

Individual Contributions to Democracy

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This note outlines simple things that everyone can do to promote world peace and democracy. It is based on a new perspective on human reaction to conflict.¹ Specifically, when people are killed and property destroyed, the apparent perpetrators often make enemies. People who identify with victims distance themselves from the apparent perpetrators and often support the injured. For example, the violence of Sept. 11, 2001, generated enormous international support for the US. This support was reversed following the destruction associated with the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The comments here outline this new perspective and offer a constructive program of simple things almost anyone can do to help improve the prospects for democracy and world peace.

Human Reactions to Violence and to Nonviolent Non-Cooperation

International responses shifted from massive support for the US following 9/11 to substantial opposition to the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These changes are typical of human reactions to violence. They happen in most wars, increasing the duration and destruction. Individuals and groups have obligations to defend themselves. Unfortunately, there has been little study of what

constitutes *effective* defense. Lacking better information, many defense efforts use violence that unwittingly manufactures recruits for the opposition faster than they can be neutralized. Opportunities for win-win conflict resolution are lost. In most wars, even the apparent winners lose more than they gain. The news media and subsequent histories usually amplify the conflict by demonizing the other side, making it almost impossible for each side to understand the other.

This effect is magnified by the natural human tendency towards overconfidence. The great 1930s comedian Will Rogers described this phenomenon: “It’s not what we don’t know that gives us trouble, it’s what we know that ain’t so.”

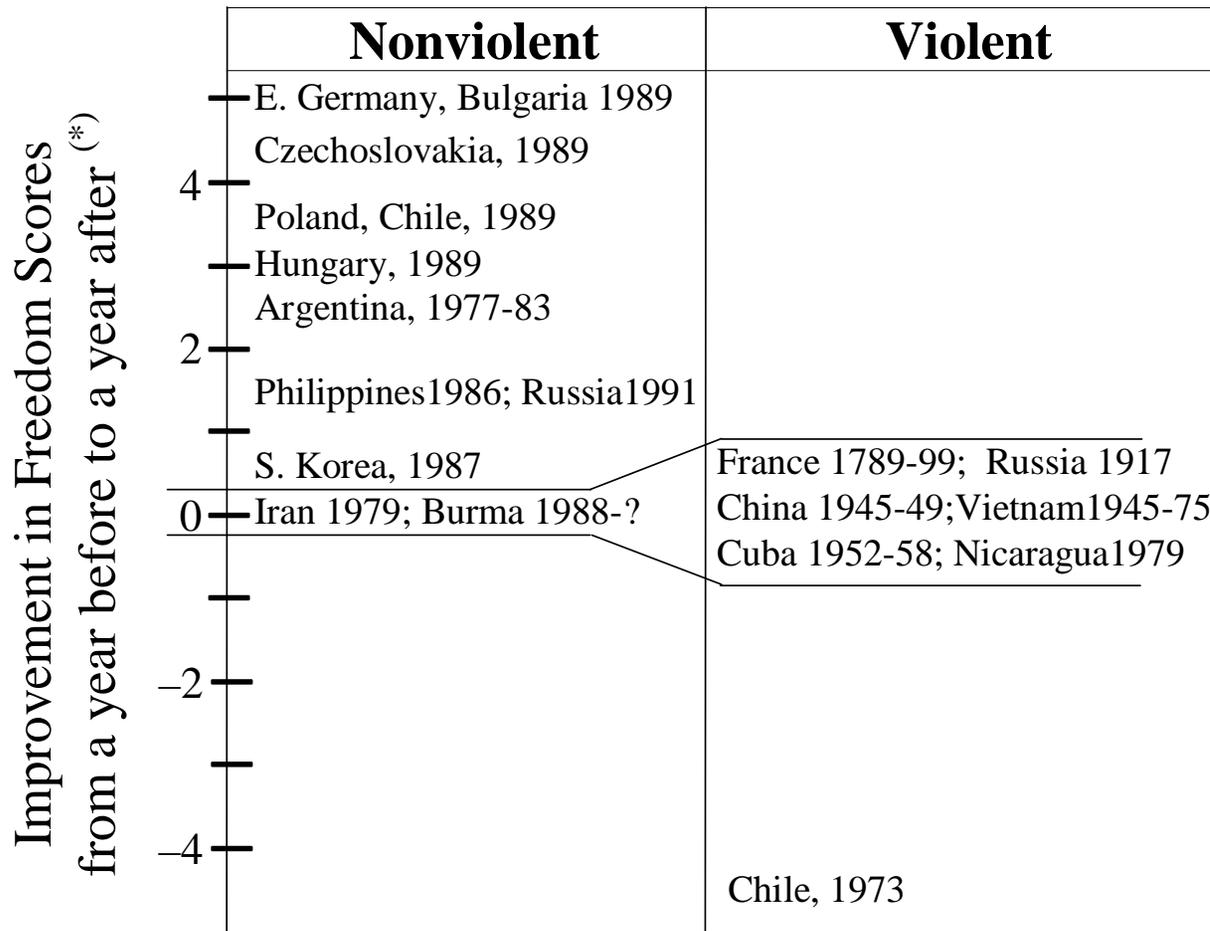
Other options for national defense appear in the histories of nonviolent change efforts such as those that produced the spectacular collapse of the former Soviet Bloc almost without firing a shot: Security forces facing nonthreatening but non-cooperative civilians often disobey orders. When they do shoot, they rarely kill as many people as when they feel personally threatened. In such situations, violence by government agents often alienates many and strengthens support for their opposition.

These effects appear in the histories of major violent and nonviolent conflicts. The accompanying figure summarizes the “Improvement in Freedom” using the Freedom House Criteria achieved by all the major revolutions and independence struggles for which I have adequate data. For example, “E.

Germany 1989” appears in the upper left corner. The 1989 Freedom House report, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, gave East Germany scores of 7 for political rights and 6 for civil liberties on a scale from 1 = free to 7 = not free. In 1991, after the transition, East Germany was rated 1 and 2, for a net improvement in freedom score of $[(7+6)/2] - [(1+2)/2] = 5$ points. Similarly, the scores for Chile dropped 4.5 points on this freedom scale after the Sept. 11, 1973 coup.

Ten of the 12 nonviolent efforts in this study achieved some advance for freedom while none of the violent efforts did. The American Revolution is not listed here in part because it's not clear where it belongs. The popular image of that revolution suggests that it belongs in the currently empty upper-right corner. However, a closer examination reveals that the 13 British colonies that declared independence in 1776 had the most advanced democratic cultures in the British Empire and perhaps the world at the time; the violence of the revolution ultimately had little impact on this. The war lasted much longer than either side anticipated initially, partly because the violence perpetrated by each side helped create recruits for the other. There was substantial sympathy for the revolutionary cause in Britain and the 13 other British colonies in North America at the time. British Supporters in Bermuda and in British Caribbean colonies provided gunpowder and other supplies for the revolutionaries but officially sided with Britain in part because of the violence.

Predominant Nature of the Struggle



(*) Freedom House scales; see “Impact of Violent and Nonviolent action on Constructed Realities and Conflict”, downloadable from “www.prodsyse.com”.

Most French Canadians were captivated by the rhetoric of freedom but ultimately sided with Britain after an invasion by the US army killed people, destroyed property, and took supplies from local farmers while “paying” in worthless continental script.

A related issue is the impact of violent and nonviolent actions on civil society, the network of open, voluntary groups independent of the state and of religious observances wherein people collectively select shared goals and cooperate to achieve them. Recent research suggests that civil society is more important for democracy than elections. The former Soviet Union held regular elections, but few would say they were democratic. Without a vibrant civil society, even officially democratic governments become undemocratic and oppressive. Violence tends to destroy civil society, pushing people to suppress their differences and follow strong leaders who “promise” greater security and protection. Nonviolent action, by contrast, tends to slow down conflict processes, encouraging individuals on all sides to think and act more carefully and democratically. There may be a role for violence in effective defense, but more research is needed to determine when it will *not* be counterproductive.

Constructive Program

This perspective supports the following constructive program by which every individual can contribute to world peace and democracy:

1. Obtain information from alternative perspectives to help understand why opposition groups do what they do. If I can't see myself behaving similarly, I haven't done my homework. I don't have to agree with them, but if I can't describe how I've done crudely similar things in the past, I may unwittingly block progress towards conflict resolution. For example, British Generals during World War II bombed German civilian targets² "to reduce popular support for the Nazis," in spite of evidence that the bombing strengthened support for the German government, just as German bombing of England had strengthened support for the British war effort. Similarly, I'm one quarter German. I doubtless have distant cousins who supported Hitler before and during the Second World War. If I can't describe scenarios under which I would do as they did, I could help drive counterproductive responses to challenges I feel. To obtain such information, I get news from many sources. People who get news representing primarily one perspective are rarely able to understand other views. It is uncomfortable and unpleasant to hear things challenging our preconceptions. It is also necessary if we want to avoid counterproductive behaviors and find opportunities for win-win conflict resolution. The availability of the Internet today makes it much easier than before to obtain differing views.

2. Establish dialogs with people with whom I may disagree, seeking not to persuade but to develop mutual understanding. We can't tell others the "truth", because they've been exposed to different information. However, we need to find ways to ask respectfully for what concerns them and for their interpretation of information we've received that seems to contract our knowledge of their perspectives.
3. Proactively support free speech, free press, and peaceful assembly. In the US, this includes questioning the so-called Patriot Act as well as US policies that support the state terror by which many undemocratic regimes around the world maintain their power. Governments in the US and elsewhere have often behaved admirably, but some of their actions should be questioned. For example, George Washington as the first President of the US used US tax money to try to suppress a slave rebellion in Haiti during the French Revolution.³ This is NOT a criticism of Washington: As long as slavery was legal in the US, a successful slave rebellion anywhere threatened the internal security of the US. Later US administrations supported the state terror by which governments in Cuba (before Castro), Nicaragua, Iran, Vietnam, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere maintained their power. This is not a criticism of Washington or any of his successors. They all did what they thought was necessary. However, the evidence available today suggests

they all manufactured enemies for themselves and their great-great-grandchildren as yet unborn. Isn't it time we examine the reality of the "political realism" that continues to drive such policies?

4. Support research into what constitutes effective defense. Military and police sciences focus primarily on short-term efficiency in projecting force. They rarely deal with the long-term impact of their actions on substantive public policy agendas. Military and political leaders and concerned individuals need better tools for evaluating the likely impact of alternative defense strategies. If military action often manufactures enemies faster than they can be neutralized, a more effective national defense policy might include nonviolent promotion of international civil society. If people who otherwise might support Al Qaeda see nonviolent opportunities for redress of grievances, they may not support terrorism.

Governments do many things that can never be checked by private individuals, especially if the news media do not report them. Non-governmental organizations can do many things to promote freedom and democracy internationally while simultaneously limiting the power of governments to say one thing and do another.

How Do I Know?

I work hard to avoid dogma, questioning almost everything, trying to understand the evidence for and against my beliefs on major issues. I generally prefer

books and articles that cite their sources. When someone says something with which I disagree, if they cite their sources, those sources often give me a better appreciation not just of the other's position but of contentious issues more generally.

If you have evidence that seems to contradict something I say, please send it to me at s.graves@prodsyse.com. Without the evidence others consider, I have to guess the basis for their positions, and my guesses are often inadequate.

¹. For more detail including references see Graves (2004) "The Impact of Violent and Nonviolent Action on Constructed Realities and Conflict", at "www.prodsyse.com".

². Uri Noy, "De Havilland Mosquito, part 2", www.2worldwar2.com/mosquito-2.htm Oct. 31, 2004

³. Mark A. Mastromarino and Jack D. Warren, eds. (2000) *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series, v. 9, Sept. 1791-Feb. 1792* (Charlottesville, VA: U. Pr. of VA); Haiti was then called St. Domingue