessary for people to be liberated.

So we venerate Lincoln as the liberator of African-American slaves, Roosevelt and Churchill and Eisenhower as liberators of Europe from Nazi rule, and Ronald Reagan as the hero of the Cold War, or at least the liberator of Grenada. These were all leaders who saw – and may have had -- no alternative to using or threatening military force to overcome the position of armed adversaries. When hostilities ended, freedom and peace ensued. And so violent conflict or its threat has been assumed to be the handmaiden of liberation anywhere.

When it became apparent this spring and summer that peace and stability in Iraq had not followed the military defeat of Saddam Hussein's regime, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said on NBC's program "Meet the Press" that civil disorder – "messiness", he called it -- always accompanied regime changes to democracy, citing the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 as an example.

Secretary Rumsfeld was wrong. No museums of antiquities were looted in Warsaw, Budapest or Berlin in 1989 when nonviolent civilian-based movements brought down authoritarian governments in those capitals, nor did the lights go out a few years before in Manila when the Filipino people split the loyalty of the military and an

autocratic president had to flee, nor did elections have to be delayed in Chile in 1988 or Serbia in 2000 when dictators there were forced out by nonviolent campaigns – indeed, elections were a key part of how real democracy was achieved in those two nations.

It is a historical fact that when nonviolent movements mobilize the people of a country to use strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience and other disruptive tactics – as part of a strategy to subvert the power of an unjust regime – democracy is more often the political result, than when an autocratic regime is bombed or attacked, in order to remove an evil ruler. If we disregard the costs of regime change through war or insurrection, by not comparing them to the risks of revolution accomplished through nonviolent conflict, then we are issuing a blank check to the belief that liberation is always violent. How, then, can we differentiate our strategy for global order from the strategy of those who resort to terror in the name of justice or self-determination?

Terrorists believe that political power derives from the power to kill – they are attached to that belief as strongly as many are to their religious beliefs. But if you worship the methods you have chosen to promote your cause, you’ll be blind to the comparative advantages of other methods. People who are not free, whose rights are denied, yearn to be treated with dignity and fairness, and many are prepared to fight for that freedom. The only question is what form that conflict will take.

Nonviolent resistance is a way to engage in conflict in which the people’s rights are at stake – and it works by activating the power that the people always possess. The world believes that power is found in weapons. But those who wield weapons do so for a reason: To get something from those who are being threatened. That’s a transaction, and each party to a transaction has leverage. If you refuse to give me what I want, even though I’m threatening you, you can influence my action and the action of those who support me for their own gain. Even if I threaten you with violence, I cannot dominate you unless I am able to pay the rising cost of quelling your resistance. But no ruler’s ability to sustain that cost is infinitely elastic.

The power of the people always lies in their ability to furnish or withhold their consent from those who would rule them. The strategy of a civilian-based nonviolent movement has to drive up the cost of controlling the people to the point that those who support and defend the regime are unwilling or unable to pay it. The nonviolent leaders of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa declared that their strategy was to make the country “ungovernable” so long as the system was based on racial oppression. To do that, they did not have to be violent.

But what does a nonviolent movement have to do? First, the groups forming the opposition have to set aside their partisan, ethnic and even ideological differences in order to unify around the simple goal of liberating the country from its undemocratic or unjust rulers – and that goal has to be explained in terms that summon the people’s sense of national purpose and awakens their hope for a better life.

Second, the movement has to reduce the fear among ordinary civilians of joining the opposition. Unfamiliar to most, there are hundreds of nonviolent tactics that involve minimal physical risk – not paying fees and taxes, work stay-aways, commercial boycotts, surreptitiously posted signs. At the outset of a struggle, such tactics help to broaden a movement’s base, because most people in a society will not be violent but can still be mobilized to act on their discontent. And distributing the scope of resistance throughout the country and beyond its politically conscious capital is essential. That puts pressure on the outermost, least reliable agents of the regime.

Third, the civilian movement has to challenge the legitimacy of the regime’s claim to represent the values of the nation and the aspirations of the people. Nonviolent tactics that force confrontations in which the regime is forced to display its arbitrary, repressive nature or resort to ridiculous posturing against the movement can force rulers to discredit themselves in the eyes of the larger public and the world. That requires the movement to maintain nonviolent discipline, in order to crystallize the meaning of the choice between the regime and the opposition.

Fourth, ever more disruptive actions – such as a general strike, or regular mass demonstrations – should be sequenced to increase the pressure on the regime, forcing it into extraordinary measures to maintain a semblance of normal business, until even that façade is exposed as a lie. As it becomes clear to everyone that nothing will be the same again until the regime is changed, even the police and military will begin to question how much sense it makes to be loyal to the dictator.

Fifth, the movement has to anticipate repression and be prepared to settle for intermediate goals without forcing a final outcome, until its subversion of the existing order and its own strength are sufficiently advanced. In short, it needs to know when to buy more time and when to reach for victory.

We are talking, of course, about staging a revolution. Thomas Jefferson maintained that when every constitutional recourse to reform a bad government had been exhausted, the people had a natural “right of revolution” to change that government. He lived in a day when organized, nonviolent mass action was unknown as a political strategy, but he still believed so strongly in the people’s right to be free that he even countenanced the idea of violent revolution. Having no attachment to violence for its own sake, Jefferson, if he lived today, would rejoice at the opportunity of exercising this “right of revolution” without bloodshed. And he would see its relationship to producing government genuinely based on the people’s consent.

Mohandas Gandhi was fond of repeating the old Christian maxim that “as you sow, so shall you reap” – that the ends of your action will be consistent with the means you employ. The history that Gandhi helped spawn in the last hundred years – of civilian-based, nonviolent movements overturning violent regimes – has demonstrated the truth of what he said.

- In the United States in the 1960s, African-Americans used sit-ins, boycotts and marches to put unbearable pressure on the system of segregation, which dissolved – yielding more tolerance and racial peace, imperfect and inadequate as it is, than anyone would have predicted in 1950 or 1960.
- In Poland in the 1980s, workers used strikes and mass demonstrations to win the right to organize a free trade union, which galvanized the resistance of the Polish people to the one-party state that had denied them basic rights for two generations. When Solidarity took power, no one died.
- In South Africa in the late 1980s, blacks in townships and factories used boycotts and strikes to drive up the economic and political costs of apartheid, until it lost the support of business leaders and the outside world, forcing a new president to negotiate a new political system.
- In Serbia in 2000, a president who practiced genocide and was called the “butcher of the Balkans” was forced to resign after a student-sparked civilian-based campaign organized in 70 cities and towns, systematically subverting the loyalty of the police and military. When the final crisis came, none of them followed the president’s orders to use bullets to control the streets – and a new, democratically president was quickly installed.

Democracy is not the gift of insurrectionaries or conquerors, it is the achievement of people who learn to apply the power that they already possess to change the way they are governed. And nonviolent resistance is not a mystical force that melts the hearts of oppressors, not the way it has commonly worked to change regimes. “Nonviolence” may be preferable as a form of behavior or a state of mind, but nonviolent action is not effective unless it comes equipped with a strategy for waging conflict in order to seize power. Gandhi did not want to make peace with the British. He incited conflict with the British in order to force them to leave India.

Nonviolent action may be a moral imperative, but even if it is, that is not what makes it powerful in the world of political struggle. Moreover, believing and declaring that only tends to reinforce the mistaken impression among many people who want to fight for their rights that “nonviolence” is less forceful than violence. And that misconception reinforces another erroneous belief: That the most violent oppressors can only be defeated with more violence.

History is our greatest ally in refuting that belief. There is no provable correlation between the degree of a regime’s brutality and its ability to hold on to power. Everyone believed that Saddam Hussein was impregnable to domestic revolt, violent or nonviolent, because he might kill anyone who showed the least sign of dissent. So everyone in Iraq was afraid to act. But the fear of action does not mean that action, once taken, will fail.

A year ago, an Iraqi opponent of Saddam visited our offices and said he liked our ideas, but that Saddam wasn’t like Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, he was like Stalin –

therefore nonviolent action wasn't possible in Iraq. (He hoped the Americans would invade.) We asked him what would happen if 5,000 people demonstrated against Saddam in the streets of Baghdad. He said of course they'd all be shot. What if 20,000 should demonstrate, we asked? Same result, though much bloodier, he said.

But what if 100,000 Iraqis should demonstrate in the streets, waving signs saying "Saddam must go!" we asked? Then he hesitated, and said, well if that should happen, perhaps the regime would unravel. Why did he concede that? Because he realized that if that many Iraqis were courageous enough to show they wanted Saddam out, the dictator's armed defenders would realize that the people were no longer afraid – fear as an instrument of power no longer worked. Anyone in a uniform would see that Saddam had therefore lost control of the country, and they'd think twice before shooting on his behalf. Suddenly an impervious regime had been reduced in our Iraqi friend's mind to a strategic problem.

When American forces invaded Iraq, few if any of Saddam's regular military units were ready to shoot to defend the regime – only a hard core of about 5,000 irregular forces and foreign fanatics could be relied on. The reality is that the very means by which he had clung to power, his legendary brutality, had destroyed his popularity and exhausted his people. If Iraqis had been given the know-how with which to organize strategic civilian-based resistance, and the same proportion of ordinary people as joined such movements in Serbia or Poland or Chile had participated, Saddam's regime would have collapsed almost as quickly as it did in the heat of armed conflict. As Bishop Desmond Tutu said, "When people decide they want to be free, there is nothing that can stop them" – not fear, not brutality, and not 5,000 fedayeen.

Yet the existence of those fedayeen in Iraq, whose violent resistance continues now during the U.S. occupation, is an important symptom of the present global crisis: There is a hard core of extreme fighters in the cockpit of terrorist and revolutionary organizations who have a proclivity to use violence which no evidence of its past futility can deter. There is not a single instance in the past 100 years in which terrorism or violent insurrection has succeeded in creating a society in which political liberty and economic development have flowered. So the impassioned promises that terrorists make that they will destroy their oppressors are hollow, but they still recruit followers – because their societies fail to teach the true consequences of violence as a method of struggle, and the global news and entertainment culture continuously reinforces the belief that violence is the ultimate form of power available to any cause.

Yet while the failures of education and the broadcast media magnify political violence, they do not create it. Regardless of its behavioral or social causes, we have no choice but to regard the willingness of terrorists to murder civilians on a mass scale as criminal – because they threaten to destroy the order and stability of the new global society which is coming into existence. We cannot avoid the reality that terrorism is a law enforcement problem that may require military force as a form of police action in some cases. But if a natural, lasting peace is what we wish, it is also essential for the world

community to remove the political basis for the ability of terrorists to operate in the first place.

The political lesson of September 11 is that while revolutionary terrorists massacred innocent civilians in North America in the name of liberating civilians from oppressive governments in the Middle East, no civilians have been liberated, none of the reviled oppressors have been overthrown, and the reprisal of war is being hurled at militant Islamist terrorists everywhere they surface. The choice of terror as a method of struggle is irrational because it chooses a form of competition in which the terrorists have an inferior position: They will never be as well armed as the states they attack. And if they were to use a weapon of mass destruction against any nation, that nation's response and the global revulsion against catastrophic civilian casualties would be so overwhelming as to doom the political cause that underpins their movement. Political violence at all levels is self-destructive.

Conflicts about rights are always political. After September 11, we cannot escape the reality that political oppression in particular places has universally recognized consequences. Multinationally networked terrorist organizations have been given safe haven and assistance by some dictatorial regimes, even as they struggle to overthrow other authoritarian governments. One way or another, political oppressors are at the heart of the global crisis.

There are 45 to 50 non-democratic, repressive regimes left in the world today. They include single-dictator regimes such as those in North Korea and Cuba; one-party states as in China, Syria and Zimbabwe; as well as military juntas, corrupt oligarchies, and intolerant clerical hierarchies that dominate weak democracies as in Iran and Pakistan. If all of these governments vanished tomorrow, the swamp of terrorism would be largely drained – because their weapons and camps would be far more difficult to acquire, and, most important, the local oppression that they decry in order to energize their followers would disappear.

The world has a choice: We can wait until one of these oppressive regimes or a terrorist network with which it does business is on the brink of acquiring a weapon of mass destruction, and then stand by and deplore unilateral military action by the United States to pre-empt or respond to such an atrocity. Or we can internationalize and expedite the removal of all regime-based political oppression, and also reduce the appeal of violence and terror as a strategy of liberation. Unless the world is prepared to cede to Washington the responsibility to respond physically to global political violence – which the U.S. now seems willing to do mainly by using military force – there must be international political action to eliminate the political oppression that is the root of the crisis.

Fortunately there is a well-documented, proven methodology for bringing down murderous regimes: civilian-based, nonviolent resistance, used as a strategy for taking power. But we can no longer afford to wait for indigenous civilian movements to engage in the trial-and-error process of reinventing nonviolent struggle to fit their local

circumstances and finally outmaneuver the regimes they oppose. Instead, the global community must invent new ways of providing assistance to these movements.

They don't need enormous financial subsidies, and they certainly don't need Americans parachuting in and telling them what to do. Only truly indigenous movements have the legitimacy required to rally popular support. But many of them need training in the skills of strategic nonviolent action as well as better communications and information-distributing technology, so they can better challenge the repressive regimes that they confront. What is needed is a new, nongovernmental, international foundation – not serving any one nation's interests -- that can impartially provide this help.

What governments can do is expand and strengthen the sanctions against the oppressive rulers which these nonviolent movements strive to replace. Right now the rapacious military rulers of Burma, who have imprisoned the Nobel Prize-winning leader of a nonviolent movement in that country, still receive important political recognition from the governments of India and other Asian nations and have vital commercial relationships with Western corporations that extract Burma's oil and other resources. Neither our government nor more than a handful of student organizations and NGO's in the United States is especially concerned about Burma. I could name a score of other dictatorships around the world whose hold on power is also reinforced by our detachment and our trade. That has to change. Political oppression anywhere is everyone's business, because the violence it breeds can now appear anywhere.

As the world faces the responsibility to confront and dissolve political oppression by supporting nonviolent movements springing from people who want to be liberated, we will be forced to re-examine one other outmoded idea: the belief that the sovereignty of a nation is vested in its government. As Abraham Lincoln insisted, the separate states did not create the federal union, here in the United States. "We, the people," as the constitution proclaims, created our political order. We are the rightful possessors of our nation's sovereignty, and our government speaks and acts for us only insofar as it obtains our freely given consent, through democratic elections.

In the period before the war in Iraq, the government of France and other nations took the position that Saddam Hussein's government was sovereign and that any intervention in Iraq would be a violation of its sovereignty so long as it was not sanctioned by the United Nations. By that logic, outside assistance to a nonviolent civilian movement struggling to remove a repressive regime could also be a violation of sovereignty. But that would place a higher value on a state's prerogatives than on the people's rights. It is time to recognize that no government can exercise sovereignty unless it is based on the people's consent.

This is not merely a need to clarify international law, it also represents a fundamental choice in our thinking about human liberty. Just as St. Paul understood that his freedom was God-given – it was his natural right -- the world is being forced to realize that rights are not conferred by states, they must be honored by states because they belong to individuals. Eventually it will be seen by everyone in this world that every

person's rights come before any ruler's will – indeed, that governments can do nothing that is not affirmed by the people.

And the rights of the people are most readily won by the people, not by terrorists and not by armies. That victory – repeating itself from society to society over the past century – is at hand now everywhere, and it can come without violence.