

The Right of Resistance

The Legitimacy and Support of Nonviolent Civic Force

Remarks by Jack DuVall - May 11, 2006
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“Never Yield Submission”

Eleven days ago, as a quarter-million immigrants demonstrated in downtown Los Angeles to dramatize the value to the American economy of undocumented workers, a 54-year old Guatemalan house painter stood and watched. “This is America,” he said to a reporter. “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 America’s purpose: To uphold 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.

The nationwide boycott on May 1 stemmed from earlier protests aimed at legislation that would make illegal immigration a felony. In spirit and in purpose, they reminded me of an event that happened 100 years ago -- a mass meeting convened in Johannesburg, South Africa, by Mohandas Gandhi, an Indian lawyer outraged by a new law making Indians carry registration cards. “The Old Empire Theatre was packed from floor to ceiling,” Gandhi wrote. One speaker said they “must never yield a cowardly submission to such degrading legislation.”

They never did. 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 In the eighth year of civic resistance, the laws were withdrawn.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. The date was September 11.

While in jail, Gandhi read these words by the American writer Henry David Thoreau, published 58 years earlier: “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 Illinois congressman, 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.”

Lincoln did not conceive that right. It was sewn into the fabric of our founding. Writing in the *Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton prefigured Thoreau: “When the first principles of civil society are violated and the rights of a whole people are invaded, the common forms of...law are not to be regarded.” James Madison, foreshadowing Lincoln, went further, recognizing the “transcendent and precious right of the people to ‘abolish or alter their governments’.” From the start, Americans were revolutionaries.

By Consent, Not the Sword

To ignite a revolution against British rule of his homeland, Gandhi returned from South Africa to India and set in motion a great, cascading river of civic resistance that ran through South Asia for decades. Millions marched, boycotted British 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 nonviolent mass action reported worldwide by broadcast media. Ever since, the rate with which people have applied this new force 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, his options disappeared, and he fled. 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.

Seven weeks ago, former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was buried. *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, spurred by a youth group, Otpor, united behind an opposition presidential candidate and rallied the public to enforce a fair election. A million Serbs converged on Belgrade, the military refused to crack down, and Milosevic had to go.

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

Seeing Orange

In 2004, millions of Ukrainians did just that. 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. Polls said that only one in four Ukrainians liked the way the country was run, but 40% believed they might have to protest to defend their rights. They did.

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. Systematic planning and nonviolent discipline – earmarks of strategic civilian-based resistance – 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 of a violent regime to rule by intimidation. A new vote was ordered, the challenger won, and the Orange Revolution succeeded.

But as a new president took power, a false version of events sprang from commentators outside Ukraine. An article in *The New York Times* said that the American Bar Association's training of Ukrainian judges was crucial, since the Ukraine supreme court had invalidated the first vote. Officials in the Russian foreign ministry accused veterans of the Serbian resistance to Milosevic of secretly training the Ukrainian opposition. A reporter for the *Financial Times* said that my organization had also helped, even though we never spoke to a single Ukrainian.

A British academic writing in *The Guardian* went so far as to suggest that all uses of people power are the result of a decades-long American plot to topple regimes that the U.S. didn't like, based on a "network of interlocking foundations and charities...transferring millions of dollars to dissidents." But if that were true, why did Filipinos use people power to oust a dictator who was a friend of Ronald Reagan? Why did the Chilean people mount five years of demonstrations and finally vote out General Pinochet, who Nixon and Kissinger had aided? To believe that civic resistance is an American plot would require you to believe that the Mongolians and South Africans and every other people who've used nonviolent strategies to win their rights were part of some vast global conspiracy hatched in Washington.

That, of course, is a fantasy, concocted to support other beliefs and interests that have little to do with how nonviolent action really works. This wave of disinformation washed ashore after the Orange Revolution in part because the nonviolent earthquake in Ukraine reverberated in Krygyzstan and Belarus. Those republics are viewed by Moscow as part of its sphere, and the Russian government – which has shut down independent media and increasingly harassed Russian dissidents – has a vested interest in trying to disprove that people power comes from the people.

Nine months after Viktor Yushchenko became president of Ukraine, 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. Well, yes. That's called democracy.

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 are active in Palestine, Tunisia, West Sahara and elsewhere in Arab lands. Nevertheless al Jazeera carried an article claiming that nonviolent uprisings are the work of the CIA and "its regime change NGO industry."

In June 2005, al Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, also took a swipe at the Lebanese civic rising and other signs of democratic change in the region. "Reform and expelling the invaders," he said, "will not happen except through fighting for God's sake." For him, only violence and fanaticism will work. But you'd expect a terrorist to say that, if he were worried that the people had found another prototype for liberation.

No leader or party that benefits from existing arrangements of arms and power wants anyone to believe that the people want to move beyond that system, because once that is widely noticed, the legitimacy of those who hold or challenge power without the consent of the people begins to expire. Few journalists, policymakers or even academics, on record as doubting that people can win their freedom without help from a superpower or a violent revolution, are likely to believe it when the people do just that.

The attempt to discredit popular nonviolent resistance comes from those who have something to lose if it succeeds: an ideological belief, an attachment to the kind of regimes that are falling, a seat in a TV studio as a talking head, or even the title, "Mr. President." And if you claim that a conspiracy proves your belief to be right, you can enjoy the moment of wowing your listeners or readers and then dash off to another meeting or story, before they notice you haven't proved that the conspiracy exists.

Ideals and Motives

There is one other trigger for rumors of American manipulation behind the so-called "color revolutions," which ought to be acknowledged. The Bush Doctrine of using pre-emptive military force if needed against states that aid terrorism is seen by many critics as having been discredited by the grim and costly occupation of Iraq. In that context, the Administration's second-term emphasis on democracy promotion as its other way to fight terrorism has been casually labeled as another form of intervention.

But any American who hopes, as Lincoln did, that the right to resist oppressive rule will "liberate the world" should hesitate before dismissing the promise of one of his successors to apply and not just invoke that ideal. President Bush says that America's policy is "to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions", and that "democratic reformers facing repression" are "the future leaders of their countries." Those of us who have long wanted our government to act for such goals should seize the gift of this policy and make sure it is more than rhetoric.

Yet as Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace wrote in *Foreign Affairs* this spring, U.S. officials have said little when faced with crackdowns by undemocratic but friendly rulers in nations like Egypt, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, allowing such regimes to pay "no significant price for their antidemocratic defiance." When Vice President Cheney was in Kazakhstan last week and was asked what he thought of its democratic record, he voiced his "admiration for what has

transpired here.” It isn’t likely that he meant the closing down of an opposition party and restricting free media in the year before the last election. But American NGO’s that endorse rights and democracy aren’t circumscribed by the U.S. government; they’ve been active in Kazakhstan – as they are on behalf of citizens in dozens of other countries where the U.S. government is not involved.

A good example of that is West Papua. Invaded and occupied by Indonesia in 1963, its people have long wanted independence, and a nonviolent movement there has received help from private groups in Australia and the U.S. This year the Indonesian government ignored international appeals to lift its ban on human rights observers and foreign media from visiting West Papua, where demonstrations have triggered severe repression. But when Secretary of State Rice visited Jakarta in March, she praised the government for setting an example of “moderation and tolerance.”

Our government’s periodic failure to practice what it preaches is the backdrop for suspicion of the motives for American assistance to people struggling for their rights. I’ve seen that suspicion first-hand. My organization was asked by an Iran-related human rights organization to help arrange a workshop on nonviolent action to Iranians invited to Dubai a year ago. No money or guidance came to us from any U.S. agency to do this, nor would we have taken it.

But after the Iranian regime arrested and interrogated three workshop participants ten months later, the husband of one was interviewed by a leading American newspaper while his wife and daughter were still in custody. After this poor man wrongly referred to the workshop as a Bush operation that jeopardized his family – as if Iranian authorities weren’t responsible for arresting them -- a reporter for that newspaper interviewed us. He said it looked as if the Bush Administration might be screwing up democracy promotion just as it had screwed up Iraq – and he seemed disappointed to hear that our workshop was unrelated. Rumors of regime change planned in Washington, not demand in Tehran to learn about civic resistance, was the tantalizing story.

Fighting Darkness

Authoritarian rulers afraid of popular resistance, distrust of American motives in helping resisters, or viewpoint-driven journalism are not all that feeds the backlash against people power. Also influential are longstanding misconceptions about the dynamics of nonviolent resistance when used to fight for political rights – misconceptions that owe much to an obsolete paradigm of political power.

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 remake a nation 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 movements 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 fostered by these beliefs are repeated endlessly by op-ed writers as if they were laws of nature 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 protest, or some sort of physical display – even though many civic campaigns are effective 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 nonviolent defiance isn't possible if rulers are too repressive. History says otherwise. 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 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 governments, however brutal, face constraints on how they can act. It's only a question of targeting those constraints.

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 strikes, boycotts or whatever the people did. What he failed to notice is that every oil-rich authoritarian state is also stupendously corrupt, which sows deep popular resentment – and economic tactics aren't the only way a civic movement can complicate a dictator's ability to keep the lid on his society.

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. If the regime doesn't call an election to gain the fig-leaf of legitimacy, then forget it. 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: disrupting a repressive state's capacity to govern. People power is not a form of moral suasion, it's a form of fighting: It stops oppression from working -- so that people's rights can be restored, so their lives can unfold according to their choices rather than the whims or mandates of the state.

Now I'm sure that someone will take out of context my statement that people power is a form of disruption, but think about what kind of argument they're likely to make: "Disruption is a bad thing." "No one should destabilize a country." "We should want peace and not conflict." All that is true, if the order being preserved allows people to exercise their natural rights. But if it doesn't, why should we value that kind of order? Why should we be anxious about difficulties for dictators produced by their own people? Order without liberty is peace at the price of darkness.

Those who want to discredit people power don't just decry its agitation against abusive government. They also deny that the source of that disturbance is the people. As I've noted, they claim that external agents or governments are really behind resistance. But any plausibility that claim may seem to have can't derive from the

motives or interests of external actors, except insofar as it is possible for nonviolent, civilian-based movements to be invented and engineered externally – and that is the biggest misconception of all.

In more than forty cases of nonviolent civic force applied to accomplish major political changes in the last hundred years, there is little if any evidence that external governments, foreign money, transnational activists, or international foundations ever played a decisive role. The knowledge of how to engage in nonviolent action has been distributed openly by countless groups for a half century, and nongovernmental organizations like labor unions and the Catholic Church have made timely contributions to local campaigns for human rights and free elections for more than thirty years. But the start, steam and strategy behind each success of people power have come from the people whose lives were on the line and whose future was at stake.

There is no external intervention model that works to manufacture nonviolent resistance, because it isn't possible for outside agencies to motivate indigenous movements of persecuted people to do their bidding. Only local leaders and activists can make sound judgments about what tactics will work in relation to opportunities and risks. And arcane training isn't necessary to make these decisions. The generic know-how needed to develop nonviolent strategies is all that has to be transferred. There are no secret recipes, sinister tricks, technical gadgets or mumbo-jumbo that have to be inculcated. Americans couldn't orchestrate a nonviolent revolution anywhere, except in the United States. Only people who crave their rights, who refuse to be governed against their will, can build a movement that persuades a population to rise up and recast their fate.

Ukrainians, Georgians and Serbians did that, just as Indians, Poles, Filipinos, Chileans, Czechs, Slovaks, Salvadorans, African-Americans, South Africans, East Germans, East Timorese and many other peoples did before them. If three of these triumphs were "color revolutions," they all were. Rutgers sociologist Kurt Schock calls them unarmed insurrections. But whatever they're called, they all turn on one pivot: the right that insures all other rights -- the right of resistance.

The Choice

More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle said that tyrants rule for their own advantage, while legitimate government is for the equal advantage of all who are governed. The American insight, as Lincoln explained, 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. "By breaking the rules of the game," he said, the resister "has disrupted the game...He has upset the power structure by tearing apart what holds it together."

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 jails and borders, guns and domination that keep us down and drive us wide apart -- will abort this embryonic world. I believe that all of what stifles and divides us 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? Do we believe, as Lenin said, that terror is invigorating? Do we accept Bin Laden's cry that the walls of oppression cannot fall except in a hail of bullets? Or do we believe, with Lincoln, that the people have the right to overturn any form of servitude, and with Gandhi, that they have the opportunity? The ancient Hebrew prophet Ezekiel, quoting his God, said: "I will overturn, overturn, overturn it...until he comes whose right it is." Today the right to overturn belongs to everyone.

So if you want your liberators not to come from Washington, or the caves of Pakistan, then go and find them in the mountains of Tibet, in the shantytowns outside Harare, on the banks of the Mekong, in the classrooms of Tunisia, in the villages of Sichuan, and yes, in the streets of Isfahan -- and teach them civic power. No government can stall such liberators for very long.

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