

## **Self-Democratization**

### **People Power and Government by Consent**

*Remarks by Jack DuVall to International Fellows  
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It is a privilege to be speaking to you, because I know that each of you is dedicated to making self-government succeed in a century when I believe it will become universal.

The American experiment with self-government took almost 90 years before it was no longer in serious historical jeopardy. That is because the American compact between states, embodied in a federal government chosen through national elections, was more or less at constant risk of rupture over the issue of slavery, until Americans fought a costly Civil War in which slaves were emancipated.

Abraham Lincoln was the president whose election in 1860 prompted states whose voters had rejected him to attempt to secede from the Union. Lincoln refused to let them go. He argued that if the losers of the election declined to accept its results and then divided the nation by leaving it, the viability of the democratic principle – based on majority rule – would be vitiated for all the world to see, at a time when the United States was the only democracy where executive power rested exclusively on the popular will.

Lincoln also thought that slavery, surely the worst form of political oppression, was inconsistent with democracy. He explained this simply: “No man is good enough to rule another man without that man’s consent.” But slaves are not the only people ruled without their consent. So too are any citizens anywhere who have no voice in state decisions that affect their livelihood and future. Thus the legitimacy of democratic government derives from securing -- not just once or intermittently, but regularly -- the consent of the people.

In America we have a phrase about the likely quality of anything that you can buy: “You get what you pay for.” In other words, the value of the product will be consistent with what you put into the transaction. A similar standard is exhibited by any struggle to secure self-government: The quality of the democracy will be consistent with the method of achieving it.

In the past century, continuing to this day, the default strategy for liberation throughout the world has been armed struggle. Terrorism is simply another tactical variation of this. The modern political philosopher whose writing on violence has best stood the test of time, in my judgment, is Hannah Arendt. In her essay, “On Violence,” she said:

*“Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it. And since when we act we never know with any certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing, violence can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction...”*

*“In a contest of violence against violence, the superiority of the government has always been absolute.”*

In other words, violence directed against British or American or any other civilians will engender a far more violent response, because their governments have far greater means to locate and kill their adversaries. Does anyone really imagine that any U.S. president or British prime minister would interpret terrorism as a reasonable demand to stop military assistance to the Egyptian or Saudi governments? No, terrorism against civilians will always be seen the way that civilians see it: As an existential threat that requires a proportionate response.

Since the Bolsheviks hijacked a nonviolent struggle against the Russian Tsar one hundred years ago and failed in the attempt to stage a violent revolt, there is not a single instance in the world in which terror or organized violence has succeeded in overturning an oppressive government which was followed by a government based on the consent of the people.

So terror as a strategy of obtaining self-rule is not rational, on the basis of logic or history, as Hannah Arendt argued. But it is not the only possible such strategy. In virtually every country today where basic rights are withheld, there are groups and movements consisting of ordinary citizens who are using something other than violence to compel change. They're using nonviolent tactics such as strikes, boycotts, blockades, mass protests, and civil disobedience, in order to undermine oppressive rulers and win power. Can they succeed? Let's ask Hannah Arendt. She said, in 1970:

*“In a contest of violence against violence the superiority of the government has always been absolute; but this superiority lasts only as long as the power structure of the government is intact – that is, as long as commands are obeyed and the army or police forces are prepared to use their weapons. When this is no longer the case, the situation changes abruptly...”*

*“Where commands are no longer obeyed, the means of violence are of no use; and the question of this obedience is not decided by the command-obedience relation but by opinion and, of course, by the number of people who share it...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.”*

This is the concept of power at the core of how civilian-based movements succeed. People power dissolves authoritarian control by starving it of popular consent and acquiescence, driving up its cost of operations, and spurring defections from its own armed defenders. This was the dynamic at the heart of many of the great civilian-driven nonviolent revolutions of the past one hundred years.

Indians refused to pay the taxes of their British colonial masters. African-Americans refused any longer to obey segregationist laws and customs. Polish workers refused to leave their shipyards and factories until they won the right to organize a free trade union. Ordinary Filipinos refused to let a dictator's loyal army units attack rebellious soldiers, blockading them with their bodies – and the military fell apart, and with it, the regime. Chileans refused to let General Augusto Pinochet steal a plebiscite, forcing him out. Czechs, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under communist regimes besieged their capitals and refused to go home until their rulers did. Serbs, Georgians and Ukrainians by the millions refused to permit corrupt, fraudulently elected leaders to hold onto power. The road to fuller, genuine democracy then opened up in all these countries.

A major new study issued this summer by Freedom House and supported by our Center reports that in 50 of the 67 transitions from authoritarianism to democracy in the past 35 years, nonviolent civic resistance was a pivotal force – and, in contrast, where opposition movements used violence, the chances for liberation were greatly reduced. “The activity of strong nonviolent coalitions reduces the appeal of opposition violence,” it concluded. Why? Because those who want to be violent always claim that it's the only way to fight effectively, and when that claim is disproved, the allure of violence begins to ebb.

Osama bin Laden has said, “The walls of oppression and humiliation cannot be demolished except in a rain of bullets.” In that statement is represented the weakness and ultimately the downfall of his cause, because no political movement – which is what radical terrorism usually represents – can succeed if its strategy is based on fallacious ideas. All ideas that are received but are not examined – if they cannot explain real events -- cannot be the basis for sustained effective action to obtain power, and that also applies to strengthening self-government after oppressive rule has been removed.

The reason that political transitions driven by civilian-based nonviolent movements produce sustainable democracy is that ordinary people – the great broad majority of a nation's citizens – participate or identify with the movement and its goals. Its victory is their victory. When you march, sit in, boycott or strike, you become a stakeholder in the results of what you've done – and *you* have done it, not policy elites or international advisors or foreign governments.

Moreover, in the words of the Freedom House study, “when such movements achieve a mass scale, they effectively prepare millions of citizens for political and civic activity, which then makes power-holders accountable after a democratic change occurs...[These movements] are environments for compromise, common ground and self-discipline...they create a basis for the tolerant give-and-take that is a crucial component of democracy...an important school for the preparation of future civic leaders...”

Today the knowledge of how to develop nonviolent strategies and how to organize, mobilize and direct civilian-based movements is only thinly and unevenly distributed around the world – but films, workshops, educational courses, the Internet, and soon even a video game, are now helping to accelerate the diffusion of that knowledge. The content of this information is not arcane or technical, and it is not some concoction brewed in Western universities, NGO's, or governments. It is simply a distillation of the practical lessons learned by Indians, Danes, South Africans, Poles, Filipinos, Chileans and a score of other peoples who developed and applied civilian power to produce or regenerate their own democracies.

Abraham Lincoln once 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 - a right, which we hope and believe, is to liberate the world."* Those who have that right can now be supplied with the knowledge of how to liberate themselves, without recourse to violence.

If a democracy can be said properly to belong to the people in whom is vested its sovereignty, then applying people power to the task of removing oppressive rulers can be called self-democratization. If democracy is to last, there may be no better kind.

*Jack DuVall is president of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, co-author of "A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict" (Palgrave/St. Martin's Press, 2001), and executive producer of the television series of the same name.*

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