

The Demand for Liberation: Motivations and Limitations of Political Violence

Notes for Remarks by Jack DuVall, Conference on “The Error in Terrorism”, Southampton Institute, November 11, 2004

During the four years prior to 9/11, my colleagues and I were engaged in developing a major new book and documentary television series providing a comparative and narrative history of the great nonviolent civilian-based movements that had taken political power in the 20th century. As we did so, we realized that the book needed a chapter on the well-known alternative strategy for liberation, insurrectionary violence and terror – and we called that chapter “The Mythology of Violence.”

That chapter probed the persistent failure of two famous insurrectionary movements, the Basque ETA in Spain, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka – one relying intermittently on terrorism, the other on traditional military rebellion.

The failure of the Basque and Tamil movements is no exception. There is in fact no good example in the last 100 years in which a violent or terrorist movement gained power and gave way to a government that observed human rights or was based on the consent of the governed. But there are manifold examples of nonviolent movements doing exactly.

The one thing common to both kinds of movements, and to most terrorists, is that they use the discourse of fighting oppression to explain the reason for their struggles. In his “Declaration of War Against the Americans” in 1996, Osama bin Laden accused America’s allies (Israel in Palestine, and India in Kashmir) of putting Muslims in a “prison” of fear. “Our fight against these governments is not separate from our fight against you,” he insisted.

But the killing of innocent civilians stirs misgivings among ordinary civilians in societies where terrorists operate; one only needs to think of how the Muslim world recoiled from the killing of children in the recent tragedy in Beslan to know that is true. To prevent that kind of blowback, terrorists constantly insist that violence is a necessity. “The walls of oppression and humiliation cannot be demolished except in a rain of bullets,” Bin Laden has said.

Yet when terrorists embrace suicide bombing as a tactic, the supposed political necessity of violence isn’t sufficient as a motivation. Terrorist leaders go further, enjoining death as a form of personal heroism and a means of divine deliverance. The texts and tracts of Islamist terrorists are studded with the glorification of death. Bin Laden has even said, “Death is truth.”

And that represents a strategic weakness of today’s global terrorists, because *death is not broadly popular*. Wailing mothers on al Jazeera, angry about their sons’ suicides and blaming their terrorist tutors, is extremely damaging to terrorist recruitment.

Moreover, reducing the motivation for terrorism to the desire to bathe in death empties it of political content. Often packaged with vengeance as the answer to self-perceived victimhood, this line of indoctrination infantilizes political understanding in the ranks of those recruited into terrorist groups. And if there's one thing that a political movement doesn't need, it's a reduction in political intelligence among its members.

Glorifying death also prompts movement members to see tactical action in romantic rather than strategic terms. It models a concept of power as contained within the tactical moment rather than a continuum of assessing options, weighing risks, taking decisions and making adjustments. In turn this enervates the strategic imagination of a movement.

What is more, if a movement is preoccupied with the demands of recruiting, training and motivating its personnel because its tactics are difficult for many to adopt, its leaders will tend to embellish claims of the effects of tactical action, especially if it makes big news. Terror becomes theatre, and its action becomes a performance more than a political campaign.

Even the very choice of terror and violence as the offensive means of a struggle has disadvantages built into the structure of conflict which ensues.

- First, violent groups almost always have a serious inferiority of firepower in relation to the states which they target.
- Second, a violent strategy cannot mobilize the full participation and resources of the civilian population in whose name the movement is acting, because civilians head for the basements when bullets are flying.
- Third, terror and violence tend to militarize movements, which resort to hierarchical, command-obedience relationships that over-invest expectations in the decision-making prowess of an elite core, which is susceptible to arrest, decapitating the movement.

Contrast the flaccid, self-limiting strategic motion of a terrorist organization with the record of civilian-based resistance and liberation movements:

- Mohandas Gandhi galvanized the Indian people to engage in massive noncooperation, boycotts and protests against British rule of India, which sapped the economic benefit to Britain of controlling the country and advertised to all Indians their common determination to be free – creating a sense of inevitability about the change.
- In World War II, the Danes used boycotts, strikes and sabotage to slash the value to the Germans of having occupied their country and to defend the idea of their national sovereignty at a time when the Nazis were trying to submerge so-called Aryan peoples into the Third Reich.

- In the U.S., the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s used sit-ins, boycotts and marches to disrupt local enforcement of racial segregation, raising its cost to the point of shearing off its support by white business and ending the acquiescence of the federal government to this injustice.
- In Poland, workers used occupation strikes at factories to win the right to unionize, employed the union to organize Polish civil society, and destroyed the credibility and legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of the people, eventually forcing communist rulers to negotiate a different future.
- Also in the 1980s, a nonviolent coalition in Chile used regular mass demonstrations to strengthen civilian opposition to the rule of General Pinochet and exploited a plebiscite he called to split the military junta beneath the general's rule, forcing him out.
- In South Africa, after a decade of township violence and guerrilla raids that only seemed to harden the apartheid state's control, the United Democratic Front and other nonviolent groups used boycotts and strikes to make the country "ungovernable", reinforce the effect of international sanctions, and push civil instability to the point of forcing the governing party to negotiate its way out of the crisis.
- In Serbia in 2000, a student-sparked nationwide nonviolent insurgency helped strengthen opposition to Slobodan Milosevic, and by the time a million Serbs caravanned into Belgrade to prevent him from refusing to honor the result of an election loss, his own police and military forces – seeing the unity of the people – refused to follow orders to crack down, which compelled him to resign.

These and other nonviolent liberation movements had certain strategic features that explain their success in developing and applying political power in real time: [insert from KSU speech]

When violence and terror are proposed as the only serious option for a liberation struggle, in ignorance of the historical record, it's clear that the effectiveness of violence is an article of faith, more than a proven strategic fact. So it is not ironic that the prime users of terror now are those who invoke religious more than political convictions as their motivation.

Because we know that nonviolent movements have roused, not thousands, but millions of people in persistent, intense campaigns for political liberation that have succeeded, we should realize that political violence has no special hold on the imagination of the ordinary people whose choice of how to struggle counts the most. It is, after all, their lives and rights which are at stake.

Instead of bidding up the theatrical threshold of tactical action, requiring greater and greater spectacles to give the illusion of success, nonviolent movements reduce the risk of action and extend it horizontally throughout societies on a vast scale, enlarging the repertoire of what can be done to bring down oppressive systems.

And the nature of nonviolent struggle itself begins to accomplish this transformation even while oppressors still appear to hold power. Instead of believing that violent agents or self-martyring champions will shatter the oppressor's will, civilian-based movements create street-corner champions on a national scale. They pilfer, siphon away and finally shift power tectonically – to the people, who accomplish their own liberation.

Terror would outsource popular struggles to bands of killers. Strategic nonviolent action is self-liberation. This is a model which is now, transnationally, being propagated by veterans and practitioners of these conflicts to nonviolent resistance groups in a score of countries. As they become successful, this model of liberation will be enhanced in the eyes of those who want to fight for their rights, supplanting the appeal of terror.

Terrorists intervene in conflicts with military force. To ordinary people on the ground, their chief products are videotaped warnings and televised tragedies. Indisputably, there is a market for terror in the world today, and that grows out of the demand for liberation. And if the only method of reducing terror is to kill terrorists, that only addresses the supply of terror, not the demand.

The motivation for political violence is the demand for liberation. The motivation will subside, as the demand is met by other strategies for shifting power to the people.