

CIVIL RESISTANCE AND DEMOCRATIC POWER
Remarks by Jack DuVall at a conference of
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Forty-one years ago, in New York City, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who led the civil rights movement powered by African-Americans, said that all over the world people “are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression.” He said that war was not a way to assist those revolutions, that instead we needed to engage in a “positive thrust for democracy” by taking “offensive action in behalf of justice.”¹

More than a century before, Abraham Lincoln, the president who emancipated Dr. King’s ancestors, declared that “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.”²

To apply this right in India, Mohandas Gandhi launched a great civilian-based movement against British rule. Millions boycotted the government’s monopolies, quit state jobs, and marched and protested. 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.”³

Gandhi’s campaigns were the first stories of civil resistance reported worldwide by broadcast media. In ensuing decades, the pace of this new force accelerated. The Danes obstructed German occupiers in World War II by strikes and work slow-downs. Polish workers refused to leave their shipyards until they’d won the right to a free trade union.

Filipinos blocked a dictator’s army units from attacking officers who had switched sides, and their dictator had to resign. Czechs, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under Soviet client regimes choked the streets of their capitals until their rulers stepped down. Black South Africans went on strike, boycotted white businesses and made their country ungovernable, until apartheid fell.

When former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic died two years ago, *The New York Times* called him “a ruler of exceptional ruthlessness” who had created “a violence not seen in Europe since 1945.”⁴ Three years before, a nonviolent campaign to dislodge Milosevic was spurred by a youth group 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.

Four years later, there were comparable events in Ukraine. When vote fraud in a presidential election on the scale of 2.8 million ballots favored the regime’s candidate, a million Ukrainians came to the center of Kyiv and would not leave until a new vote was ordered. Their planning and nonviolent discipline impressed the secret service and army, who blocked orders to use violence. A new vote was held, and the Orange Revolution opened the door to a government clearly based on the consent of the people.

These are not exceptional cases. In 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy in the last 35 years, nonviolent force was pivotal.⁵ Civil resistance opens the vise of oppressive rule by disputing its legitimacy, escalating the cost of its operations, and splitting the ranks of its own defenders. Gandhi said that “the people, when they become conscious of their power, will have every right to take possession of what belongs to them.”⁶

Unfortunately, we live in a world that still so worships the primacy and prerogatives of the state, that the evidence of what citizens can do to win their rights is disregarded when it stares us in the face. But why should we be more impressed by the indirect acts of states than by the direct acts of the people who have the greatest incentive to induce change?

The most common misconception about civil resistance is that it isn't possible without public space for protest. But that assumes that resistance is mainly physical – even though many campaigns work because of what they refrain from doing. A strike means not going to work, a boycott means not buying, and withholding fees or taxes means not paying. Danish resistance to Nazi occupation in World War II reached its zenith when strikes and work stay-aways spread to every city.

A second misconception is that defiance isn't possible if repression is brutal. But at the height of state violence in Argentina in the 1970s, a group of mothers of the disappeared surprised everyone by marching every week in the heart of Buenos Aires. The regime realized they couldn't beat or arrest these women without alienating more people, so they were tolerated – and grew in number, and inspired other groups to organize to restore democracy. When fear receded, so did the regime's aura of invincibility. All rulers face constraints on how they can act.

A third misconception is that civic force can't be mobilized without a politically literate middle class, independent media, and an election to organize around. But before Gandhi challenged the British Raj, the political class of Indians who published their own newspapers and petitioned the government made little progress. In contrast; Gandhi mobilized tens of millions of illiterate Indians who terrified the British. Fifty years later, Solidarity fractured the Polish communist party's hold on power, and the apartheid state was crippled by nonviolent action in South Africa, without open elections or much of a black middle class to aid and shelter resisters.

A fourth misconception is that civil resistance requires outside assistance, often from foreign governments, and therefore can't be trusted. But in more than forty cases of nonviolent resistance producing major political changes in the last hundred years, there is no evidence that foreign money or transnational activists ever played a decisive role. The knowledge of how to use nonviolent action has been distributed openly for a half century, and NGO's such as labor unions and the Catholic Church have helped local campaigns for more than thirty years. But the start, the steam and the strategy behind each movement have come from the people who put their lives on the line.

The reality is that only indigenous activists can make sound judgments about what tactics will work in relation to opportunities and risks. There are no secret recipes, tricks, or technical short-cuts. Only people whose own future is at stake can persuade their fellow citizens to rise up.

It's true that people power is disruptive: It stops oppression from working -- so that people's lives can be shaped by their own choices, not by the mandates of the state. Dictators say that no one should destabilize a country, that development requires peace. But why should we worship order if women cannot vote, if journalists are arrested, if students are beaten in the streets or disappeared? Order without rights is peace at the price of darkness.

Despite the success of civil resistance to overcome oppression, today more than twenty nations are stricken by violent insurgencies and separatism or by terrorist campaigns.⁷ At the core of each of these armed conflicts is a political struggle. Power is concentrated in a ruling group that disdains the people's voice and is challenged by an insurrectionary group whose skill is sufficient to keep itself going but cannot match the violence of the state.

In all these countries, every avenue of systematic progress, in rights and health and the environment and education, is obstructed by cycles of violence -- while the cost of that violence to the livelihood and longevity of the people mounts with every passing year. Self-obsessed or autocratic rulers and the killers who attack them are not just enemies of each other, they are foes of the people's future.

In the past several years, I've met many brave young men and women who are helping to save their people's future, in Egypt, Zimbabwe, Tibet, Palestine, Tonga, Iran, Nigeria, Guatemala, Lebanon, West Papua, and the Maldives. For 30 years, the Maldives have been saddled with the same corrupt dictator. His family and friends own the land beneath luxury island resorts, and he looks the other way as the drug trade pushes boys into addiction and radical Islamists push a life of submission on young girls.

Until two years ago, political opposition in the Maldives was suppressed, but then a dissident was killed in custody and international pressure forced the regime to open up more space for dissent. One woman I visited, an opposition leader who had taken up nonviolent protest, had been labeled a terrorist and was under house arrest when I talked with her. Not only do Maldivians have a repressive government to face down, some are alarmed that the Islamists might eventually try to force their way into power, aborting the chance for democracy.

The temptation of violence gains traction when people think they have no alternative. The philosopher Hannah Arendt said that "much of the present glorification of violence is caused by severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world."⁸ To break that frustration, the truth about how people capture power must be learned. Václav Havel, the Czech dissident and later president, said that living without rights was living a lie -- the lie that life is normal -- and that escaping the lie by confronting repression could open the way to a "social movement" or "civil unrest."⁹

The outcome in the Maldives is still uncertain, but the opportunity for a nonviolent transition to democratic rule is still alive. Yet while oppressed people in many countries are slowly learning how to mount civil resistance, the global public is still largely unaware of its impact. The news media are so transfixed by the prestige of governments, they neglect the evidence of what self-organized citizens can do, and they are so spellbound by the spectacle of violence, they discount the possibilities of civil resistance, especially when it isn't exhibited as protest.

But civil resistance has a better record of freeing people because it enlists the full breadth of a society – women, workers, merchants and minorities – rather than only alienated young men reaching for guns. It doesn't depend on theatrical tactics to sustain momentum, and instead of goading its most courageous fighters into suicide, it reinvests their experience in more ingenious ways to expedite the struggle.

Moreover, people power does not have to glorify death. Osama bin Laden once said, "Death is truth."¹⁰ That reminded me of how a Serbian civic leader explained why the old regime in Belgrade lost the people's trust. "Their language smelled like death," he said.¹¹ He knew what Bin Laden doesn't: Death is not popular. In a poll taken last year in the two most populous Muslim societies, Indonesia and Pakistan, seven out of ten people said that killing civilians is never justified.¹²

Apart from the obvious carnage it creates, violence isn't necessary to gain power. A new study cited this year in the journal *International Security*, which reviewed 323 violent and nonviolent campaigns between 1900 and 2006, found that violent campaigns succeeded in part in 26 percent of cases, but nonviolent campaigns succeeded in 53% of cases – more than double the success rate of violence.¹³

These are facts and that is history, and to the extent that people gain the knowledge of how civil resistance succeeds, the allure of violence will wane. Merely exhorting people not to be violent, when every violent image in the news is proof of its prevalence, is a losing strategy to end violent conflict. Only when violence is understood as a losing strategy to gain power will it become less prevalent. In our book, *A Force More Powerful*, there is a photograph of a lone protester on a street corner in South Africa in 1986, holding a sign: "To end violence, struggle for justice."

So what should we do, you and I? "To work in...the People," the great poet Walt Whitman said, "this, I say, is what Democracy is for..."¹⁴ So say we all. So all of us, through our associations and foundations, through our libraries and universities, through all appropriate organizations and major institutions, should work to help any people anywhere who cannot write, who cannot meet, who can't speak out, but who want to march and strike and 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.

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¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," speech at Riverside Church, New York, NY, April 4, 1967;

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>

² Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* and *Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*. The Library of America, 1989.

³ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, Yale University Press, 1989.

⁴ "Slobodan Milosevic, 64, Former Yugoslav Leader Accused of War Crimes, Dies," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2006.

⁵ Adrian Karatnycky, Study Director, "How Freedom Is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy," A Research Study by Freedom House, 2005.

⁶ Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁷ Ploughshares Fund, *Armed Conflicts Report*, 2007,
<http://www.ploughshares.ca/images/articles/ACR07/MapRevACR07.pdf>

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1970), 83.

⁹ Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1985).

¹⁰ Osama bin Laden, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," *Al Quds Al Arabi*, 1996.

¹¹ Srdja Popovic, *Bringing Down a Dictator*, documentary film, 2002, produced by Steve York.

¹² "Large and Growing Numbers of Muslims Reject Terrorism, Bin Laden," report on polls taken by Pew Global Attitudes Project and Terror Free Tomorrow, *WorldPublicOpinion.org*, June 30, 2006

(http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/international_security_bt/221.php?nid=&id=&pnt=221)

¹³ Dr. Maria Stephan and Dr. Erica Chenoweth, "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict," *International Security*, vol. 33, issue 1, pages 7-44, Summer 2008.

¹⁴ Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," *Prose Works*, 1892.