

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

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1848

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 U.S. 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 this:

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.

On the very 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 to push constitutional government for Sicily, which was ruled by a repressive king. In ensuing months, there were street protests in France against King Louis Philippe, demonstrations in Prague seeking Czech independence from the Austrian empire, protests in Berlin for political rights, and student protests in Vienna.

Throughout a year of popular revolts all 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 over a century for the peoples of Europe who rose up in 1848 to obtain their rights, honored by governments based on popular consent ascertained by 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."

But half the world today is not yet living in that future. The people of Sudan, Zimbabwe, Tunisia and Libya do not. The people of Syria, Iran and Pakistan do not. The people of North Korea, China, Burma, and Vietnam do not. The people of Belarus and Turkmenistan do not. The people of Cuba do not. And the people of all the countries represented by the 9/11 hijackers do not.

Yet in all these countries, repression is resisted by people who know instinctively that better lives can only follow better ways of being ruled. Workers and peasants in China want to have a say about where they live and work. Africans and Central Asians want to be free of corruption that steals the value of the resources that they extract from their wells and mines. Students and web bloggers in Iran want to use the Internet without being arrested and tortured. Papuans and West Saharans and Palestinians want self-government. And Muslim women in Egypt, Indonesia and other nations want the right to vote where they cannot, the right to dress as they prefer, and the right not to be beaten legally or even mutilated where that abuse prevails.

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

The Choice of How to Fight

The uprisings of 1848 were foreshadowed by the French Revolution of three generations before. Now the French are wonderful people (I should know, I’m partly French), but their revolution – replete with guillotines in public squares and the killing of a king – has been a model touted by incendiary egotists for two centuries. 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.”

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. As a strategy for rising up, violence and terror may make revolutionaries into celebrities, but they do not liberate the people. The latest famous Leninist in his choice of methods, Osama bin Laden, says that “oppression and humiliation cannot be demolished except in a rain of bullets.” But his tactics haven’t 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.

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.” On the global stage, this means that non-state actors making existential threats against civilian populations invite massive state-delivered suppression of their capacity to fulfill those threats. Terrorism is no more destructive than it is self-destructive.

But the results of violent force have not ever been limited to the countervailing violence it causes. Its spectacle and wreckage, seared by the media into the images of memory, erects the myth that doing damage has meaning, that it tells some sort of truth about the cause that it purports to serve. Alexander Solzhenitsyn didn’t think so. “Any man who has once proclaimed violence as his method,” he said, “is inevitably forced to take the lie as his principle.”

The first lie of those who use violence to impose their will is that it has *inherent* power. But if those threatened are not afraid, and if they don’t consent to what the threat-maker wants, he won’t succeed. Power is produced in a strategic transaction between contending forces, not from the physical tools of that conflict. The second lie behind political violence is that it’s justified as the only means of achieving change. But in 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarian to democratic governments in the past 35 years, according to a new study, nonviolent civic resistance and not terror or violent rebellion was the pivotal force.

Vaclav Havel, the great Czech dissident and later president, defined the way this force could arise. He said that living without rights was living a lie – the lie that life is normal– and that escaping the lie, by confronting the fact of oppression, could make the truth visible, through a “social movement”, “civil unrest” or “a sharp conflict.” This would be living in the truth, Havel, said, and it would open up “explosive, incalculable political power.”

Tactics to Disrupt

Building a movement that instigates a conflict and provokes unrest to undercut an unjust order is what civic resistance is all about. Strikes, boycotts, mass protests, and civil disobedience are among the tactics that such a movement applies – in order to discredit the lies that an oppressive ruler uses to assert legitimacy, weaken the support that he needs to govern, and interrupt his capacity to monopolize information and control events.

The failure to recognize that civic disruption is the essence of nonviolent political struggle is the reason that observers often fail to recognize “people power” as *power*. What governments do and what decision-makers say are taken seriously. But the capacity of ordinary people to change the system too often goes unnoticed. To elite broadcasters and pundits, the people are like Rodney Dangerfield, they “can’t get no respect” – unless there are a million of them on the streets. But by then, the real story – the mobilization of a nationwide, representative movement – has already unfolded. The genesis of people power lies in strategy, not theatre.

Two other misconceptions should also be challenged. One is triggered when the word “nonviolence” is used to describe the root of this kind of struggle, if it were a frame of mind or type of behavior. When those who want to fight for freedom hear this, they won’t 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 don’t take seriously 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 high on testosterone but low on political sense.

The most common misconception is that nonviolent resistance works only against less brutal opponents, like the British in India or American racism. That the British could exploit India without constant brutality is not to say that it was merely a 200 year-long inconvenience for Indians. The one thousand Indians who were massacred by British soldiers at Amritsar wouldn’t have thought so. As for what desegregated America in the 1960s, it wasn’t lofty intentions and mystical speeches. 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 never before seen where they were held, 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.” The rock music group Kosheen has unconsciously captured something of that spirit, of what it means to challenge a tyrant, in the lyrics to their song, “Catch”:

*You create misery, have your cake and need it
Take your place in history, and pray we don’t repeat it
Call it faith, call it back, call it off, don’t call me later...
Out of my way, I’m coming, I’m gonna catch you if I can
Out of my way, start running. I’m gonna catch you.*

Refusing any longer to take the tyrant’s “calls” and coming after his sources of power shows that a race, a conflict, is underway and that it may not end until the “creator of misery” is caught, as if he were a criminal. And make no mistake about it, depriving people of their rights is, in history’s eyes, a crime. Lincoln said, “No man is good enough to rule another man without that man’s consent.” When one group dominates another, there is no consent – but there will be resistance.

So the instinct for self-government is congenital – and people rising up to achieve it is natural. But first you have to persuade others to join you, based on a proposition about the destiny you share. 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.

This isn’t just a theory. A report entitled “How Freedom Is Won” published last year by Freedom House found that in one of every five top-down transitions from an authoritarian to a democratic system in the last three decades, newly won rights were later withdrawn. But in three

of every five bottom-up transitions, when the people won their own rights, those liberties were upheld after the transition. What begins with civic disruption can end with lasting democracy.

The Engine of Strategy

A few months ago the 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.”

Today Microsoft and Google are helping the Chinese government block the Chinese people from access to much of the Internet, and Yahoo has helped Beijing track down political dissidents. America may be buying half the contents of every Wal-Mart store from the Chinese, but their rulers haven't bought the idea of self-government. The Chinese people will have to win it for themselves. They almost did in 1989, when 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, 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 Tom 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 strategy of Polish workers in 1980, when strikes in shipyards 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 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 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 groups and social communities and operate with a consensus about its goals and methods. Without unity, a movement can't claim to represent the aspirations of the people and its calls for action won't enlist full participation.

Through Solidarity, 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 every coloration, and the original people power movement that forced the resignation of the autocratic Filipino president Ferdinand Marcos featured uncommon courage by 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 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...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."

Outraged by a popular graffiti campaign by Kmara, regime supporters said the students were part of an Armenian conspiracy. That was followed by the belief that the American billionaire George Soros had cooked everything up. Outside experts couldn't believe that Georgians had done it themselves. But then, some historians insist that without Robert F. Kennedy's Justice Department, African-Americans could not have demolished segregation. Eminent people in offices far from the basements and boulevards of the struggle deserve more credit than the people who risk their bodies or careers to wrench a better future out of a tormented past? Don't you believe it.

No campaign to overturn oppression is creditable unless it is indigenous, and the people who join the campaign know that best of all. 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's 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 won't switch allegiance to those shooting at them. Armed defenders come from the same communities as a movement's members. They know what's at stake: their future prospects, in a society that suddenly 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." Volodymyr 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..."

Did it? 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." He said he never heard one soldier say he'd use his rifle against civilians. 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 which had poisoned its opponents and murdered journalists was replaced with one that espoused reform and stood for real democracy.

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 revolution. Democratic power is not seized by a few, it is summoned from the many.

The People's Knowledge

The British held India by force for a century and a half before Mohandas Gandhi began organizing to resist their rule. The ideas he promoted, he delivered himself, face to face – taking the train or just walking, to speak to crowds that only several years of patience enlarged. 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.

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 are the ways this knowledge is circulated. It can't be stopped, although there are fearful governments and advocates of violence who apparently prefer that people whose rights are assaulted not learn how to defend those rights.

This knowledge 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. It is the people's knowledge, a legacy of millions, whose stories of liberation, whose "living in the truth," are now teaching tens of millions how to do the same.

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 in 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 carried by 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 belittles the role of the citizens "who did the planning, took the risks, went to the polls and, if necessary, took to the streets."

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 commodity but 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, it represents an irresistible alternative to violent struggle once it is visible as an option for aggrieved people.

Engagement by Americans in the work of sharing the knowledge of people power is consistent with our very identity. One of our greatest poets, Walt Whitman, who lived in

Washington when Lincoln was president, said that the mission of civilized governments is “to train communities...beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves.” People today who yearn to rule themselves do not need governments to do this training. But Whitman knew that if Americans declined to join this work, we would abandon who we really are. “To work in...the People,” he declared, “this, I say, is what Democracy is for; and this is what our America means.”

In the last four years, I 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, 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. But all these causes really comprise and reinforce one cause.

On his route to Washington from Illinois before his inauguration as president, Abraham Lincoln gave a talk to the Senate of the New Jersey legislature in Trenton. He spoke about the men who had fought with George Washington in the American Revolution. “I am exceedingly anxious that that thing which they struggled for,” he said, which “held out a great promise to all people of the world to all time to come – I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made.”

Three years later, at Gettysburg, Lincoln defined that idea. He said that America was dedicated to a “proposition,” that all are “created equal.” And then he asked us to offer “increased devotion” to that cause for which those who died to save the Union had given “the last full measure of devotion” -- “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

I 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. Since Lincoln asked for our devotion to that cause, many others have embraced it and liberated millions with new strategies based on new ideas of power. Violence, much less terror, is not a prerequisite for rights or freedom, in a world where autocratic will 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 live in the truth: The right to rise up can change history, but blood is no longer the price.

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