
The Right to Rise Up: People Power and the Virtues of Civic Disruption

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On January 12, 1848, a first-term member of the U.S. Congress stood up in the House chamber to challenge the president's conduct of the war with Mexico. Congressman Abraham Lincoln suggested that President James Polk had not been truthful about the war's justification; that the United States had not intervened to support the independence of Texas from Mexico, but to take Mexican territory. Yet Lincoln also affirmed the right of Texans to self-determination, saying:

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.¹

On the same day that Abraham Lincoln spoke these words in Washington, D.C., the streets of Palermo, Italy, were jammed with people. Leaflets had called for demonstrations in favor of constitutional government in Sicily, then ruled by a repressive king. In ensuing months, street protests erupted in France against King Louis Philippe, in Berlin for political rights, and in Prague for Czech independence from the Austrian empire.

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Throughout a year of popular revolts across Europe, republics were declared and kings were forced to abdicate. But all these uprisings tumbled into violence or succumbed to military crackdowns. Within three years, the surge toward democracy had failed and Europe's old regimes retook control.

It took more than a century for the peoples who rose up in 1848 to obtain rights enforced by governments that had gained power through fair elections. Lincoln, the man who liberated America from slavery fifteen years after declaring the right of any people to liberate themselves, would not have been surprised. He proposed that self-government was not only for America, it was for "a vast future also."²

Today, people in half the world are still not living in that future. In China, Cuba, and North Korea, democratic opposition parties are banned. In Belarus, Burma, Iran, and Zimbabwe, regime opponents are harassed and jailed. In Palestine and West Papua, self-determination has not been achieved. In more than 40 other countries, government is not based on the consent of the people.

Yet in all these countries, repression is resisted by people who know instinctively that better lives will only follow better ways of being governed. Workers and peasants in Asia want to have a say about where they live and work. Africans and Central Asians want to be free of the corruption that steals the value of the resources they extract from their wells and mines. Bloggers in the Middle East want to use the Internet without being arrested and tortured. And women in a score of nations want the right to vote where they cannot, the right to dress as they prefer, and the right not to be beaten or even mutilated where those abuses are sanctioned.

The impulse to assert the dignity of being human, to claim what Lincoln called "a fair chance in the race of life," is universal.³ But Lincoln said that something more was needed than that impulse. You must also have the power to rise up and shake off oppression.

CHOOSING HOW TO RISE UP

The uprisings of 1848 were foreshadowed by the French Revolution of three generations before. That revolution—replete with guillotines in public squares and the killing of a king—has been touted ever since by incendiary egotists. With no little gusto, Vladimir Lenin said, "We need the real, nationwide terror which reinvigorates the country and through which the great French Revolution achieved glory."⁴

While Lenin's revolution succeeded, the Bolsheviks did not deliver a

government based on the consent of the people. Nor has any violent revolution since then done so. As a strategy for rising up, violence may make revolutionaries into celebrities, but it rarely liberates citizens. The latest Leninist in his choice of methods, Osama bin Laden, said that “oppression and humiliation cannot be demolished except in a rain of bullets.”⁵ But his tactics have not brought him any closer to his stated goals of bringing down regimes he doesn’t like—and political power should only be measured by its ability to deliver political results.

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The clearest modern thinker about violence, Hannah Arendt, said that “in a contest of violence against violence, the superiority of the government has always been absolute.”⁶ People who choose guns and bombs as the way to rise up will find that the regimes they attack have far more experience in such contests. So we should not be surprised to learn that in 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarianism in the past 35 years, according to a recent study by Freedom House, it was not violent rebellion but non-violent civic resistance that was the pivotal force.⁷

Power is not inherent in the physical tools used in a conflict; it is produced in the strategic transaction between the parties to a conflict. Thus civic resistance requires building a movement that instigates a conflict. Strikes, boycotts, mass protests, and civil disobedience are among the tactics that such a movement applies. Typical objectives include discrediting the lies that an oppressive ruler uses to assert legitimacy, weakening the support that he needs to govern, and interrupting his capacity to monopolize information and control events.

The failure to recognize that civic disruption is the essence of nonviolent struggle is the reason that policymakers and media often fail to anticipate the impact of “people power.” To elite broadcasters and pundits, the capacities of ordinary people are like Rodney Dangerfield, they “can’t get no respect” unless there are a half-million demonstrators on the streets. But by then, the real story—the mobilization of a nationwide, representative movement—may already have unfolded.

This failure to take nonviolent resistance seriously has two causes. First, the longstanding use of the word “nonviolence” to describe the root of civilian-based struggle frames the latter as moral behavior rather than political conflict. When those who want to fight for their rights hear this, they may not opt for nonviolent action because they don’t want to make peace with a brutal ruler—they want to force him out. And when reporters assume that

nonviolent action is some sort of “soft power,” they overlook what people’s movements have done to dislodge bloody regimes, instead giving credit to collateral factors like international sanctions, external aid, or bomb-throwing rebels on the sidelines who are high on testosterone but low on political sense.

Equally misleading is the belief that nonviolent resistance works only against less repressive opponents, like the British in India or American defenders of segregation. That the British could exploit India without constant brutality is not to say that it was merely a 200-yearlong inconvenience for Indians. The 450 Indians who were massacred by colonial soldiers at Amritsar wouldn’t have thought so. As for what desegregated America in the 1960s, lofty intentions and inspiring speeches were not decisive. Most American politicians had designed or condoned racial subjugation—which at one time included lynchings—and mass civic disruption broke it down through sit-ins, boycotts, and marches, driving the cost of the system sky-high, city-by-city and state-by-state.

The civil rights activist Bernard Lafayette has said that nonviolent action “is fighting back, but you’re fighting back with other weapons.”⁸ Lincoln said, “No man is good enough to govern another man without that other’s consent.” When one group dominates another, there is no consent—but there will be resistance. To turn that resistance into a force for change, you have to persuade others to join you, based on a proposition about a better future. That means you’re selling ideas, better ideas about how people can be governed. And that is exactly what happens in a democracy. What it takes to sustain a free political order that respects equal

rights is developed by what it takes to organize a civilian movement to produce that system.

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This isn’t just a theory. The Freedom House report cited earlier, entitled “How Freedom Is Won,” found that in three of every five bottom-up,

civic-driven transitions from authoritarian rule, rights and liberties were upheld well after the transition. What begins with civic disruption can end with lasting democracy.¹⁰

THE ENGINE OF STRATEGY

The 2005 Nobel Prize for Economics was awarded to Thomas C. Schelling of the University of Maryland. Fifty years ago Schelling wrote about conflict between an oppressor and civic forces:

The tyrant and his subjects are in somewhat symmetrical positions. They can deny him most of what he wants . . . if they have the disciplined organization to refuse collaboration. And he can deny them just about everything they want . . . by using the force at his command. . . . They can deny him the satisfaction of ruling a disciplined country, he can deny them the satisfaction of ruling themselves. . . . It is a bargaining situation . . . and it remains to see who wins.¹¹

Today Google is helping the Chinese government block the Chinese people from having access to much of the Internet, and Yahoo has helped Beijing track down political dissidents. But the Chinese had a chance to win their rights in 1989, when charismatic student leaders rallied a half-million Chinese in a weeks-long occupation of Tiananmen Square, demanding free speech and democracy. Unfortunately, they couldn't agree among themselves about the tactics to use next, and they had no plan to survive as a movement if the government didn't give way to their demands. They faced but didn't recognize what Schelling called a "bargaining situation." 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 winning strategy of Polish workers in 1980, when strikes stunned the communist regime. Militant workers had wanted to march on local party headquarters, but Lech Walesa and his organizers realized that could lead to quick repression, so they occupied their 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 Solidarity, and nine years later Walesa was president of Poland.

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

Left intellectuals, conservative Catholics, factory workers, and students all coalesced behind Solidarity into an enduring civilian force that kept pressuring the government, even during martial law. The movement that roused a majority of Chileans to challenge General Augusto Pinochet included groups and parties across the spectrum, and the original people

power movement that forced out the autocratic Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos was composed of 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 Georgia in 2000, the student group Kmara decided that university reform wasn't possible so long as the government remained in office, so they joined a nationwide movement to win the next elections. In the

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words of one of its leaders, Giorgi Kandelaki, "tactical planning occurred on a weekly basis . . . during brainstorming sessions. Once the . . . details for an action were approved during a discussion, activists would compile a detailed

budget for the action. Though discussions were heated . . . once a decision was made, Kmara members exerted . . . discipline in its execution."¹²

Outraged by Kmara's popular graffiti campaign, regime supporters said the students were part of an Armenian conspiracy. That was followed by the charge that American billionaire George Soros was behind everything. Outside experts couldn't believe that Georgians had carried out the campaign without external help. But then, some historians insist that without Robert F. Kennedy's Justice Department segregation would not have been demolished. Is this fair—should eminent people in offices far from the basements and boulevards of a struggle deserve more credit for its success than the people who risk their bodies or careers to wrench a better future out of a tormented past? The question answers itself.

No campaign to overturn oppression is creditable unless it is indigenous. That is why internal audiences are more crucial than external supporters, although both are influenced by the contest for historical legitimacy and moral authority between a movement and a government. Winning that contest is impossible unless the opposition refrains from violence, because just as repression blackens a regime by showing that it has lost the ability to persuade and can only terrorize, armed attacks criminalize those who would replace it.

Nonviolent *discipline* is therefore the third cylinder in the engine of a strategy. Without it, a movement can't enlist ordinary people, who won't

take the risks of violent resistance. To the extent that a movement's tactics jeopardize lives, the cause will lose momentum.

Nonviolent discipline is also critical in co-opting people within the state's repressive apparatus. Defections from the military are often the straw that breaks the camel's back in a nonviolent conflict, but soldiers are unlikely to switch allegiance to those who are shooting at them. Armed defenders come from the same communities as a movement's members. They know that their future prospects are at stake, and that their society suddenly has a chance to escape from capricious misrule.

At the height of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators remained nonviolent. "We are a force," said one speaker to the crowd, "but a peaceful force." Volodymur Filenko, head of mass action for the campaign of opposition presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko, said of the soldiers they faced, "It was very important that we never, ever provoked them with aggression . . . and this did have an impact."¹³

One general later commented, "Besides his official position, every soldier is also a citizen. Many guys from our office, for example, would leave work in the evening, change their clothes, and go to the Maidan [the main demonstration space] to join the revolution." That's not surprising—one of the demonstrators' slogans was "Military with the people!" No wonder that when an order came to crack down, the army and the secret service refused. A corrupt regime that had poisoned its opponents and murdered journalists was replaced with one that espoused reform and stood for real democracy.¹⁴

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

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THE RIGHT TO KNOWLEDGE

The British held India by force for a century and a half before Mohandas Gandhi began organizing to resist their rule. The ideas that he promoted, he also delivered himself, face-to-face—taking the train or even

walking to speak to crowds that continually grew over a period of a few years. Step-by-step, he changed the spirit and the fate of his nation. One hundred years after the last century's leading teacher of nonviolent action began his work, systematic knowledge of how nonviolent strategies can dissolve almost any kind of persecution is now traveling everywhere.

This knowledge is circulated by books and documentary films in many languages, curricula and institutes at universities, conferences, workshops by veterans of nonviolent conflicts, and now a videogame on nonviolent strategy. It can't be stopped, although many fearful governments would prefer that their subjugated citizens not learn how to use nonviolent strategy to resist repressive rule. In 2004, Cuban dissidents were arrested, tried, and jailed in part for having copies of the documentary film series, "A Force More Powerful." In March 2006, Iranians who had participated in workshops on nonviolent action the previous year were arrested and tortured. Violence is the only means by which oppression can defend itself.

The knowledge of how to defeat oppression is not based on any secret recipe. It is simply the distillation of best ideas and practices springing from nonviolent struggles that have triumphed, and failed, in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas over the past century. It is the people's knowledge, a global legacy, and the people of the world have a right to learn from each other's stories of liberation.

Yet after the departure of detested governments in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, and the expulsion of Syrian troops from Lebanon after a nonviolent uprising, all taking place in a period of less than four years, the governments in Moscow and Beijing have begun to vilify the idea of nonviolent revolutions named after colors or flowers. Unwilling to admit that the majority in these nations wanted genuine democracy, critics with other axes to grind have insisted that nonviolent uprisings are the work of the CIA and "its regime change NGO industry," in the words of one writer on Al Jazeera.

But as Valerie Bunce of Cornell University and Sharon Wolchik of The George Washington University argue in a new paper, the theory of external manipulation greatly underestimates the role of the citizens "who did the planning, took the risks, went to the polls and, if necessary, took to the streets."¹⁵

For decades, civic groups around the world have received help and training from nongovernmental organizations and foundations outside their countries. The Roman Catholic Church was celebrated when it aided nonviolent activists in the Philippines and Poland. Groups in Europe and African-Americans helped raise the visibility and also hard

cash for the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Nonviolent groups advocating East Timorese independence from Indonesia got support from many countries.

The most important kind of assistance to activists, however, is not material but intellectual—the generic knowledge of how their brothers and sisters in other conflicts developed strategies and applied tactics that worked. Knowledge is not a material commodity and its flow across the world should be unhampered by those who dislike its content.

In a world in which terrorists insist every day that their self-determination requires indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians, the work of nonviolent campaigners to achieve self-government should get as much help as possible, because as a model for liberation, nonviolent action represents an irresistible alternative to violent struggle once it becomes visible as an option for aggrieved people.

In the last four years, we have met and talked with activists and students and civic leaders from Iraq, West Papua, Zimbabwe, France, Iran, Tunisia, Venezuela, Palestine, Italy, the Philippines, China, Australia, Libya, Tahiti, Azerbaijan, Kenya, West Sahara, and the United States, all of whom are convinced that nonviolent strategies can curb corruption, defend free elections, re-energize democracy, reclaim their homeland, or just help them speak and assemble freely in the cities and open spaces of their nations. The demand for the knowledge of this power crosses all ideological lines and springs from a cascade of causes.

We believe that it is no longer necessary for men and women at arms to die in order to create or restore government by the people. Violence, much less terror, is not a prerequisite for rights or freedom in a world where autocratic clout can be annulled with civic resistance. It is no less glorious or revolutionary for the people to be the means of their own emancipation than it is for armed force to be that instrument.

It is time for all those, not just in government but also in the media and universities, on the Internet, among activists and in publishing, who tell stories and create images and propound theories of how the walls of injustice can crumble, to put down the guns of their imagination and recognize the truth: The right to rise up can change history, but blood is no longer the price.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), 167.
- 2 Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*. (New York: The Library of America, 1989), 297.
- 3 Ibid, 259.
- 4 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Collected Works* (New York: Firebird Publications, 1995).
- 5 Osama bin Laden, "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," August 23, 1996, <www.mideastweb.org/osamabinladen1.htm> (accessed April 5, 2006).
- 6 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1970), 48.
- 7 How Freedom Is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy, Freedom House, 2005.
- 8 Steve York, "A Force More Powerful," broadcast on PBS, September 2000.
- 9 Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858*, 328.
- 10 How Freedom Is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy, Freedom House, 2005.
- 11 Thomas C. Schelling, "Some Questions on Civil Defence," in Adam Roberts, ed., *Civilian Resistance as a National Defense* (Albert Einstein Institution Monograph Series, 1991), 351-352.
- 12 Giorgi Kandelaki, "Rose Revolution: A Participant's Story," July 2005 (to be published by the U.S. Institute of Peace).
- 13 Anika Binnendijk, "Breaking the Stick: The Impact of Nonviolent Strategies on Ukrainian Security Forces During the 2004 Orange Revolution." Unpublished Master's thesis, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, January 2006, 60.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, "Bringing Down Dictators: American Democracy Promotion and Electoral Revolutions in Postcommunist Eurasia," in Mitchell Orenstein and Stephen Bloom, eds., *Transnational and National Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (manuscript in preparation).