

COMBAT NEEDN'T BE USED TO TOPPLE DICTATORS

by

Bob Keeler

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Now that post-invasion euphoria is waning, and there's less giddy talk about which dictator should be the next target of American bombs, it's time to reflect on a better way: strategic nonviolent conflict.

Yes, armies can unseat dictators. But when invasion produces a tyrant's downfall, as in Iraq, creating a functioning society is incredibly tricky.

Democracy has a better chance to emerge when dictators fall to the nonviolent power of the repressed people themselves - people using tactics such as strikes, boycotts and nonviolent sabotage. Resistance leaders must gather wide support to launch those actions. So developing the resistance is itself a democratizing act, a big step toward building the post-dictator nation.

Recent history offers many examples, in such nations as Poland, the Philippines, India and Chile. These stirring stories appear in books by Gene Sharp of the Albert Einstein Institution in Boston, and more recently in the Emmy-nominated documentary "A Force More Powerful" and the companion book by Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall.

The success of nonviolent conflict relies on this principle: Even the most repressive dictator needs the consent of the governed and the obedience of his security forces. "Sometimes, the more brutal a dictator is, the more brittle he is," said Ackerman, chairman of the Washington-based International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. "The more brutal he is, the more he depends on his own security forces to commit acts of repression." Repression can drive more citizens into the resistance, strengthening it in the struggle to spread disobedience to the security forces themselves.

Even the Butcher of the Balkans, Slobodan Milosevic, was not brutal enough to survive a nonviolent uprising. It was not the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, in response to Serbian violence against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, that unseated him. Rather, it was the rise of a student-led movement, Otpor (Resistance). In fact, the bombing helped him hang on, because Otpor could not afford to be seen as opposing a government under foreign attack.

"NATO bombing strengthened Milosevic's dictatorship," said Srdja Popovic, a founder of Otpor and now a Serbian national legislator. "It gave him an excuse for involving more and more absolutist methods in his governance." After Milosevic lost an election in

September 2000, he sought to retain power, but the resistance launched the widespread civil disobedience and strikes that toppled him.

As Otpor sought strategic skills to guide its rising numbers, its leaders had met in Budapest with Robert Helvey, a retired U.S. infantry colonel committed to Sharp's nonviolent strategies.

Helvey and Ackerman have also met with Iraqi opposition groups. They believe that if dissidents had adopted nonviolent strategies years ago, they would have had a chance to topple bloodlessly even the hideously brutal Saddam Hussein.

The tactics of nonviolent conflict won't always succeed. But violent internal uprisings have little chance against the state's greater violence, and invasion shatters infrastructure and impedes democracy-building after the struggle ends. So nonviolent strategy should be considered a serious option.

That's not to say that the United States - or any government - should seek to start nonviolent struggles elsewhere. "If any government were to try to instigate something like this, it would not work," said Shaazka Beyerle, associate director of Ackerman's center. She and DuVall, the center's director, brought these ideas to students and faculty at Stony Brook University on May 7.

So the key to the future of nonviolent conflict is finding ways to spread the strategies of successful past conflicts to populations that may use them in the future.

One crucial instrument has been a documentary about the fall of Milosevic, "Bringing Down a Dictator," whose executive producer was Ackerman. The film, which will reap a prestigious Peabody award today in Manhattan, has been translated into Arabic, Spanish, Farsi, Mandarin and Russian. And expatriate dissidents have beamed it by satellite into Iran. The center is also working on a sophisticated CD-ROM game, to help future resistance leaders learn interactively from past conflicts how to build nonviolent strategies suited to their own situation.

Before Americans dismiss nonviolent resistance as an option, we should remember that our own Declaration of Independence talks about governments "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Removing that consent nonviolently from dictators is exactly what this resistance seeks.

Bob Keeler is a member of Newsday's editorial board.

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