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Martin Luther King Jr.

Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born on January 15, 1929. Dr. King grew up as the son of a leading minister in Atlanta, Georgia, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. His mother, Mrs. Alberta Williams King, assisted her husband in the care of his congregation. Because of their efforts and interest in behalf of the congregation and the community, his parents were known as 'Momma' and 'Daddy' King. His community, centered on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta also influenced him. By the 1930s when he was a child, it was the center of business and social life in Black Atlanta and the major center for the Black Southeast. The community was so successful that nationwide, it was known as "Sweet Auburn". The residential neighborhoods of the community, and especially the one where Dr. King was born were known for the diversity of the backgrounds of the residents. Though all Black, the neighborhoods had business people, laborers, college-educated, uneducated, rich, poor and successful all living close to each other.

As a boy, Dr. King experienced many of the same things most children do. He helped and played games with his older sister Christine and his younger brother A. D. He played baseball on vacant lots and rode his bicycle in the streets. He went to school at David T. Howard Elementary, three blocks from his home. He attended the Butler Street YMCA down Auburn Avenue. When the family moved to the house on Boulevard, he was attending Booker T. Washington High School, working a newspaper route, attending his first dances, and planning to attend college. But, Dr. King's primary memories of his childhood were of the sting of segregation.

In 1941 Daddy King moved the family to a brick home. Here King continued his development and education until he graduated from Morehouse College in 1948. Dr. King still lived in this home when he attended College here in Atlanta, starting at the age of fifteen. After graduation he left for graduate work at Crozer Theological Seminary, then in Chester, Pennsylvania (now Colgate Rochester divinity School/Bexley Hall/Crozer Theological Seminary in Rochester, New York), and at Boston University. He became pastor at The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama in 1954 and served there until 1960. From 1960 until 1968 he was co-pastor, with his father, of Ebenezer Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue, where his grandfather, Rev. A. D. Williams had also been pastor.

Starting with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-1956, Dr. King was also the foremost leader of the Civil Rights Movement. His dedication to the tactics of non-violent resistance led to successful campaigns in Montgomery, AL, Birmingham, AL, and Selma, AL as well as encouraging African-Americans throughout the South to campaign for their own freedom. After 1965, He expanded his work to include actions in the North, opposition to the War in Vietnam, and planning for a campaign to aid poor people.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968 by James Earl Ray.

<http://infousa.state.gov/life/people/mlk.html>

Presidential Proclamation

Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday, 2012

On a hot summer day nearly half a century ago, an African American preacher with no official title or rank gave voice to our Nation's deepest aspirations, sharing his dream of an America that ensured the true equality of all our people. From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired a movement that would push our country toward a more perfect Union.

At a time when our Nation was sharply divided, Dr. King called on a generation of Americans to be "voices of reason, sanity, and understanding amid the voices of violence, hatred, and emotion." His example stirred men and women of all backgrounds to become foot soldiers for justice, and his leadership gave them the courage to refuse the limitations of the day and fight for the prospect of tomorrow. Because these individuals showed the resilience to stand firm in the face of the fiercest resistance, we are the benefactors of an extraordinary legacy of progress.

Today, Dr. King is memorialized on the National Mall where he once spoke, a symbol of how far our Nation has come and a testament to the quiet heroes whose names may never appear in history books, but whose selflessness brought about change few thought possible. Dr. King's memorial reminds us that while the work of realizing his remarkable dream is unending, with persistence, progress is within our reach.

On the Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday, we celebrate the man who fought for the America he knew was possible. Dr. King's faith in a God who loves all His children and a Nation grounded in the promise of equality would not let him rest until victory was won. As we work to meet the challenges of our time from fixing our schools so every child gets a world class education to ensuring all Americans have access to strong and secure economic opportunity let us draw strength from Dr. King's stirring affirmation that "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve." In his memory, let us continue climbing toward that Promised Land, one more fair and more just for all people.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim January 16, 2012, as the Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday. I encourage all Americans to observe this day with appropriate civic, community, and service projects in honor of Dr. King, and to visit www.MLKDay.gov to find Martin Luther King, Jr., Day of Service projects across our country.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this thirteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand twelve, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-sixth.

BARACK OBAMA

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/13/presidential-proclamation-martin-luther-king-jr-federal-holiday-2012>

The Power of Nonviolent Action

01 March 2009

By Stephen Zunes

*Armed insurgencies impose great human costs. Nonviolent “people power” movements succeed by calling attention to official repression and winning support from the undecided. Stephen Zunes is a professor of politics at the University of San Francisco. He is the principal co-editor of *Nonviolent Social Movements* (Blackwell, 1999) and chairs the committee of academic advisers for the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.*

This article appears in the March 2009 issue of eJournal USA, [Nonviolent Paths to Social Change](#) (PDF, 783 KB).

Nonviolent action campaigns have been a part of political life for millennia, challenging abuses by authorities, spearheading social reforms, demanding an end to colonial rule, and protesting militarism and discrimination.



People-power movements, such as this one in 1989 in Czechoslovakia, have helped bring down scores of authoritarian regimes.

India’s Mohandas Gandhi and the United States’ Martin Luther King Jr., who were both brilliant strategic thinkers as well as great moral leaders, are perhaps the best-known leaders of such movements. Not only were they committed to nonviolent action as the most effective means of waging their respective struggles; they also held to a deep faith-based commitment to nonviolence as a personal ethic. In many respects, however, Gandhi and King were unusual in their personal commitment to principled nonviolence, as the vast majority of nonviolent movements and their leaders have not been pacifists but embraced nonviolent action as the best strategic means to advance their struggles.

Indeed, primarily nonviolent struggles in recent decades have not only led to significant political and social reforms advancing the cause of human rights, but have also even toppled repressive regimes from power and forced leaders to change the very nature of their governance. As a result, nonviolent resistance has been evolving from an ad hoc strategy associated with religious or ethical principles into a reflective, even institutionalized, method of struggle.

Indeed, the past 30 years have witnessed a remarkable upsurge in nonviolent insurrections against autocratic rulers. Primarily nonviolent “people power” movements have been responsible for advancing democratic change in nearly 60 countries during this period, forcing substantial reforms in many countries. Other struggles, while eventually suppressed, have nevertheless posed serious challenges to other despots.

In contrast to armed struggles, these nonviolent insurrections are movements of organized popular resistance to government authority that, either consciously or by necessity, eschew the use of weapons of modern warfare.

Unlike conventional political movements, nonviolent campaigns usually employ tactics outside the mainstream political processes of electioneering and lobbying. Tactics may include strikes, boycotts, mass demonstrations, the popular contestation of public space, refusal to pay taxes, destruction of symbols of government authority (such as official identification cards), refusal to obey official orders

(such as curfew restrictions), and the creation of alternative institutions for political legitimacy and social organization.

Why Nonviolence Works

For many years there was an assumption that autocratic regimes could be overthrown only through popular armed struggle or foreign military intervention. Yet there is an increasing awareness that nonviolent action can actually be more powerful than violence. A recent academic study of 323 major insurrections in support of self-determination and freedom from autocratic rule over the past century revealed that major nonviolent campaigns were successful 53 percent of the time, whereas primarily violent resistance campaigns were successful only 26 percent of the time. (Maria J. Stephan and Eric Chenoweth. "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Logic of Nonviolent Conflict." *International Security*, vol. 33, no. 1, Summer 2008.)

There are several reasons why insurgents have turned away from armed struggle to embrace nonviolent action. One reason is a growing awareness of the increasing costs of insurgency warfare. Technology has given status quo powers an increasing advantage in recent years in defeating or at least neutralizing armed insurgencies. Even when an armed revolutionary movement is victorious, large segments of the population are displaced, farms and villages are destroyed, cities and much of the country's infrastructure are severely damaged, the economy is wrecked, and there is widespread environmental devastation. The net result is an increasing realization that the benefits of waging an armed insurrection may not be worth the costs.

Another factor endorsing nonviolence is the tendency, once in power, for victorious armed movements against dictatorships to fail in establishing pluralistic, democratic, and independent political systems capable of supporting social and economic development and promoting human rights. These shortcomings often result in part from counterrevolution, natural disasters, foreign intervention, trade embargoes, and other circumstances beyond a victorious popular movement's control.

However, the choice of armed struggle as a means of securing power tends to exacerbate these problems and creates troubles of its own. For one, armed struggle often promotes the ethos of a secret elite vanguard, downplaying democracy and showing less tolerance for pluralism. Often, disagreements that could be resolved peaceably in non-militarized institutions lead to bloody factional fighting. Some countries experienced military coups or civil wars not long after armed revolutionary movements ousted colonialists or indigenous dictators. Others became overly dependent on foreign powers for weapons to keep them in power.

There is also an increasing awareness that armed resistance tends to upset undecided elements of the population, who then seek security in the government. When facing a violent insurgency, a government can easily justify its repression. But force used against unarmed resistance movements usually creates greater sympathy for the government's opponents. Some have compared this phenomenon with the martial art of aikido, in that the opposition movement leverages the power of state repression to advance the movement's ends.

In addition, unarmed campaigns involve far more participants beyond the young able-bodied men normally found in the ranks of armed guerrillas, taking advantage of a popular movement's majority support. Unarmed resistance also encourages the creation of alternative institutions, which further undermine the repressive status quo and form the basis for a new independent and democratic order.

Armed resistance often backfires by legitimizing the use of repressive tactics. Violence from the opposition is often welcomed by authoritarian governments and even encouraged through the use of agents provocateurs, because it then justifies state repression. But state violence unleashed on unarmed dissidents often triggers a turning point in nonviolent struggles. A government attack against peaceful demonstrators can be the spark that transforms periodic protests into a full-scale insurrection.



King and Gandhi embraced nonviolence both in principle and as strategy.

Sowing Division

Unarmed resistance movements also tend to sow divisions within pro-government circles. There are often disagreements regarding how to deal effectively with the resistance, since few governments are as prepared to deal with unarmed revolts as they are to quash armed ones. Violent repression of a peaceful movement can often alter popular and elite perceptions of the legitimacy of power, which is why state officials usually use less repression against nonviolent movements. In addition, some pro-government elements become less concerned about the consequences of a compromise with insurgents if their resistance is nonviolent.

Unarmed movements also increase the likelihood of defections and noncooperation by unmotivated police and military personnel, whereas armed revolts legitimize the role of the government's coercive apparatus, enhancing its self-perception as the protector of civil society. The moral power of nonviolence is crucial in the ability of an opposition movement to reframe the perceptions of key parties: the public, political elites, and the military, most of whom have no difficulty supporting the use of violence against violent insurrections.

The efficacy of nonviolent resistance in dividing supporters of the status quo is apparent not only in rendering government troops less effective, but also in challenging the attitudes of an entire nation and even foreign actors, as in the South African struggle against apartheid. Pictures of peaceful protesters — including whites, members of the clergy, and other “upstanding citizens” — broadcast on television worldwide lent legitimacy to antiapartheid forces and undermined the South African government in a way that the armed rebellion was unable to do. As nonviolent resistance within the country escalated, external pressure in the form of economic sanctions and other solidarity tactics by the international community raised the costs of maintaining the apartheid system.

Due to increased global interdependence, the nonlocal audience for a conflict may be just as important as the immediate community. Just as Gandhi played to British citizens in Manchester and London, organizers of the civil rights movement in the U.S. South were communicating to the entire nation, and especially to the administration of President John Kennedy.

Insurgency within the Soviet bloc was disseminated by television broadcasts that spread the news from country to country, legitimating local protests that no longer seemed like isolated events organized by unstable dissidents. The prominent role of the global media during the anti-Marcos people power movement in 1986 was instrumental in forcing the U.S. government to scale back its support of the Philippine dictator. Israeli repression of nonviolent protests by Palestinians during the first intifada of the late 1980s brought unprecedented international sympathy to their struggle against foreign military occupation. As Palestinian-American scholar Rashid Khalidi observed, the Palestinians had “succeeded at last in conveying the reality of their victimization to world public opinion.”

As a proactive ingredient in nonviolent resistance, the creation of alternative structures provides both a moral and a practical underpinning for efforts aimed at bringing about fundamental social change. Parallel structures in civil society may render state control increasingly impotent, as they did throughout Eastern Europe leading up to the events of 1989.

In the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos lost power in 1986 not through the defeat of his troops and the storming of the Malacañang Palace, but from the withdrawal of sufficient support for his authority, so that the palace became the only part of the country he could effectively control. On the same day that Marcos was officially sworn in for another term as president in a state ceremony, his opponent — Corazon Aquino, widow of an assassinated Marcos critic — was symbolically sworn in as the people’s president. Given that most Filipinos saw Marcos’s election as fraudulent, the vast majority offered its allegiance to President Aquino rather than to President Marcos. The transfer of allegiance from one source of authority and legitimacy to another is a key element of a successful nonviolent uprising.

In the course of a successful nonviolent revolution, and with adequate popular participation, political authority may be wrested from the state and invested in institutions of civil society as these parallel institutions grow in effectiveness and legitimacy. The state may become increasingly impotent and irrelevant as parallel nongovernmental institutions take over an increasing portion of the tasks of governing a society, providing services to the populace, and creating functional equivalents to the institutions of the state.

Indigenous Roots

Citing the financial support provided by some outside foundations funded by Western governments to some opposition groups that later took part in the so-called color revolutions among nations of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, some authoritarian regimes have denied the popular legitimacy of these pro-democracy movements by claiming they were simply “soft coups” plotted by the United States or other Western powers. Such outside funding cannot cause a nonviolent liberal democratic revolution to take place, however, any more than Soviet financial and material support for leftist movements in previous decades could cause an armed socialist revolution to take place. One Burmese human rights activist, referring to his country’s centuries-old tradition of popular resistance, noted how the very idea of an outsider having to orchestrate the Burmese people to engage in a nonviolent action campaign is like “teaching a grandma to peel onions.”

Successful revolutions, whatever their ideological orientation, are the result of certain objective conditions. Indeed, no amount of money could force hundreds of thousands of people to leave their jobs, homes, schools, and families to face down heavily armed police and tanks and put their bodies on the line unless they had a sincere motivation to do so.

Foreign powers have historically promoted regime change through military invasions, coup d'états, and other kinds of violent seizures of power that install an undemocratic minority. Nonviolent people power movements, by contrast, make regime change possible through empowering pro-democratic majorities.

There is no standardized formula for success that a foreign government or a foreign nongovernmental organization could put together, because the history, culture, and political alignments of each country are unique. No foreign government or NGO can recruit or mobilize the large numbers of ordinary civilians necessary to build a movement capable of effectively challenging the established political leadership, much less of toppling a government.

As a result, the best hope for advancing freedom and democracy among oppressed nations of the world comes not from armed struggle and not from the intervention of foreign powers, but from democratic civil society organizations engaged in strategic nonviolent action.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Nonviolent Thought Through U.S. History

01 March 2009

By Ira Chernus

Rooted in 16th century Europe, the intellectual traditions of nonviolent thought and action were developed in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries and traveled abroad to Asia and Africa. Ira Chernus is a professor of religious studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder and author of American Nonviolence: The History of an Idea.

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Nonviolent Vietnam War protests in the 1960s followed the example of the civil rights movement.

When people set out to create social change, they have to decide whether to use violence to achieve their aims. Some who opt for nonviolence may have no objection to violence in principle. They just believe that violence will not succeed in gaining their goals, or they are afraid of getting hurt, or they can't persuade others to join them in violence. Theirs is the nonviolence of convenience, or pragmatic

nonviolence.

But over the centuries there have been many who might have gained their goals through violence — who had the means, the courage, and the strength to do violence — yet freely decided not to do violence under any circumstances. They followed the way of principled nonviolence. Though many have been inspired to adopt principled nonviolence for emotional and cultural reasons, they have also been moved by the rich intellectual tradition that offers logical arguments on behalf of nonviolence.

That intellectual tradition runs like an underground stream through U.S. history. Its roots go back to the Anabaptist Christians of Europe in the 16th century, the era when Protestant Christianity began. The Anabaptists rejected violence because they were committed to staying separated from the mainstream society and its many conflicts. Some of their descendants came to the United States, where they established what are known as the historic peace churches.

The distinctive American contribution came when other Christians, who were deeply involved in the conflicts of society, decided on principle to pursue political and social change using only nonviolent means. The process began in colonial times, before the United States declared its independence from Britain, among members of the Society of Friends, known as Quakers. Their strict commitment to nonviolence led some of them to oppose the payment of taxes for war, the enslavement of African Americans, and the persecution and displacement of Native American peoples. But the Quakers were primarily a religious group, whose beliefs led them to nonviolence.

The great turning point came in the 1820s and 1830s, when a group of people from different religious backgrounds began to demand the abolition of slavery in the United States. These abolitionists were nearly all Christians, and not all of them were committed to pursuing their goal nonviolently. Those who were, however, created the first group that formed around a goal of political-social change and then chose nonviolence as their means. They believed in God as the supreme ruler of the universe. Therefore, they said, no human should ever exercise authority over another human. On that basis they denounced slavery. But since violence is always a way of exercising authority, they were led logically to renounce violence, too.

The same line of thinking influenced the great essayist Henry David Thoreau to go to jail rather than pay taxes to a government that supported war and slavery. In his famous 1849 essay “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau explained that he would never obey an unjust law, regardless of what punishment he received, because people should follow their own conscience rather than passively follow the government’s demands. Thoreau’s main goal was to maintain his own moral virtue and his freedom to act on the truth as he saw it. But he did point out that if enough people refused to obey unjust laws, they could “clog the machinery” of the state.

Tolstoy and Gandhi

The writings of the abolitionists and Thoreau inspired the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy to become an ardent exponent of Christian nonviolence. His writings, in turn, helped to shape the ideas of the greatest of all nonviolent activists, the leader of India’s independence movement, Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi. In the 20th century, the ideas of Tolstoy and Gandhi came back to the United States and inspired many Americans, who often did not know that so much of the theory of nonviolence had originated in their own country.



Abolitionist Wendell Phillips delivers an antislavery speech on Boston Common in April 1851.

For Gandhi, nonviolence was more a matter of intention than actual behavior. He defined “violence” as the intention to coerce another person to do something the other person does not want to do. Nonviolent actions such as boycotts, blockades, and disobedience to laws may look coercive, but if done in a true spirit of nonviolence, they are merely ways of following the moral truth as one sees it. They leave others free to respond in any way they choose. A follower of Gandhian nonviolence says,

in the spirit of Thoreau, “I am doing what I feel I must do. Now you do whatever you feel you must do. You may jail me, beat me, or even kill me. But you cannot take away my freedom to be true to my conscience.”

Gandhi recognized that he was calling all people to act on their subjective view of truth. No one can know the whole truth, he said, and we must be open to the possibility that we will later see that we were wrong. That is why we must never aim to impose our own views on others. But we must take a firm stand — even unto death — on the truth as we see it now. Only then can we discover for ourselves what the truth is in any given situation.

Since principled nonviolence means non-coercion, people committed to nonviolence believe they are never trying to make a situation turn out the way they want it. They are working not for selfish purposes but for the good of the whole world as they see it. In fact, according to Gandhi, they should never be concerned about the outcome of their actions at all. They should only be sure that they are doing the morally right thing at every moment. Following the moral truth is both the means and the end of nonviolence; a right process is the goal. Therefore, nonviolence should not be judged by its ability to produce results.

The most famous exponent of nonviolence in the United States was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the great spokesman for the civil rights of African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. King agreed with Gandhi that nonviolent actions must always be taken out of concern for the well-being of all people, even those who are unjust and oppressive. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” he proclaimed, “tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Unlike Gandhi, though, King was concerned about the results of his actions. He judged the strategies of the civil rights movement not only by their intrinsic moral virtue, but also by their effectiveness in ending discrimination against black people. He wanted to provoke conflict and win political victories.

But as long as one is working nonviolently for justice and equality, King argued, the conflict will yield greater justice and peace for everyone. So in his view, there is no conflict between success for oneself and benefit for society: “We are in the fortunate position of having our deepest sense of morality coalesce with our self-interest.” Even when our acts involve unyielding confrontation and pressure, he said, as long as we are motivated by selfless love offered equally to both sides in the conflict, we are working to harmonize the opposing sides and improve life for all. On that point, Gandhi certainly would have agreed.

Results From Nonviolence

The civil rights movement demonstrated that nonviolence can produce results, if one chooses to judge by that standard. In the 1960s, the nonviolent movement to end the Vietnam War — largely inspired by the successes of civil rights activists — played a significant role in persuading the U.S. government to remove its troops from Vietnam.

Up to the 1960s, most Americans who committed themselves to principled nonviolence were moved by Christian religious beliefs. But the protest movement against the Vietnam War brought in many who were not Christian. The Jewish Peace Fellowship (founded in 1941) grew significantly. An emerging Buddhist peace movement was guided by the teachings of Thich Nhat Hahn and, later, the Dalai Lama.

There were also many more Americans with no religious affiliation who were drawn to nonviolence. They could find inspiration in the writings of the feminist Barbara Deming. Nonviolence is necessarily coercive, she wrote. But it forces people to stop doing only things that they have no moral right to do. It leaves intact their freedom to do whatever they have a right to do. So nonviolence is the most effective way to make lasting social and political change because it is least likely to antagonize the people being forced to change.

Since the 1960s, the United States has seen a growing interest in principled nonviolence applied to many political issues, though it still counts only a very small minority of the population among its adherents.

Nonviolence movements in the United States have also helped to spawn similar movements around the world. They have achieved major improvements in their conditions of life — most notably, in the overthrow of totalitarian regimes in places from Eastern Europe to the Philippines. Nonviolent activists helped to end long-standing and bitter conflicts in Northern Ireland, Guatemala, and East Timor, among other places. They are now active on numerous fronts in conflict zones around the world. In the long view of history, the United States is at the center of an ongoing global process of nonviolent social and political change.

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Harnessing the Power of Protest

By Clay Shirky

Clay Shirky consults and writes about the social and economic effects of Internet technologies and teaches at New York University. His most recent book is Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations.

Simple new telecommunications tools are removing obstacles to collective action by ordinary people, and thus changing the world.

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On March 27, 2006, a Monday, secondary school students in Los Angeles, California, surprised teachers and administrators by staging a school walkout in protest of HR4437, a bill before the U.S. Congress proposing a crackdown on illegal immigrants. This was no ordinary walkout, though, because tens of thousands of students participated, from schools all across the city. The students walking out, a largely Hispanic population, had been inspired to act by a protest by adults in their community that had taken place just two days before. So many students walked out of their schools

and down to City Hall that they blocked traffic as they went, creating a very visible and public display for their cause.



Using communication tools, Los Angeles students organized a surprise demonstration by 30,000 people.

The protest had several remarkable aspects, starting with size — tens of thousands of people all taking coordinated political action. Coordinating such a thing at multiple geographic sites at the same time is hard. Getting secondary school students to do so, when most of them are too young to vote, is harder. And involving immigrants, who may never be able to vote, is harder still. Being able to do so without the school administration knowing is nothing short of astonishing — keeping a secret among 30,000 people has never been trivial. And doing it all in 48 hours should have been impossible, would have been impossible, in fact, even a year before.

What made a rapid, secret, huge protest happen was the adoption of new communication tools, especially MySpace (the interactive social-networking Web site) and SMS (text messages sent via the phone). Armed with these tools, students could coordinate with one another, not just person to person but in groups. Almost as critically, the messages they exchanged went to the people who mattered — the other students — without reaching the school administrators.

Making the school protest possible, though, was not the same as making it happen. What made it happen was real political feeling: The students had a message they wanted to express, together and in public. MySpace and texting amplified that message by giving the messengers abilities they hadn't had before, but the message itself, a demand for political inclusion in making immigration policy, was independent of the tools.

Though some of the early utopianism around new communications tools suggested we were heading into some sort of post-hierarchical paradise, that's not what is happening now, and it's not what is going to happen. None of the absolute advantages of large-scale and professional media have disappeared. Instead, what has happened is that most of the relative advantages of those institutions have disappeared — relative, that is, to the media controlled directly by the citizens.

The story here is the new ability of uncoordinated groups to achieve the kind of goals such groups have always shared. Human beings are social creatures, not occasionally or by accident, but always, and society isn't just the product of its individual members; it's the product of its constituent groups as well. Whenever you improve a group's ability to communicate with one another, you change the things they are able to accomplish together.

Speaking Is Publishing

You can see those changes in the altered relationship between citizens and the media: The old saying that freedom of the press exists only for those who own a press points to the significance of the Internet and mobile phones. In the digital realm, to speak is to publish, and to publish online is to open the possibility of connecting with others. With the arrival of a medium where interpersonal communication, public broadcasting, and social coordination shade into one another, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of association now do so as well.

With this blending of conversational, broadcast, and social elements into one medium, we have entered a world where every piece of digital media is a latent community: The people interested in

any given bit of writing, picture, or video might well be interested in conversing with one another as well. Being able to synchronize groups via social media is adding a new feature to traditional media; it is becoming not only a source of information, but also a site of coordination. In the case of the Los Angeles walkout, MySpace provided a place for students to publish information about HR4437 (a broadcast function), to talk to one another directly about the bill (a communications function), and to propose a course of communal action (a coordination function), all in one arena.

To put it in military terms, digital media can create “shared awareness,” the sense in a group not only that each member understands what is going on, but also that the understanding is similar among all, and, critically, each member understands this as well. Shared awareness is a useful precursor to coordinated action, and the ability to create shared awareness improves with real-time media and with mobile media.

A recent application that improves shared awareness using both fast and mobile messages is Twitter, the service that broadcasts short messages from a phone or personal computer to any of your friends who have subscribed to your Twitter “feed.” Though Twitter can be used for any sort of short message, Twitter itself proposes that you use Twitter to answer the question “What are you doing now?”

As a result, much of the content on Twitter at any given moment is inane. On a random Thursday afternoon, here’s a random sample of twittering:

PaulDizmag: Moving appliances from one rental to another.

radiopalmwine: King Sunny Ade - Dance, Dance, Dance

Lisanae: im having a really bad day.

Patorama: It is seemingly impossible to buy a single Faber-Castell black brush pen online. I can buy a pack of 10 tho. I guess I’ll have extras.



Improved communication capability can lead to more accomplishment.

Many of the public posts have this sort of quality — grooving to King Sunny Ade, moving appliances, generically bad days — where the publicly available content is not likely to interest most users. Just because much of the content is banal, though, doesn’t mean all of it is, as with this Twitter feed from Cairo in 2007 (with message times appended):

Alaa: Going to doky prosecutor judge murad accused me and manal of libel (10:11 a.m. April 04)

Alaa: Waiting for prosecutors decision might actually spend the night in custody (01:57 p.m. April 04)

Alaa: We are going to dokky police station (03:31 p.m. April 04)

Alaa: In police station no senior officers present so we are in limbo (04:29 p.m. April 04)

Alaa: We will not be released from giza security will have to go back to dokki station (07:59 p.m. April 04)

Alaa: On our way back to police station (10:25 p.m. April 04)

Alaa: We are free (11:22 p.m. April 04)

Alaa, or Alaa Abd El Fattah, is an Egyptian programmer, democracy activist, and blogger living in Cairo. Here, he is documenting his arrest, with his wife, Manal, in El Dokky, a Cairo neighborhood, an episode that ended 12 hours later with their release. His arrest was ordered by Abdel Fatah Murad, an Egyptian judge attempting to have dozens of Web sites blocked in Egypt on the grounds that the sites “insult the Quran, God, the president, and the country.” When Egyptian pro-democracy bloggers started covering the proposed censorship, Murad added their sites to the list he was attempting to ban.

Tipping the Balance

What does a service like Twitter, whose public face is so banal, offer El Fattah and other Egyptian activists? As El Fattah describes Twitter, “We use it to keep a tight network of activists informed about security action in protests. The activists would then use Twitter to coordinate a reaction.” Because pro-democracy activists are watched so carefully, Twitter allows them a combination of real-time and group coordination that helps tip the balance of action in their favor.

One early use of Twitter had El Fattah and a dozen or so of his colleagues coordinating movements to surround a car in which their friend Malek was being held by the police, to prevent it and him from being towed away. Knowing they were being monitored, they then sent messages suggesting that there were many more of them coming. The police sent reinforcements, surrounding and thus immobilizing the car themselves. This kept Malek in place until the press and members of Parliament arrived. The threat of bad publicity led to Malek’s release, an outcome that would have been hard to coordinate without Twitter.

The power to coordinate otherwise dispersed groups will continue to improve: New social tools are still being invented. However minor they may seem, any tool that improves shared awareness or group coordination can be pressed into service for political means because the freedom to act in a group is inherently political. What the increasingly social and real-time uses of text messaging from China to Nigeria shows us is that we adopt those tools that amplify our capabilities, and we modify our tools to improve that amplification.

Social tools aren’t creating collective action; they are merely removing the obstacles to it. Those obstacles have been so significant and pervasive, however, that as they are being removed, the world is becoming a different place. This is why many of the significant changes are based not on the fanciest, newest bits of technology, but on simple, easy-to-use tools such as e-mail, mobile phones, and Web sites. Those are the tools most people have access to and, critically, are comfortable using in their daily lives. Revolution doesn’t happen when society adopts new technologies; it happens when society adopts new behaviors.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Read more: <http://www.america.gov/st/democracy-english/2009/March/20090304102533ebyessedoo.6991999.html#ixzz1jjDCEpxe>

Additional Resources About Nonviolent Paths to Social Change

Books and Articles

- **Ackerman, Peter, and Christopher Kruegler.** *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994.
- **Asher, Sarah Beth, Lester R. Kurtz, and Stephen Zunes, eds.** *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.
- **Barash, David P.** *The Survival Game: How Game Theory Explains the Biology of Cooperation and Competition.* New York, NY: Times Books, 2003.
- **Chernus, Ira.** *American Nonviolence: The History of an Idea.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.
<http://spot.colorado.edu/~chernus/NonviolenceBook/index.htm>
- **Helvey, Robert.** *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals.* Boston, MA: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2004.
<http://www.aeinstein.org/organizations/org/OSNC.pdf>
- **Horgan, John.** “Has Science Found a Way to End All Wars?” *Discover*, published online (March 13, 2008).
<http://discovermagazine.com/2008/apr/13-science-says-war-is-over-now>
- **King, Mary.** *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Power of Nonviolent Action.* Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1999.
- **King, Martin Luther.** *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Radio Address to India.* All India Radio (March 1959).
<http://www.sajaforum.org/2009/01/history-50th-anniversary-of-martin-luther-king-jrs-india-visit.html>
- **Kurlansky, Mark.** *Nonviolence: Twenty-Five Lessons From the History of a Dangerous Idea.* New York, NY: Modern Library, 2006.
- **Kurlantzick, Josh.** “Terrorists Against Terror.” *Asia Pacific Defense Forum*, vol. 33, no. 3 (3rd quarter, 2008): pp. 36-40.
- **Lakshmi, Rama.** “Son Retraces King’s ’59 India Pilgrimage.” *The Washington Post* (February 18, 2009).
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/17/AR2009021703040.html>
- **Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story** (in English and Arabic, comic book format).
<http://www.hamsaweb.org/comic/>
- **Sharp, Gene.** *Politics of Nonviolent Action.* Boston, MA: P. Sargent Publishers, 1973.
- **Shirky, Clay.** *Here Comes Everybody: How Digital Networks Transform Our Ability to Gather and Cooperate.* New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2008.
- **Staples, Lee.** *Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organizing.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004.
- **Talbot, David.** “The Geeks Behind Obama’s Web Strategy.” *The Boston Globe* (January 9, 2009).
http://www.boston.com/news/politics/2008/articles/2009/01/08/the_geeks_behind_obamas_web_strategy/?page=full
- **Teaching Nonviolence. Best Practices of Nonviolent Conflict Resolution.**
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001266/126679e.pdf>
- **Thoreau, Henry David.** “Civil Disobedience.”
<http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil.html>
- **Warren, Mark R.** *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Filmography: Documentaries and Biographies

A Force More Powerful (2003)

<http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org>

Producer: York Zimmerman, Inc.

Synopsis: This television series profiles how millions of people chose to battle brutality and oppression during the 20th century with nonviolent weapons — and won.

Running Time: 180 minutes

Bringing Down a Dictator: From Dictatorship to Democracy (2003)

<http://www.yorkzim.com/pastProd/bringingDown.html>

Producer: York Zimmerman, Inc.

Synopsis: Learn about nonviolent struggle and action as a means of political defiance. This film also explores how nonviolence helped depose Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic.

Running Time: 56 minutes

Eyes on the Prize (1987)

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/index.html>

Producer: Harry Hampton

Synopsis: *Eyes on the Prize* is an award-winning documentary series on the U.S. civil rights movement that brilliantly illuminates the struggle for racial equality and social justice.

Running Time: 14 hours

The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers' Struggle (1997)

<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/fightfields/>

Producer: Paradigm Productions

Synopsis: *The Fight in the Fields* follows the first successful organizing drive of farm workers in the United States, while recounting the many failed and dramatic attempts to unionize that led up to this victory. Among the barriers to organizing was the Bracero Program, which flooded the fields with Mexican contract workers between World War II and the 1960s.

Running Time: 120 minutes

Freedom on My Mind (1994)

<http://www.film.com/movies/freedom-on-my-mind/14697772>

Producer: Connie Field

Synopsis: Telling the dramatic story of the

Mississippi voter registration project from 1961 to 1964, *Freedom on My Mind* is a landmark documentary that chronicles the most tumultuous and significant years in the history of the U.S. civil rights movement.

Running Time: 104 minutes

Gandhi (1982)

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083987/>

Producer: Richard Attenborough

Synopsis: The biography of Mahatma Gandhi, who rose from a small-time lawyer to India's spiritual leader through his philosophy of nonviolent but direct-action protest.

Running Time: 188 minutes

Nongovernmental Organizations That Promote Nonviolence

Burma Global Action Network

<http://www.burma-network.com/>

Día de Solidaridad con Cuba

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Dia-de-Solidaridad-con-Cuba/12432514783>

Global Youth Movement

<http://www.globalyouthmovement.com/>

Invisible Children

<http://www.invisiblechildren.com>

One Million Voices Against FARC

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/One-million-voices-against-FARC/10780185890>

One Million People Against Crime in South Africa

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6340297802>

The U.S. Department of State assumes no responsibility for the content and availability of the resources listed above. All Internet links were active as of March 2009.

Read more: <http://www.america.gov/st/democracy-english/2009/March/20090309120608ebysesedoo.4423792.html#ixzz1jjK538wA>

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ABUJA

American Corner Abuja
Chief Bola Ige Information
Technology Center
C/o National Center for Women
Development
Opposite Central Bank of Nigeria
CBD, Abuja
Telephone: 0703-165-0015
E-mail:
acabuja@amcornersnigeria.info

BAUCHI

American Corner Bauchi
Professor Iya Abubakar Community
Resource Center
C/o Bauchi State Library Complex
Abdulkadir Ahmed Road
GRA, Bauchi
Telephone: 0802-362-2461; 0803-
967-0833
E-mail:
acbauchi@amcornersnigeria.info

CALABAR

American Corner
Cross River State IT Village
37 Ekpo Archibong Road
Calabar.
Telephone: 0803-928-2757
E-mail:
accalabar@amcornersnigeria.info

IBADAN

American Corner Ibadan
Nigerian Society for Information,
Arts and Culture
Leventis Building
54, Magazine Road
Jericho, Ibadan
Telephone: 0805-987-4749; (02)753-
5838(office)
E-mail:
acibadan@amcornersnigeria.info

JOS

American Corner Jos
University of Jos
11, Murtala Mohammed Way
Beside University of Jos Township
Campus
Jos
Telephone: 0803-718-4414; 0802-
986-5140
E-mail: acjos@amcornersnigeria.info

KANO

American Corner Kano
Kano State Library Board
Murtala Mohammad Library Complex
Nasarawa, Kano
Telephone: 0803-914-2919
E-mail:
ackano@amcornersnigeria.info

LAGOS

Barak Obama American Corner
(Lagos)
29, Gafer Animashanu Street (off
Ajose Adeogun St.)
Victoria Island, Lagos
Tel: 08022951591

E-mail:

aclagos@amcornersnigeria.info;
american.corner@oviebrumefoundation.org;

MAIDUGURI

American Corner Maiduguri
University of Maiduguri Library
PMB 1069
Maiduguri
Telephone: 0802-833-8754; 0703-
219-7077
E-mail:
acmaiduguri@amcornersnigeria.info

PORT HARCOURT

American Corner Port Harcourt
Center for Advanced Social Science
13, William Jumbo Street
Old GRA, Port Harcourt
Telephone: 0805-203-1279;
08036729331
E-mail:
acportharcourt@amcornersnigeria.info

SOKOTO

American Corner Sokoto
Usmanu Danfodiyo University
City Campus
Sultan Abubarka Road
Sokoto
Telephone: 0802-508-8545; 0806-
000-1519
E-mail:
acsokoto@amcornersnigeria.info

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