

## **Civic Power and the People's Rights: Nonviolent Action for a New World**

**Remarks by Jack DuVall – Male, Maldives Islands, August 2006**

### *“Never Yield Submission”*

Three months ago, 250,000 immigrants demonstrated in Los Angeles, California, to dramatize the contribution of undocumented workers to the U.S. economy. One newspaper interviewed a 54-year old Guatemalan house painter who was standing on the curb, watching the protest. “This is America,” he said. “This is the first time in my life I have seen something like this. This is why everyone wants to be here.”

That Guatemalan man identified the principle that gives democracy its staying power: The right of the people freely to express their minds, openly to seek relief from injustice, and fearlessly to hold government accountable for its action.

Recent immigrant protests in America focused on legislation making illegal immigration a serious crime. In spirit they reminded me of an event a hundred years ago -- a mass meeting convened in Johannesburg, South Africa, by Mohandas Gandhi, an Indian lawyer outraged by a new law requiring Indians to carry registration cards. “The Old Empire Theatre was packed from floor to ceiling,” Gandhi later wrote. One speaker said they “must never yield a cowardly submission to such degrading legislation.”

During a long campaign of noncooperation, Indians burned their registration cards, marched across borders, and thousands went to jail, Gandhi himself three times, to disrupt the laws' enforcement. In the eighth year of resistance, the laws were withdrawn. One piece of one empire of contempt for people's rights was erased, starting that night at the Empire Theatre.

Gandhi had said that he had been influenced by the American writer Henry David Thoreau, whose essay, “On Civil Disobedience,” had been published in 1849. Thoreau had said, “All men recognize...the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable.” That echoed even bolder words spoken one year before by an American congressman who later became president, Abraham Lincoln:

*“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.”*

To apply this right in India, Gandhi returned home from South Africa and launched a great nonviolent movement against British rule. Millions marched, boycotted state monopolies, and quit state jobs. 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.”

Gandhi's campaigns were the first stories of civic resistance reported worldwide by broadcast media. Ever since, the adoption of nonviolent action has accelerated. The Danes obstructed German occupiers in World War II by strikes and work slow-downs. African-Americans marched and boycotted until racial segregation was dissolved. 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 his regime was immobilized. Czechs, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under Soviet client regimes choked the streets of their capitals until their rulers called free elections. Black South Africans went on strike, boycotted businesses, and made their country ungovernable, until a new political system was established.

Five months ago, 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." Five years ago, 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.

### *Withholding Consent*

These are not exceptional cases. In 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy in the last 35 years, nonviolent force was pivotal. People power opens 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."

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." Lincoln had said, "No man is good enough to govern another man, without that other's consent." 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. Leonid Kuchma, president for ten years, was stepping down. His rule, which began with economic reform, had given way to corruption and curbing dissent. In 2000, Ukraine's leading independent journalist was decapitated, and the president was implicated. In the midst of the 2004 campaign to replace Kuchma, the opposition candidate was poisoned. When vote fraud in the election on the scale of 2.8 million rigged ballots was revealed with the help of international observers and favored the ruling party's candidate, 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 police and 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." 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 after Viktor Yushchenko became president of Ukraine, 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. 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, 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. In fact, civic resisters today are active in Palestine, Tunisia, West Sahara and elsewhere in that region. In Islamic countries generally, there are many precedents in history for nonviolent movements producing new civic power and making gains for the people:

- In 1929, the Pashtun leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan founded his nonviolent “Servants of God” movement against British rule in what is now Pakistan. He organized hundreds of villages and thousands of people, to boycott state stores and lie down in front of police lines holding the Koran.
- In 1985, in Sudan, weeks of nonviolent protests in Khartoum and Omdurman against the repressive rule of a dictator was capped by a general strike that paved the way for a bloodless coup.
- In 1987-88, in the first Palestinian Intifada, tens of thousands of civilians boycotted Israeli products, marched in demonstrations, refused to pay fees, and inspired military “refuseniks” in Israel to split public support for the occupation.

This year in Egypt, opposition parties boycotted parliamentary elections, and civilian dissidents against authoritarian rulers in North Africa are gathering force. The ranks of these campaigns in the Islamic world, to open up closed societies and force governments to observe human rights, are far more numerous than the membership of terrorist networks – because they stand for people living freely, now and everywhere.

### *The Engine of Strategy*

Not every nonviolent campaign succeeds, of course. Perhaps the most spectacular failure was in China, in 1989. Charismatic student leaders rallied a half-million Chinese in a weeks-long occupation of Tiananmen Square, demanding free speech and other rights. But they couldn’t agree among themselves about the tactics to use next, they didn’t recognize that the government might agree to some if not all of their demands and so they lost a chance to bargain for the survival of their movement, and they prepared for repression. It might have helped them to recall the aphorism of Sun Tzu, an ancient Chinese sage: “Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” The Tiananmen demonstration was crushed.

Compare that lost opportunity to the strategy of Polish workers in 1980, when strikes in shipyards galvanized the nation and stunned the communist regime. Militant workers had wanted to march on local party headquarters, but Lech Walesa and his organizers realized that would lead to quick repression, so they occupied the shipyards instead. Then the militants wanted to demand full democratic rights, but Walesa knew that would trigger Soviet intervention. Instead the workers bargained for the right to a free trade union, which they won – so anxious was the regime to end the strike. With that right, they organized the nation; ten million Poles joined what was called Solidarity, and nine years later Walesa became president of Poland. Opportunity for power emerges from a strategy to build it.

In a nonviolent struggle, the engine of that strategy has three cylinders, and the first is unity. The movement should encompass a wide spectrum of political views and social communities and operate with a consensus about its goals and methods. Without unity, a movement can't claim to represent the people, and its calls for action won't enlist wide participation.

In Poland, Solidarity became the agency through which left intellectuals, conservative Catholics, factory workers, students, and merchants coalesced into an enduring civilian force that kept putting pressure on the government, even during martial law. The movement that roused a majority of Chileans to challenge General Augusto Pinochet included groups of all kinds, and the front ranks of the people power movement that forced the resignation of an autocratic Filipino president featured wage-earners, businessmen, nuns, students, and army and air force officers.

The second cylinder of the strategic engine is planning. No successful nonviolent movement is spontaneous. The vulnerabilities of the opponent have to be assessed and tactics have to be sequenced, to probe, confuse and eventually outpace the decision-making resilience of the state. Meanwhile, activists have to be trained, money has to be raised, and communications have to be maintained.

In the nation of Georgia beginning in 2000, the student group Kmara decided that university reform wasn't possible so long as the same government remained in office, so they joined a nationwide movement to win elections. Kmara's cadres split into four parts: public relations, field work, training and finance. In the words of one of its leaders, Giorgi Kandelaki, "...tactical planning occurred on a weekly basis mainly during brainstorming sessions. Once the idea and details for an action were approved during a discussion, activists would compile a detailed budget for the action...once a decision was made Kmara members exerted efforts to retain discipline in its execution."

But whatever plan is adopted, winning is impossible unless the opposition refrains from violence, because just as repression blackens a regime by showing that it's lost the ability to persuade, armed attacks criminalize those who strive to replace it. Nonviolent discipline is therefore the third cylinder in the engine of strategy. Without it, a movement can't enlist ordinary people, who won't take the risks of violent resistance.

Nonviolent discipline is also critical in co-opting people within the state's apparatus. Defections from the military and police can be the decisive factor in a nonviolent struggle, but soldiers won't switch allegiance to those who shoot at them. Armed defenders come from the same communities as nonviolent resisters, so they

know what's at stake: their livelihood and future prospects, in a society that has a chance to escape from capricious misrule.

At the height of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine fourteen months ago, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators were totally nonviolent. "We are a force," said one speaker to the crowd, "but a peaceful force." Volodymur Filenko, head of mass action for the opposition campaign, said of the soldiers they faced, "It was very important that we never, ever provoked them with aggression...And this did have an impact." Did it? One general said he never heard one soldier say he'd use his rifle against civilians – which is not surprising, since one of the demonstrators' slogans was "Military with the people!"

So unity, planning and nonviolent discipline are the skills that drive a movement forward -- so that rights are regained which were stripped away, so that voices can be heard which were silent, so that people can become who they want to be. Their words and action, the commitment of their lives and sacred honor are the fuel for this kind of change. Democratic power is not seized by a few, it is summoned from the many.

### *Misconceptions about People Power*

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 is disregarded when it stares us in the face. And we live in a time that is so mesmerized by the spectacle of violence used by states or insurrectionists, that seismic change driven by nonviolent action is explained away by reference to indirect acts of states rather than the direct acts of the people who have the greatest incentive to induce change.

Misconceptions about people power are repeated by the world media as if they were facts rather than opinions. The most common is that civic resistance isn't possible unless there is enough public space for protest. But that assumes that resistance is only physical protest – even though many civic campaigns are effective because of what they do *not* do. 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 nonviolent action isn't possible if rulers are too repressive. But at the height of state violence against dissent 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 arrest or beat up these women without alienating more people, so they were tolerated – and grew in number, and inspired other groups to organize. When fear receded, so did the regime's aura of invincibility. All governments face constraints on how they can act.

A third misconception is that people power won't work if the government doesn't depend on the people for revenue. Last year I heard a panel discussion in Madrid on energy security, chaired by a London oil trader. He flatly declared that what happened in Ukraine couldn't happen in petroleum-producing regimes in Central Asia, because oil wealth made them impervious to whatever the people did. What he failed to notice is that every oil-rich state is also stupendously corrupt, which sows deep popular resentment – and economic tactics aren't the only way a civic movement can apply pressure for change.

A fourth misconception is that civic forces can't be mobilized without a politically literate middle class, independent media, an election to organize around, and outside training in campaigns and vote-counts. But before Gandhi challenged the British Raj through a mass movement, the political class of Indians who published their own newspapers and petitioned the government had little impact. In contrast, Solidarity fractured the Polish communist party's hold on power, and the apartheid state was crippled by civic action in South Africa, before fair elections came to those countries.

Insisting that civic resistance only works through an electoral model misconstrues it as another form of politics, rather than what it is: neutralizing unjust rulers' capacity to govern. People power is not a form of moral suasion, it's contentious, it forces states to honor people's rights, so that their lives can proceed according to their choices rather than the whims or mandates of those who govern.

### *Means and Ends*

For people to defy a government not based on their consent may be the most fateful political transaction in they can engage. About most transactions, Americans have a saying: "You get what you pay for." How you buy something can determine if you get to keep it. If you use someone else's credit card, to whom will you owe your future? If, instead of mobilizing the people to produce the kind of government which they want, you delegate the fight to an armed band which pays in blood to get what it wants, you may or may not get a government that listens to you. But history proves you will almost certainly get recrimination, vendettas and civil strife.

"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? Osama bin Laden says that "oppression...cannot be demolished except in a hail of bullets." Lenin went further, saying that "real, nationwide terror" was needed to "reinvigorate" a country.

But since Lenin wrote those words, there is no instance anywhere in which violent revolution or terror has liberated a people and launched a government based on their consent. 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 disturbed British control. Terror wasn't actually a rational means to a political end; Gandhi called it "a deep-seated disease," a "cult of violence."

In his first message to America after the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden said that his young jihadists "have no intention except to enter paradise by killing you." In other words, their motivation had been drained of political content, for if the only reason to kill is to be killed, the killer has discarded any concern for the living. Whatever else it may be, liberation is not about the dead.

So 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. Karl Marx called the "democratic concept of man" false, because it holds that each person "has value as a sovereign

being,” and he called that postulate “an illusion.” If you do not value another person’s life, then of course you are free to take it away.

But how reasonable is it to believe that annihilating lives can enhance life, that destruction opens the door to progress? Violence is not the product of the people’s power, and it almost never yields the people’s rights.

### *Liberating Minds*

Abraham Lincoln said that slavery amounted to one proposition: “You work, I’ll eat.” But injustice breeds conflict, and Lincoln called it a struggle between two principles: “One is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle...No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation...or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.”

Those who use violent repression and those who tout violent revolution are both attached to that principle, for they would not give the people the opportunity to set the course of history – they would reserve that for themselves. This is not a modern attitude. It is more ancient than the pens beneath the Roman Colosseum, where slaves were kept, to be sacrificed in public combat. But history did not end in Rome. The acceptability of the urge to dominate would eventually begin to ebb, once the scientific revolution dawned.

One of its heralds, Francis Bacon, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century declared that science was “not a belief to be held but a work to be done,” and he thought of that work as “a work for the peoples.” Thought had to be liberated from absolute belief before free inquiry and experiment could open up power from new ideas. The anthropologist Loren Eiseley said that Bacon knew that these discoveries would come slowly “by infinite and continuing effort, out of minds whose dreams must rise superior to the existing world...” The scientific challenge, Eiseley wrote, “was to break with the dead hand” of dogmatism, “to arrest and touch with hope the popular mind.”

We settled on our title for *A Force More Powerful* (the book, the television series, and now the video game) when we read of Gandhi’s meeting with African-American ministers in 1937. One of them asked the Indian leader whether nonviolence was active rather than passive. Slightly agitated, Gandhi replied, “It is the greatest and the activist force in the world...a force which is more positive than electricity, and more powerful even than ether.” It was as if he thought of it, not as religious or even political, but as a kind of science, with laws to be applied and power to be derived.

Those who have amplified Gandhi’s legacy by consummating nonviolent struggles for rights, democracy and self-rule include Europeans, Asians, Latin Americans, Africans and North Americans, and those who fight this way for rights today include Central Asians and Polynesians, as well as Africans and Asians. Civic power is a global phenomenon, even as its strategies brew in the basements and the barrios of a thousand different villages and cities. Among those who are doing this are:

- An Iraqi-born journalist, returned to the country of his birth after long exile in Europe, to edit one of Baghdad’s uncensored, honest and popular newspapers, in the explosion of free speech happening in that city.

- An Egyptian woman raised in Britain and now living in Berlin, working to help local activists throughout the Middle East fight government corruption.
- A young Belarusian student, a woman determined to help bring genuine democracy to her country.

When the Egyptian and the Belarusian visited Washington, I took each of them to the Lincoln Memorial. The Belarusian had never heard of Lincoln, the Egyptian only knew he had freed African-American slaves. Neither had read before his words, inscribed on the Memorial's walls, rededicating the nation to the proposition that all people are equal, and to the "great task" of insuring that the idea of government by the people would be preserved for all mankind.

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.

Take away consent and government withers. 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. Václav Havel said that the greatest threat to a system based on lies is living in 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 Gandhi, that they have the opportunity?

Jack DuVall  
 President, International Center on Nonviolent Conflict  
<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org>



