

Nonviolent Action — A More Ethical and Effective Alternative to War

by Randy Schutt

War is hell — both for the soldiers who fight it and the civilians who live where it is fought. The Iraq war is a perfect example of the mess that military force can make of a country: directly killing thousands of innocent civilians, injuring tens of thousands more, and displacing and traumatizing millions, while destroying critical infrastructure — such as roads, bridges, and electricity generation, water purification, and sewage treatment plants — that makes a civilized life possible. Creating a civilized, democratic society out of the chaotic disaster that Iraq has become will be extremely difficult and take a very long time, even under the best circumstances.

There Is an Alternative

But what is the alternative? In the last three decades, nonviolent action has demonstrated that it is very effective in overthrowing horribly repressive regimes. For example, nonviolent action toppled the apartheid regime in South Africa, deposed the dictatorships of Slobodan Milosevich in Yugoslavia, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, and Augusto Pinochet in Chile, and brought down the former Soviet Union and its communist satellite states (including Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Lithuania). Overthrowing those regimes incurred relatively few casualties and wrought relatively little destruction. The nonviolent overthrow of these vicious regimes has mostly left these countries stronger, more civilized, and much more free and democratic.

Nonviolent action relies on an empowered populace that refuses to carry out the desires of the ruling leaders. Without the consent of the governed, these leaders have little power. If consent is completely withheld, they have only their own personal individual power and can easily be ignored and removed from governance.

Nonviolent action involves ordinary people working together to overcome their oppression. Like war, nonviolent action inspires people to selfless service on behalf of others. Unlike war — which is

usually monstrously destructive and leaves people horribly traumatized and resentful, often leading directly to future wars — the carrying out of nonviolent action actually builds community and understanding and empowers people to act more civilly. In practicing nonviolent action, people work together as a civic body, learning to practice freedom, democracy, and justice.

It's Working 70% of the Time

A 2005 study by Freedom House (http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/29.pdf) found that in the 67 cases since 1972 in which dictatorial systems fell or new states arose from the disintegration of multinational states, civic resistance was a key factor in driving 50 of those transitions — over 70%. In 32 of the 67 countries (nearly 48%), strong, broad-based nonviolent civic coalitions were highly active, and in many cases central to steering the process of change. Only one transition to freedom was brought about by an outside military force.

Of course, nonviolent action cannot win every struggle, just as war cannot. But clearly nonviolent action has demonstrated that it is a viable alternative to war, and one that is a credit to humanity, not a destroyer of it.

If we are sincere about spreading democracy around the world, then it makes sense to use the most effective means available, especially means that are consistent with moral values of freedom, justice, compassion, and community. If there is a viable alternative to war, it makes sense to stop using weapons that kill and maim innocent people and destroy their cities, businesses, and homes.

Each year the United States spends close to \$500 billion on its military forces. The amount spent on diplomacy and nonviolent action by all countries in the world is a minuscule fraction of this amount. Even with little money or research, nonviolent action has achieved tremendous results. Isn't it time to explore this ethical and effective alternative to war?