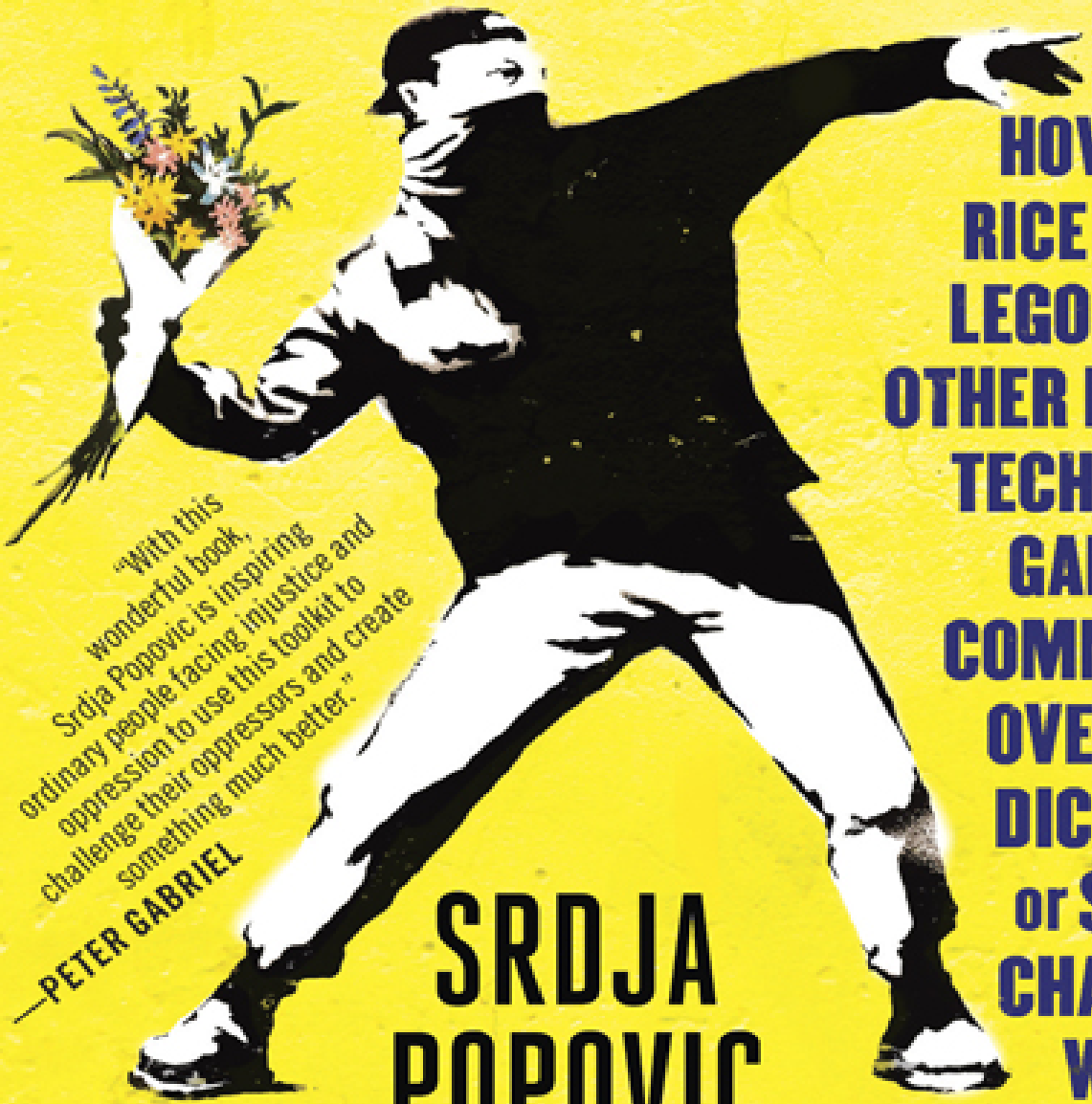
BLUEPRINT FOR REVOLUTION



"With this wonderful book, Srdja Popovic is inspiring ordinary people facing injustice and oppression to use this toolkit to challenge their oppressors and create something much better."
—PETER GABRIEL

HOW TO USE RICE PUDDING, LEGO MEN, and OTHER NONVIOLENT TECHNIQUES to GALVANIZE COMMUNITIES, OVERTHROW DICTATORS, or SIMPLY CHANGE the WORLD

SRDJA POPOVIC

Blueprint for Revolution

How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World

Srdja Popovic

with Matthew Miller

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Preface

This is a book about revolutions.

Not the violent kind: those usually end up soaked in the blood of innocent people. And not the type carried forth by a small group of zealots: if you wonder how those work out, curl up with a good biography of Lenin. Instead, this is a book about the kind of movements that are now sweeping through so much of the world, from Cairo's Tahrir Square to Occupy Wall Street. It's a book about the revolutions launched by ordinary people who believe that if they get together and think creatively, they can topple dictators and correct injustices.

I had the good fortune of being one of those ordinary revolutionaries, and I traveled on a strange personal journey from a too-cool-to-care Belgrade bass guitarist to one of the leaders of Otpor!, the nonviolent movement that toppled the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević. After a brief stint as a member of the Serbian parliament, I now work as a friend and consultant to any movement, large or small, anywhere in the world, that wishes to apply the principles of nonviolent action to oppose oppression and bring about liberty, democracy, and joy. But don't worry: this book isn't about me. Instead, it's about all the things I've learned while working with activists from Syria to Kiev, about the big ideas and the small tactics that make what I like to call "people power" such a mighty force. Because I'm no great intellectual, I've chosen to convey most of this information not with dry facts or dense theories but by simply telling stories of remarkable individuals and

movements, the challenges they faced, and the lessons they learned.

The book can be thought of as having two parts, and in the first section you'll find plenty of examples that demonstrate what nonviolent activism looks like in the world today as well as the key features that define successful movements for social change. In the second part, I go over some practical tips on how one can actually put these nonviolent techniques to good use. I hope that you'll be able to relate to these stories and examples and that they will inspire you to make a difference of your own. Because of the nature of these stories—in some cases, the anecdotes I share pertain to people who still have much to lose should their exact role in their respective movements be known—I took the necessary precautions and changed some names and other personally identifying pieces of information. I also took the occasional liberty of simplifying complex stories by paring them down to their essentials, with apologies to scholars and pedants.

The ideas and the stories in this book are meant to be not only understood but also felt. Like a great rock album, they're meant to get you on your feet and moving. And they're meant to convince you that even though the suits, the bullies, and the brutes—the whole cadre of grim men who usually run things—may look invincible, often all it takes to topple them is a bit of good fun.

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CHAPTER I

It Can Never Happen Here

My beautiful city of Belgrade probably isn't on your list of the top ten places to visit before you die. Some neighborhoods can be rough, and we Serbs have a reputation for being troublemakers, which is why we named a major street after Gavrilo Princip, the man accused of setting World War I in motion, and another after his band of revolutionaries. And then there's the memory of our former dictator Slobodan Milošević, the maniac who introduced "ethnic cleansing" to the world, started four disastrous wars with his neighbors in the 1990s, and brought on a slew of NATO bombings that ravaged the city. But none of that mattered to a group of fifteen Egyptians who visited Belgrade in June 2009. That's because they weren't looking for a relaxing summer getaway. They were coming to plan a revolution.

Given their particular agenda, the first place I wanted to show them is the last place I would have recommended to any other visitor: Republic Square. To get an idea of what this dirty and misshapen part of town looks like, imagine that someone took Times Square, made it much smaller, sucked out all the energy, removed the neon, and left only the traffic and the grime. The Egyptians, however, didn't mind it at all—they were hoping to bring down their own dictator, Hosni Mubarak, and for them Republic Square wasn't just a tourist trap but ground zero for a nonviolent movement that was started by a bunch of ordinary youngsters and grew into a massive political force that did the unthinkable and toppled Milošević. I was part of

that movement's leadership, and my Egyptian friends came to visit hoping that there was something they could learn from us Serbs.

I led the group to a quiet corner, far away from the bustling cafés with their overworked waiters, and began my short talk. Once upon a time, I told them, pointing at the clusters of luxury shops—Armani, Burberry, Max Mara—that dotted Republic Square, Serbia's inflation was so bad that the price for two pounds of potatoes skyrocketed from four thousand dinars to seventeen billion in just one year. If that wasn't enough, we were also at war with neighboring Croatia. And if you tried to speak out against the disastrous policies that led our economy to collapse and our security to wither away, you were arrested and beaten or worse. In 1992, I was a freshman biology student, and the future for us young Serbs looked very, very bleak.

"Yeah," one of the Egyptians responded with a laugh, "we know how that feels!"

The Egyptians continued to nod in understanding as I went on with my story. Faced with Milošević's terrors, I told them, the natural response, at least at first, was apathy. After all, my friends and I were not the type of people who could even imagine one day starting a movement. We weren't aspiring politicians. We were college kids, and we shared the same passions as college kids all over the world: staying up late, drinking a lot, and trying to get a date. If you'd asked me back in those days what could get me out of the house and out to Republic Square, I wouldn't have said a protest—I would have said a rock concert.

From my spot on the square's sidelines, I tried to explain to my Egyptian friends why I loved Rimtutituki, a band whose musical-sounding name, freely translated, means "I put a dick in you," hoping that the three or four women in the group who were wearing the *hijab*, the traditional headdress of observant Muslim women,

wouldn't be too mortified. In 1992, the band was the coolest thing in town, a bunch of rowdy guys who played fast guitars and were known for their rowdy lyrics. When they announced a rare free concert, my friends and I all promptly skipped class and filed into Republic Square to see our idols in action.

What happened next shocked us. Rather than give another of their fun-filled performances, the members of Rimtutituki rode into the square on the top of a flatbed truck, looking more like conquering generals than punk musicians. Then, with their truck driving around in circles, they sang a selection of their best-known songs, the words making such declarations as "If I shoot, then I won't have time to fuck" and "There is no brain under the helmet." You didn't have to be a genius to understand what was going on: with the war still raging, Belgrade was filled with soldiers and tanks en route to the front, and here were the boys in the punk band mocking all this militarism, speaking out against the war, advocating a normal and happy life. And this in a dictatorship, where spitting out such slogans in public could get you in a lot of trouble.

As I ran after the truck, cheering on my favorite musicians, I had a series of epiphanies. I understood that activism didn't have to be boring; in fact, it was probably more effective in the form of a cool punk show than as a stodgy demonstration. I understood that it was possible, even under the most seemingly dire conditions, to get people to care. And I understood that when enough people cared, and enough of them got together to do something about it, change was imminent. Of course, I didn't really understand any of these things, at least not yet. It would take me years to think through the feelings I had that afternoon in Republic Square, to make sense of my insights and convert them to actions. But once I'd witnessed the possibility of successful and attractive nonviolent action, it was impossible to go

back to my previous state of apathy. My friends and I now felt we had to do something to bring down Milošević.

And Milošević, to his credit, worked very hard to give us plenty of reasons to be furious. In 1996, he refused to accept the results of the parliamentary elections that would have unseated many of his goons and replaced them with members of the opposition, and when activists took to the streets to demonstrate, they were crushed by Milošević's police. In 1998, Milošević moved closer to total dictatorship, announcing that his government would now have complete control over all the affairs, academic and administrative alike, of Serbia's six universities. It was more than my friends and I were willing to put up with. Getting together in our small, smoky Belgrade apartments, we decided to start a movement.

We called it Otpor!, which means "resistance," and we gave it a logo, a cool-looking black fist that was a riff on a potent symbol of social change that has served everyone from the partisans who fought against the Nazis in occupied Yugoslavia during World War II to the Black Panthers in the 1960s. For Otpor!'s fist, we used a design that my best friend, Duda Petrovic, had scribbled on a scrap of paper in the hopes of impressing one of the girls from the movement. It was edgy, and it was perfect.

All this talk of logos may sound shallow, I told my Egyptian friends, but branding was important to us. Just as people all over the world see the red-and-white swoosh and instantly recognize Coca-Cola, we wanted Serbs to have a visual image they could associate with our movement. Besides, at that time we realized only too well that even if we begged all of our friends and family members to come out and support our movement, we probably couldn't get more than thirty people to show up at a march. We could, however,

spray-paint three hundred clenched fists in one evening, and one morning early in November the citizens of Belgrade woke up to discover that Republic Square had been covered by graffiti fists. At the time, when everyone was terrified of Milošević, this gave people the sense that something large and well-organized was lurking just beneath the surface.

And, soon enough, it was.

Seeing the fist and the word “resistance” plastered everywhere, young people naturally wanted to know more about this new, hip thing. They wanted to join it. To weed out the poseurs, the flakes, and, worst of all, the potential police informants, we gave them a sort of test: to prove they were serious, they themselves had to go out and spray-paint the fist in selected locations. Before too long, we had not only covered the city with our symbol but also recruited a small group of committed people who were ready to believe regime change was possible.

Once we had recruited this core group, it was time to make some crucial decisions about what kind of a movement we wanted to be. The first thing that was obvious to us was that we were going to be a strictly nonviolent movement, not only because we believed—strongly—in peaceful resolutions, but because trying to use force against a guy who had tens of thousands of policemen, hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and God knows how many thugs at his disposal seemed to us like a very bad idea. We could never outpunch Milošević; but we could try to build a movement so strong and so popular that he’d have no choice but to succumb to it, accept an open and free election, and be promptly defeated.

The other crucial decision we made was that Otpor! wouldn’t be a movement centered on charismatic leaders. This, in part, was a practical consideration: as soon as we got big, we realized, the police would tear

into us with all their might, and a movement without easily identifiable people in charge would be harder for the authorities to take down in one swoop. Arrest any one of us, went the logic, and fifteen others would take his or her place. But in order to hide in plain sight, we had to be sneaky. We needed to spark a series of small and creative confrontations with the regime. We wanted to capture that Rimtutituki moment, that special and hopeful feeling that resistance was not futile and that victory was within reach.

Pointing across to the far corner of the plaza, I asked the Egyptians to look at the squat and deserted shopping complex from the 1980s just beyond the taxi stand that was completely sheathed in black glass. That spot was where Milošević's security services had arrested me on December 15, 1998. It was a freezing cold morning. Otpor! had been in existence for three months, and we'd gathered enough supporters and enough clout to stage a small protest down the road from Republic Square. I never got there. As I made my way to the meeting point, a few police officers jumped me and dragged me off to a piss-soaked jail cell just a few minutes' walk away, where they had their fun beating me to a pulp for what seemed like an eternity. Luckily, the thick layers of sweaters I was wearing cushioned some of the blows from their heavy boots. Eventually, the police let me go, but only after one of the cops shoved his gun into my mouth and told me he wished we were in Iraq so that he could just kill me right there.

The Egyptians perked up. This talk of beatings and guns reminded them of home, of Mubarak's notoriously thuggish security forces. At least we Serbs had lived through similar stuff. One of the Egyptians was an intellectual, with a slim build and wire-framed glasses. Mubarak's secret police had a special animosity toward students, and you could tell by the man's response that he must have had similar interactions with the cops.

Looking directly at him, then, I continued telling the story of Otpor!'s rise, and of how something unexpected started happening the more popular we became: the harder the police tried to scare us away from Republic Square, the more we kept coming back.

With Otpor!'s brand stronger than ever, our little demonstrations became the hottest parties in town; if you weren't there, you might as well have kissed your social life goodbye. And none were cooler, naturally, than those who managed to get themselves arrested—being hauled off to jail meant you were daring and fearless, which, of course, meant you were sexy. Within weeks, even the nerdiest kids in town, the sort who wore pocket protectors and prided themselves on bringing their own graphing calculators to school, were being shoved into police cars one evening and scoring dates with the most attractive women in their class the next.

At this point in the story, I could sense my Egyptian friends' silent skepticism, and so I stopped and asked the bespectacled intellectual if the same dynamic was true back home. Without hesitating, he said it wasn't. In Cairo, he told me, speaking with authority, nobody would ever want to be on the wrong side of Mubarak's secret police. He had a point: even Milošević's most brutal enforcer behaved like the tooth fairy compared to the guards in Mubarak's jails. But there was a universal principle at work in Republic Square that I wanted to share, and it really didn't have too much to do with whose secret police were nastier. What I wanted my Egyptian friends to understand was far more simple, and much more radical: I wanted them to understand comedy.

It's common for people launching nonviolent movements to cite Gandhi, say, or Martin Luther King, Jr., as their inspiration, but those guys, for all their many, many virtues, simply weren't that hilarious. If

you're hoping to get a mass movement going within a very short span of time in the age of the Internet and other distractions, humor is a key strategy. And so, walking slowly through Republic Square, I told the Egyptians about how Otpor! used a lot of street theater. We didn't do anything too political, because politics is boring, and we wanted everything to be fun and, more important, funny. In the early days of Otpor!, I said, laughter was our greatest weapon against the regime. Milošević's dictatorship, after all, was fueled by fear: fear of our neighbors, fear of surveillance, fear of the police, fear of everything. But during our time of fear, we Serbs learned that fear is best fought with laughter, and if you don't believe me, then try to think of the best way to reassure a friend who is about to be wheeled into an operating room for major surgery. If you act serious and concerned, his anxiety will spike. But if you crack a joke, suddenly he will relax, and maybe even smile. The same principle is true when it comes to movements.

How, then, to make something as harrowing as life under a despot funny? That's the best part of starting a movement. Like our heroes, Monty Python, my friends and I put our heads together and struggled to come up with good, catchy bits of activism that would have the desired effect. In one protest against Milošević, for example, Otpor! activists in the Serbian town of Kragujevac took white flowers—which represented the dictator's despised wife, who had worn a plastic one in her hair every day—and stuck them onto the heads of turkeys, a bird whose Serbian name is one of the worst things you can call a woman. The freshly accessorized turkeys were then let loose in the streets of Kragujevac, and the public was treated to a comical display of Milošević's ferocious policemen running around and foolishly tripping over themselves as the birds scattered and squawked all over the place. The best part about it all was that the cops didn't really have a choice, as to let the turkeys run free was to signal to Otpor! that their

insubordination would be tolerated. But once you've seen a burly cop chasing a turkey, like a character from an old-fashioned cartoon, can you ever be afraid of him again? It was an example of creative thinking that turned the security forces into a punch line in front of all the morning commuters and plenty of smirking journalists who arrived on the scene to take photos, and all it took was a trip to the poultry farm and a bit of imagination.

As the day went on, however, and as I shared more of Otpor!'s experiences with the Egyptians, it was clear that they were having doubts. The more religious activists were keeping a tally of everything they saw in Belgrade that wouldn't fly in Cairo. In Cairo, for instance, a café is a place for fat men to sip tea and smoke hookahs, not for girls in halter tops and short shorts to drink beers with their boyfriends in public. To these religious Egyptians, Republic Square seemed very foreign; to them, all my talk of punk rock bands and turkeys running around and people having fun standing up to the police sounded like an impossible dream.

Walking down the main shopping street adjacent to the square, we passed through beautiful rows of old nineteenth-century buildings, dating back to the days when the Austro-Hungarian Empire ruled Belgrade. Every cupola, column, and ornamental iron balcony that the Egyptians spotted seemed to reinforce a single message in their minds: this was Europe, and nothing that happened here would ever work back home on the Nile. I wasn't at all surprised to see these doubts percolate. I'd experienced the same scenario with other activists who came to Serbia looking for advice, traveling a great distance to meet with us Otpor! veterans only to hear spirited lectures about practical jokes. And the Egyptians, I felt, were beginning to wonder if the joke was on them.

Still, they must have been inspired by at least some of the stories they had heard about the protests that used to take place in Republic Square. Maybe it was out of sheer desperation, but without any prompting, one of the Egyptians began to yell political slogans amid the jam-packed crowds of café patrons and tourists.

"Free Egypt," he suddenly shouted. "Free Egypt! Down with Mubarak!"

He was red in the face, screaming with all his heart, and within seconds the entire Egyptian group burst into a chorus of chants. At least now they were energized, I thought; they were enjoying the liberty, still unattainable in Cairo, of expressing themselves at an impromptu rally. Our loud party raised a few eyebrows, and several cops stopped by to ask politely if everything was all right; they were just as baffled by my friends as the Egyptians had been baffled by us.

But this was only the first day of their visit, and so I tried not to let the group's frustration faze me. They needed time to acclimate, I told myself, and besides, Otpor!'s brand of rabblerousing was as far from the popular image of revolutionaries as you can get. We didn't scowl like Lenin or Marx, and we certainly were opposed to all that bloody stuff that Mao and Arafat preached. This was new territory for the Egyptians, and maybe they just needed to get used to it. For the rest of the week's training, we'd reserved a block of hotel rooms at Palić Lake; we would spend the next few weeks in Serbia's version of Switzerland, a scenic landscape dotted with painted gingerbread houses in pastel hues.

The next day, we started our workshop with the Egyptians in the conference room of a small hotel on the lakeshore. The place we'd booked was nothing special, but it didn't matter. We weren't here for the amenities. Before we began, we shared a hearty Serbian breakfast of cheese pastries and yogurt, and then the fifteen Egyptians stepped outside and smoked a few packs of

cigarettes in record time. I smiled: during the days of Otpor!, I too was a heavy smoker, putting away fifty cigarettes or more a day as a way to cope with the pressure of standing up to the regime. When they were done lighting up and came back inside, we closed the heavy curtains over the windows and got to work. Outside, people were splashing around in the pool, chatting on the hotel's terrace, and ordering ice-cream cones. But inside, we talked about revolution.

I stood in front of the Egyptians, who were now sitting in a semicircle around me. I opened by asking them if they had any thoughts about their recent visit to Republic Square and the stories they'd heard about the Serbian Revolution. I wanted to see what they honestly thought about the type of nonviolent resistance we had used against Milošević and were now suggesting they employ in Egypt.

A hand went up almost instantly. It was Mohammed Adel, a gentle-eyed teddy bear of a man and a leader of the April 6 movement, Cairo's best-organized nonviolent group. Although we had a translator to help us out with Arabic—a language none of us spoke—we hardly needed assistance figuring out what Mohammed was going to say. In fact, as soon as Mohammed had opened his mouth, I saw my colleague Sandra smile knowingly a few seats away. She'd spent the day in Belgrade with the Egyptians and had been doing this work long enough to know what was coming next.

"Srdja," Mohammed said bluntly, "we are all impressed with what happened in Serbia. But Egypt is very different. It can never happen there."

We weren't fazed by Mohammed's pessimism. "It can never happen here" is everybody's first reaction, and I told Mohammed that I understood his doubts. The nonviolent activists in Georgia, I told him, had said the same thing when a bunch of young Serbs met them in Tbilisi just before they brought down their own

dictatorship in 2003's Rose Revolution, using Otpor!'s methods. And I had heard the same concerns raised in the Ukraine before Leonid Kuchma was toppled in the Orange Revolution in 2004, a year later in Lebanon on the eve of the Cedar Revolution, and three years after that in the Maldives, where pro-democracy activists ultimately deposed the country's strongman. All of these revolutions were wildly successful, and all of them started with their organizers arguing that whatever happened in Serbia could never happen in their home countries.

"But with all due respect," interrupted a young Egyptian woman whose posture indicated that she wasn't buying any of it, "you spoke about concerts and demonstrations. If we do any of that, Mubarak will just make us disappear. We can't form groups larger than three. That's why your methods won't work in Egypt. It's totally different."

Yes, I told her, Mubarak's secret police—the Mukhabarat—were among the worst in the world. But people who lived in Pinochet's Chile during the 1970s were plucked off the street and thrown into secret jails just like in Egypt. And instead of trying to swarm the streets, they started encouraging taxis to drive at half speed. Just imagine, I told the young woman, that you wake up in Santiago and go to the store to buy some empanadas, and suddenly you see that all the taxis are moving in slow motion. Then imagine that spreading—imagine every car, bus, and truck driving at ten miles an hour as well, clearly stating their drivers' displeasure with the regime. Within a matter of days, people are walking at half their normal pace down the sidewalks. The city barely moves. Before all this happened, I told the Egyptian woman, people were afraid to talk openly about despising Pinochet, so if you hated the dictator, you might have imagined that you were the only one. Watching the slow drivers and walkers, however, and

understanding their actions to be a subtle protest against the regime, you could be certain that everyone hated the tyrant. Tactics like these, Chileans used to say, made people realize that "*we* are the *many* and *they* are the *few*." And the beauty was that there was no risk involved: not even in North Korea was it illegal for cars to drive slowly.

The woman laughed and informed me that a half-speed protest wouldn't exactly work in Cairo, where traffic never moves to begin with. But she admitted that something similar could be done in Egypt.

People, I said, will always be ready with a list of reasons to explain why their case is unique and why their movement is destined to fail. It's human nature. In Serbia, for example, everyone told me that it was impossible to stand up to Milošević because he had the army, the police, and the state-controlled media. In Burma, they told me that their culture of obedience guaranteed that people would never challenge the junta. And when I visit the United States, people constantly complain that all that Americans care about is filling their Walmart shopping carts and mowing the lawn in front of their McMansions. But guess what? Martin Luther King Jr., was from America, monks are leading the demonstrations in the streets of Rangoon, and today Serbia is a democracy.

The first step to building a successful movement, I told the Egyptians, was to get rid of the idea that whatever had happened somewhere else could never be replicated at home. This notion, I said, rested on two assumptions, one right and the other wrong. The first assumption—which is correct—is that every place is different, and that country A's nonviolent movement can't be copied and pasted onto country B. Even on my best days, I admitted to the Egyptians, I would never be able to motivate even a hundred Serbs to march with Mohammed and his April 6 movement for democracy in

Cairo. Likewise, I would never be able to get a Saudi woman to mimic the winning techniques of the FEMEN protestors in Ukraine and flash her breasts at a rally for gender equality in Riyadh.

The religious Egyptians smirked at that one.

While the first assumption implicit in "it can never happen here" is valid, I continued, the second—which is the notion that there is categorically no way for a nonviolent movement to succeed in your country—is absolutely wrong. The principles that have been used in nonviolent campaigns from Gandhi's time to the Serbian Revolution and beyond are universal. They can work in anyone's country, town, community, or even college.

The key, I told the Egyptians, was to start with something small, relevant, but achievable, something that won't get you killed or roughed up too badly. I reminded them that the first thing that we did in Otpor! was to adopt the clenched fist as our symbol. When the members of Otpor! would visit friends, we would slap stickers with the fist inside the elevators of their buildings. This, I explained, was a tactic the Egyptians could easily replicate.

A burly Egyptian guy interrupted me. "I don't understand how stickers will bring down Mubarak," he said.

I could see from the way the Egyptians were looking at me that most of them were wondering the same thing. But I also saw a few half-empty packs of Marlboros scattered in front of them, the leftovers from their after-breakfast smoke. I asked them why they had chosen those particular cigarettes. At first, nobody knew where I was going with this.

"I don't know," said one of the intellectuals. "Maybe the packaging looks nice?"

“They’re the best cigarettes,” the burly Egyptian added. “And they’re American.”

Well, I told him, he was smoking Marlboros because that brand represented something to him. Maybe it was the Marlboro Man, or the red packaging, or the quality control, or whatever. But when he went to the store for cigarettes, he made a choice between brands. And in the end he trusted Marlboro. It’s the same with a dictator. Every dictator, I explained, is a brand. Usually that brand is wrapped in a national flag, and it very often relies on some narrative about stability—Pinochet’s famous quote was “Me or chaos.” Often, a dictator’s brand represents defiance of the United States, of Israel, of whomever. And like all brands, dictators are desperate for market share and exposure. That’s why Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez hosted his own TV show, called *Aló Presidente*. Broadcast for hours at a time, it featured Chávez making speeches and acting out skits. In one episode he dressed up as a baseball umpire and declared that his political opponents were “out.” Dictators such as the colorful Chávez are like any other brand, addicted to airtime and always seeking to increase their slice of the market. But if you look past the advertising and the propaganda posters, all dictatorships are baked from the same basic ingredients: corruption, nepotism, mismanagement, social injustice, violence, and fear. So why do people choose to go along with them?

(illustration credit 1.2)

Nobody had an answer.

It's because in a dictatorship, I said, there aren't any other brands. If Mubarak represented some crappy domestic cigarette, I told the Egyptians, then they would need to become a carton of Marlboros. They needed a brand that was better than his. And brands require advertising, which relies on symbols. That's why the clenched fist was so important in Serbia's revolution, and why roses and the color orange were used by activists in Georgia and Ukraine during their successful struggles against their countries' post-Soviet stooges. Without some way of branding, all the anger to be found in little pockets of discontent in Egypt—whether it was the textile workers who went on strike in Mahalla in 2008, the journalists who were clamoring for uncensored Internet access in Cairo, or the unemployed kids who were being beaten in the streets all across the country—would never be focused on the real problem, which was Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship. Having a strong logo would help people make the connection that all this unrest was related to something much larger than themselves. And this much larger something, I told the Egyptians, should be the vision they create.

At that, a particularly shy Egyptian raised her hand.

"All of this is amazing," she conceded, "and God willing we will succeed. But there are only fifteen of us here, and we are up against Mubarak, his police, his army, his party, everything. You know, sometimes it seems," she said, hesitating, "that we're just … nobodies."

Now, I'm not a religious person by any means. But if I had to choose one book to call my scripture, without a doubt it would be *The Lord of the Rings*. I've always kept a small shrine to Tolkien in my bedroom, and even in the darkest moments of the Serbian campaign, when Milošević and the madness of ethnic cleansing controlled everything around us, I would turn to my well-worn copy of Tolkien's books and find confidence

in their pages. I was particularly fond of one exchange, in which the wizard Galadriel tells the hobbit Frodo that "even the smallest creature can change the course of the future."

I repeated those words to the Egyptians. And then I repeated them again. It was clear why the Egyptians felt like nobodies. From a very young age, we are all told that it's the strong and the mighty who make history happen. Newspapers and magazines compete to run profiles of the powerful and the rich, and TV presenters always seem so charmed by the world-shaping elites they interview in their fancy studios. In the West, our culture begins with the *Iliad*—with its scenes of nipples pierced with spears and helmets filled with blood—and continues to this day as a three-thousand-year celebration of violence and heroes and conquest. Think about it: how many movies have you seen about World War II or the Vietnam War? Plenty, I'm sure. But try to count the number of major films that have been made about famous nonviolent struggles. There's *Gandhi*, of course, with Ben Kingsley; *Milk*, with Sean Penn; plus a few moving tributes to Nelson Mandela. But that's pretty much it.

We revere the warriors, but have the warriors really shaped history? Consider the following: the main outcome of World War I was World War II, and the main outcome of World War II was the Cold War, which in turn gave us Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, the war on terror, and so on. But what did the world get from Martin Luther King Jr.? Civil rights and a black president in 2008. And what was the historic legacy of Gandhi? The independence of India and the end of colonialism. And Lech Walesa, the leader of Poland's Solidarity movement during the 1980s, what did he achieve? The end of Communism in Eastern Europe. And who was Lech Walesa? Just an electrician at the Gdansk shipyards, a hobbit if there ever was one.

I told the Egyptians about Harvey Milk, the slain gay rights leader. He became the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California, and he was just a humble shopkeeper from San Francisco before he decided that attitudes about homosexuality needed to change. Harvey was another hobbit. When Jane Jacobs decided to stare down Robert Moses—the most powerful man in New York City, whose insane plan to plow a superhighway through the historic neighborhoods of downtown Manhattan would have destroyed the city—she was derided as a shrill housewife and a crazy dame. That's because Jacobs, who ended up revolutionizing the field of urban planning without even having a college degree, was a hobbit too.

None of these people came from the elites, and if you were casting for models to pose for bronze statues to put in city squares, you wouldn't have selected any of them. But these are the people who move the big world forward. It's not just in Tolkien that the hobbits change the course of the future, I promised the Egyptians. It happened in Belgrade, and it could happen in Egypt as well.

And with that, everybody grew silent. I didn't really know if they were quiet because they agreed with what I was saying or because they were just exhausted. Either way, it was time to break for the day. Over the course of the next few sessions we discussed more technical aspects of creating a revolutionary movement, and I reminded them about the importance of planning, unity, and maintaining nonviolent discipline throughout every stage of their campaigns. Once that was all finished, we said our farewells and went our separate ways, me back home to Belgrade and they to Cairo.

I didn't share it with the Egyptians at the time, but there was a moment during the fight against Milošević when I too felt that change couldn't happen in Serbia. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was late at night on

April 23, 1999, and plumes of black smoke were rising from the headquarters of the Serbian national television station just a few blocks from my home. That was where my mother, Vesna, worked, in an office that I considered almost a second home; I had spent so many hours of my childhood running through it. The building and its journalists had apparently been designated as a legitimate military target during the NATO bombing campaign that was supposed to put an end to Milošević's war machine, and the building was obliterated in an instant by the Western air forces only hours after my mother left her desk earlier that day. Sixteen of her innocent co-workers died that horrible night.

My mother was shaking as she stood next to me on the roof of her apartment building while we watched the flames rise into the sky. She was alive only because she had been chosen for an afternoon shift that day. As for me, I was twenty-six years old, and my country was in the middle of its fifth war since I'd turned eighteen. Martial law had been declared the day that NATO started its bloody bombing campaign, I had already been labeled a traitor and an enemy of the state, Otpor! had been driven underground, and to stay safe I had stopped sleeping at home. On that night, even I thought that change could never happen here. But somehow I knew that it had to, because if we didn't win, there wouldn't be anything left for us to save.

So I understood the hopelessness that the Egyptians were feeling, and I empathized with them. But our policy is not to keep in touch with activists after we train with them, and we didn't make an exception for Mohammed Adel and his friends. Once they got the ball rolling back home, there was very little that we could do to assist them. Every country is different, and local activists have the intimate knowledge of their society needed to understand what might work best to cure its ills. Some things can't be imported, and a vision for your

own society's future is one of them. Only you can create that. My role, and the role of my colleagues, is simply to tell aspiring nonviolent activists what has worked for us in Otpor! and to share with them strategies and tactics culled from years of experience. After that, we stepped aside. Of course, that didn't stop a slew of dictators—Iran's Ahmadinejad in 2009, Russia's Putin in 2011, Venezuela's Chávez in 2007, or Turkey's Erdogan in 2013—from claiming that we were Serbian agents and that anyone associating with us was a traitor or a spy. Chávez, in fact, paid us the highest compliment of all when he appeared on television in an orange outfit to personally hold up an Otpor! leaflet that had been making the rounds in Venezuela and used it to denounce us as Serbian mercenaries who were corrupting the students of his country—the same students, in fact, who had just used nonviolent techniques to hand Chávez his ass in a humiliating national referendum.

And so I'd love to be able to say that I often wondered about the fifteen Egyptians after our week at Palić Lake, but the summer of 2009 was a very busy time for us and I was swamped with work. Waves of street protests were spreading across Tehran after what looked like clear-cut election fraud, and my attention naturally shifted to Iran. There were almost seventeen thousand downloads per month of our Farsi-language training manuals from Internet addresses within the Islamic Republic, and Burma's Saffron Revolution—which had been launched after a Buddhist monk was inspired by a DVD about the Otpor! movement that someone had smuggled into his monastery—was approaching its second year.

In fact, with all these distractions, it was almost a year and a half later before we were reminded of Mohammed Adel and the others. But I'll never forget how it happened. It was late April 2010, and I had just dashed out of my apartment on a lovely spring day. I needed to buy some cigarettes, and I wasn't feeling very social, so I

thrust my hands in my pockets and kept my head down as I crossed the street. At the kiosk, as I scanned the racks for the brand of cigarettes I wanted, I noticed the front page of one of Serbia's largest newspapers out of the corner of my eye. When I realized what I was seeing, I froze. I couldn't move a muscle. There it was. A clenched fist, as big and bold as ever, in a photograph of someone waving a sign. There was no mistaking that logo: this was the clenched fist of Otpor!, the same design that Duda had scribbled all those years ago. I'd probably seen a million of those fists in my lifetime, but never quite like this. The woman holding the sign was wearing a *hijab*, and the headline read: "The Fist Shakes Cairo!"

It was about to happen there.

(illustration credit 1.3)

(illustration credit 2.1)

CHAPTER II

Dream Big, Start Small

Personally, I can't think of anything more revolting than cottage cheese. Forgive me, but I'm a Serb, and we live for a type of cream cheese called kajmak. The name might seem strange to Americans with that *j* floating in there, but it's pronounced "kai-mack" and it's amazing. It has a creamy, smooth texture that is something like yogurt. Our cream cheese is nothing like that prepackaged Philadelphia stuff you have in the States. It doesn't come from a factory and, like most Serbian food, kajmak is rich in both history and cholesterol. It's been said that countries with the most turbulent histories have the best dishes, and that might explain why we Serbs are perversely proud of the fact that, due to all of our lost wars and foreign invasions, you can find Turkish baklava as well as Austrian Sacher torte on the menu of any good Belgrade café. But for really bloody histories, it's hard to top the Middle East, and in few places are people so passionate about their food. And Israelis, God bless them, love cottage cheese. To me it's gross and lumpy, but to them it's essential. They gobble it up with scrambled eggs for breakfast and mix it into their salads for dinner. Yet by 2011 it was getting really expensive.

Now, this wasn't the only thing Israelis had noticed. For two decades, the formerly generous state had gone through a difficult process of privatization, and many social programs were cut. Tens of thousands of poor Israelis were scrambling to find apartments in an increasingly tight real estate market, which was controlled by a handful of powerful corporations eager

to raze older buildings and replace them with shiny glass high-rises.

But as anyone who's dealt with a landlord can tell you, arguing for your right to an affordable rent is a hard battle to win. You'll probably just be sent to Craigslist and told to look somewhere else. And in every city and state, you'll always find lots of people who support gentrification and new development. So while less well-off Israelis tried to snag the scarce affordable housing they could find, plenty of other citizens did little but shrug and admire the sleek new buildings sprouting up all over the place. Even as the people seeking affordable apartments resented the new class of insanely wealthy, politically connected men and women who were enjoying a lifestyle of private planes and private clubs, most Israelis kept telling themselves that, compared to the rest of the world, life in Israel was still pretty good. They could afford to shop at Ikea every weekend, buy the latest flat-screen TVs, and take nice trips abroad.

A few blowhards, the sort of humorless folks you'd politely try to ditch if you ever got stuck talking to one at a party, looked at all the new buildings and conspicuous consumption arising in Israeli society and cried out that a revolution was in order, that Israelis needed to get together and topple the system or, at the very least, the government. But nobody paid any attention. Just like us in Serbia, these grumpy Israelis had a clear vision of tomorrow that was based largely on their recent past. Even if nobody was listening, they still spoke about wanting to live in a country where a basic safety net existed to catch those who were down on their luck. They were still cool with the free market, and took pride in having created so many successful industries, particularly in high tech. What they hated—the term sprang up somewhere around 2010 and was

soon on everyone's lips—was "piggish capitalism." For the most part, though, they had no idea how to stop it.

This is where Itzik Alrov comes in. When Israelis think of their heroes, they imagine tanned and muscular warriors or beautiful models like Bar Rafaeli, not a scrawny ultra-Orthodox insurance salesmen who makes ends meet by moonlighting as a singer in local synagogues. But this Alrov was a thoughtful and passionate man. Like all the others, he didn't like "piggish capitalism," but he understood that for anything to change he needed to make the fight relevant to everyone, even those individuals who were relatively well-off. He knew that most people wouldn't join an effort to do something that sounded really daunting, like forcing the prime minister to resign or coming up with an alternative economic program. He knew instinctively that when you have a vision of tomorrow, you can't pick the big cataclysmic fight as your first confrontation. In the beginning, everybody is a nobody. And nobodies need to find the battles they can win. That's why in all those movies Batman goes after common thugs in the first few scenes. He starts by picking easy fights, building a reputation and a name. Only then does he take on the Joker. No matter how important the big issues are to you, it's imperative to start with something manageable. And in Israel, Alrov knew he couldn't take on the entire economy right out of the gate. But he could do something about cottage cheese.

Like all Israelis, he was crazy for the stuff. And like all Israelis, he knew its story only too well. Realizing that the cheese was a fundamental part of most people's diet, the government had subsidized it as a staple, which meant that the price of one cup of cottage cheese couldn't go above a predetermined price. It kept cottage cheese affordable. In 2006, however, the government changed its mind. As it had done with so many other industries and resources, it decided to let the market run

its course, so it removed the subsidies. The minister of finance, a chubby guy with a beard who looked like a sketchy version of Santa Claus, addressed the policy in an interview where he jovially laughed the whole thing off. Israelis had no reason to worry, he said. With the cottage cheese market now open to competition, products were bound to improve. In a sense, he was right: within four years, scores of new cottage-cheese-based products flooded the market, from artisanal cottage cheese to cottage cheese blended with yogurt and other cheeses. What the minister forgot to tell the people was that losing the subsidy came at a price. From four shekels, or approximately one dollar, in 2006, the price of cottage cheese spiked to double that by the time Alrov was looking for ways to protest the cost of living. And it didn't take him very long to realize that the uproar over cottage cheese was the perfect vehicle for change.

Alrov created a modestly designed Facebook page, using a snapshot of a dollop of cottage cheese. He gave his new social network group an awkward name: "Cottage cheese is such a basic product and now it costs nearly 8 shekels. We won't buy it for one month!!!" He advocated letting the cheese spoil on the shelves until prices were lowered. And in the apocalyptic language befitting a religious man, he opined that "if we don't overcome our desire to buy cottage cheese, we will never succeed in making it affordable again."

At first, only thirty-two people, most of them friends of Alrov's, joined his online petition. But Israel is a small country, and a local blogger, amused by the idea of a cottage cheese boycott, interviewed Alrov. The day after the interview ran, his petition had nine thousand signatures. The mainstream media soon reported for duty, reveling in the unlikely working-class hero who had fallen into their hands. Before too long, Alrov's page had a hundred thousand followers, which in a country

of only seven million people is a lot. Alrov had found an easy fight to pick, and since everybody wants to join a winning team, his following continued to grow.

The three or four companies who control Israel's dairy market did what big and powerful organizations—corporations, governments, dictators—always do. At first they ignored Alrov and his followers. As the cottage cheese protests gathered steam, Tnuva, the largest player in the market, announced a new product called Cottage Cheese Munchies, individually packaged tubes of cottage cheese with small compartments containing various toppings like fruit or chocolate chips. The new product, a Tnuva spokesman said in an official announcement, "allows Tnuva to further differentiate itself from its competitors, as it charges the consumer more money for its innovation." It was a dumb statement, but in 2011 Tnuva felt so secure in its position of power that it didn't worry about it too much.

It was a mistake. Alrov realized that talking about cottage cheese was a cover for Israelis to talk about the economy, about injustice, and about national priorities. Most people don't really understand how the economy works—my wife and my bank manager will tell you that's very much the case for me as well—but everyone understands how infuriating it is when the one product you really can't live without gets progressively more expensive for no good reason except the greed of a few companies. People didn't want innovation; they wanted their cheap cheese. Moved by Alrov's call, more Israelis took the plunge and gave up their beloved cottage cheese. Tnuva's chairwoman sent a stern message through the press, saying she wouldn't lower prices. In doing so, she gave the cottage cheese protest just what it needed: a villain. Enraged with Tnuva's arrogance, Israelis vowed to punish the behemoth. They didn't stop at cottage cheese: now chocolate milk—*shoko*, the national addiction of Israeli children—gazed longingly

from supermarket refrigerators as previously loyal consumers sneered while passing it by. Smoothies went unsipped. Swiss cheese grew moldy. Around water coolers in offices all over Israel, people boasted about their commitment to go dairy-free. It was the world's first case of politically motivated lactose intolerance.

And it worked. Within two weeks, the large supermarket chains, panicking over a noticeable drop in profits, announced that they would place all cottage-cheese-related products on sale. Still, that only lowered the price so much; if consumers were to win the battle, Tnuva and the other dairy corporations had to bow down. Sensing the tremors, the milk mongers tried to play nice. Tnuva's chief, sounding much more welcoming than before, released another statement; she said that while she regretted not being able to reduce the price of cottage cheese, she promised not to raise it again until the end of the year. Most pundits expected this gambit to work, but they were underestimating the resolve of the cheese-addled masses. Alrov and the scores of activists who joined him were now sensing that they could win. They were like sharks who smelled blood in the water, and they pressed on. Five days later, Tnuva announced that it was reducing the price to just under six shekels. The protestors still wouldn't budge. For them, it was five shekels or bust. A few days later, victory was theirs. All of the dairy companies issued separate statements, each pledging low prices. Tnuva's chairwoman, under the scrutiny of her disapproving board, announced her resignation.

But the real victory of the cottage cheese protest wasn't just the triumphant return of the now affordable dairy product to the tables of hundreds of thousands of Israelis. Watching Alrov and his followers, a small group of young and idealistic Israelis had a bit of an epiphany. Unlike Alrov, whose main concern was being able to feed his family, they were college students who had

spent their adolescence advocating for a host of causes related to social justice. They lived in communes, marched in demonstrations, read rousing literature, and wrote insightful blog posts. And they'd gotten nowhere. But now people were getting a better idea of how these protest movements could coalesce into something that actually achieves victories. They saw the importance of starting small, and doing what the American writer and activist Jonathan Kozol advises: "Pick battles big enough to matter, but small enough to win." By choosing such an easy target, Alrov gave them the missing piece of the puzzle. Now that they'd experienced a victory, people were emboldened and willing to pick bigger fights. Just a few weeks after the cottage cheese rebellion was won, these students too launched their own Facebook page, targeting the rising cost of housing. They invited people to join them in one of Tel Aviv's loveliest, leafiest boulevards, bearing tents. Until they were given options they could afford, they argued, they would live in the street. While before the students were ignored, here were thousands of ordinary Israelis answering the call. If it worked for cottage cheese, went the thinking, why not for housing? Hundreds of thousands more showed up at a series of mass demonstrations. Like Tnuva, the government first ignored, then tried to deflect, then sought to appease, and finally capitulated. A committee was appointed, and many of its recommendations were signed into law. Because some random insurance salesman picked a fight over lumpy cheese, young Israelis were now much closer to achieving their seemingly impossible vision of tomorrow.

A big part of a movement's success will be determined by the battles it chooses to fight, and a lot of that has to do with how well it understands its opponent. Many centuries ago, Sun Tzu reflected on this idea when he told readers of *The Art of War* how important it is to always put your strong points against your enemy's weak points. Now, I don't know if Gandhi ever read Sun

Tzu, but of all the nonviolent warriors I can think of, few have applied those ancient Chinese principles as well as Gandhi did.

That's because Gandhi understood from the beginning that military force was the strength of the British Empire. That's what they were good at. Even if he hadn't been a dedicated pacifist, Gandhi surely would have realized that the British soldiers, armed with the most modern weapons in the world, would never be defeated in an armed conflict. But out in India, the British nevertheless suffered from a critical weakness: a lack of numbers. In all of India, there were only 100,000 of their soldiers ruling over 350 million Indians. Still, if those Indians organized a military campaign, they'd be wiped out. But if they chose to act exclusively through peaceful means, the strongest card the British had—their fearsome military—wouldn't be played. If Gandhi could somehow unite all those millions of Indians under a single, nonviolent banner, the British would be overwhelmed.

In order for that to happen, though, he'd need a cause. He'd already called for the independence of India and spoken of self-determination for the Indian people, but that was a bit too abstract. Abstract ideals can mobilize a few like-minded revolutionary souls, but Gandhi needed an entire country. For that, he would have to find something concrete. He needed to champion a cause that was so simple and so uncontroversial that every Indian, regardless of politics or caste, couldn't help but flock to his side. And in 1930, Gandhi found his answer: salt.

At the time, the British were taxing salt production in India, which meant that a fee had to be paid to the British crown if anybody in India wanted a commodity that is necessary for human life. You couldn't find a more basic or more crucial issue. Everybody needs salt. It's found in every kitchen, no matter how lavish or

ramshackle the house may be. And it's something that really should be free. After all, India has around forty-three hundred miles of coastline. Traditionally, all Indians would need to do was go to the beach, take some seawater, and boil it. Voilà—you have salt. But under British rule, the colonial administrators insisted on levying a tax on it. So Gandhi, instead of taking on the full might of the British military and organizing an armed insurrection—which would have ended in disaster—gathered just seventy-seven followers and announced his intention to walk through towns and villages of India on a month-long march to the shore, where he and his fellow activists planned to extract salt from seawater and dare the British to stop them.

At first, the British viceroy didn't seem to be bothered by what seemed to him like a trifling matter. A few Indians in loincloths taking a stroll to the beach? So what? "At present," the viceroy wrote, "the prospect of a salt campaign does not keep me awake at night." But by the time the marchers arrived at the ocean, twelve thousand Indians had joined their ranks, motivated in part by their hatred of the unfair taxes and the daily humiliations that the British were inflicting on India. But mostly they were there because they wanted salt. Gandhi's march had touched a raw nerve, and, as he predicted, the British were reluctant to use their mighty military to suppress a peaceful protest over a biological necessity. After all, how would that look to the rest of the world? And—what was scarier for the British—how would that look to the tens of thousands of Gandhi's emboldened followers? As similar demonstrations began to take place throughout India, it became clear that the authorities had severely underestimated Gandhi's strategy. "As Britain lost America through tea," an American newspaper wrote, "it is about to lose India through salt."

Because salt was so basic and because the issue was so simple, the salt march gained followers of all creeds and castes for Gandhi's movement. The British, who were completely caught off guard, were forced to back down and let the Indians have their salt tax-free. When the colonizers caved, Gandhi had scored a victory. And since Gandhi had proved that he could deliver the goods to the average Indian, he was able to leverage his salt success toward bigger and more important battles, namely, the ultimate expulsion of the British and the independence of India. Gandhi wanted to live in a free India, but he knew that he needed to start by picking the small battles, and it doesn't get much smaller than a grain of salt.

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This is why you see so many activists campaigning for better and healthier food. That's because no matter what a person's religion, skin color, or political belief may be, there isn't a single human being out there who doesn't need to eat. Everybody relates to food, and we're all affected by it. Whether you look at Sarah Kavanagh, the sixteen-year-old girl from Mississippi who convinced two hundred thousand people to sign her successful online petition asking Gatorade to remove a chemical used as a flame retardant from its orange thirst quencher, or Vani Hari and Lisa Leake, bloggers who led a similar campaign asking Kraft Foods to eliminate the bright yellow dyes from their macaroni and cheese, food has a special way of getting people to come together. People are biologically wired to relate to issues of health and nutrition, and that's a big part of the reason that Doug Johnson was able to win his fight against the way Nestlé marketed baby formula in the 1980s or why people today watch documentaries such as Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* and Robert Kenner's *Food, Inc*. Whether it's food or some other basic necessity, activists who can identify some everyday thing that speaks to as

many people as possible will always have an advantage over those who cling to a much narrower platform.

Which brings us, of course, to Milk. Harvey Milk, that is. Apologies for the pun, but you may have heard about this pioneering politician who was the first openly gay public official in America. If you haven't, he is wonderfully portrayed by Sean Penn in an Academy Award–winning movie called *Milk* that you may want to check out. Milk's story is about many things: courage, conviction, and dedication. Most of all, it's about how important it is to start with the small stuff.

Nothing in the first four decades of Harvey Milk's life suggested that he would one day become an inspiration to anyone seriously interested in human rights and equality. Born on Long Island to a conservative, middle-class Jewish family, he'd known he was gay from a very young age, but took great pains to cover up his true identity. He joined the Navy, fought in Korea, and then found work first as an insurance actuary and then as a researcher for a large Wall Street securities firm. This future icon of liberal America even campaigned for the archconservative Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Milk was hardly a revolutionary, and in fact he once broke off with a boyfriend he dearly loved because he felt the young man was too likely to challenge authority and get in trouble with the police. Milk was successful and respectable, with neatly cropped hair and a closetful of fine suits. He was also miserable, living a lie. Eventually he got fed up: in 1969, at the age of thirty-nine, he quit his job, got rid of the tie, let his hair grow, and moved west to San Francisco.

The city he found was one busy being reborn. By 1969, it had the largest gay population of any major metropolitan area in the United States. Neighborhoods like the Castro, where Milk eventually settled, were shedding their old residents—working-class Irish

Catholics—and welcoming in new ones, young men and women who had come to San Francisco seeking tolerance, free love, and flower power. Here Milk felt liberated. Having spent a lifetime keeping his sexuality a secret, he was now accepted openly and wanted to help other gay men and women not to be ashamed of themselves. Milk, who ran a popular camera shop, soon became involved in local politics. His first stop was the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club, the most powerful—and only—gay political organization in town. Milk showed up, smiling widely and talking bravely. He was like so many other young, talented, and hugely passionate men and women who decide to make a difference: the way to victory, he and his closest friends believed, was to tell the truth, raise good points, offer sensible solutions, and count on good people to come out and vote for change.

But it wasn't so simple. Back then, even in San Francisco, homosexuality was still a taboo subject. Today, with the advance of gay marriage and the growing acceptance of homosexuality in American society, it's easy to forget how different the cultural landscape was when Harvey Milk ran for office. In the early 1970s, when Milk was first mobilizing, gay sex was still a felony in many places and a legitimate cause for eviction from rented apartments. As late as 1973, the American Psychiatric Association categorized homosexuality as a mental disorder. Being gay wasn't something that people were comfortable with. So Milk was running a principled platform that confused, turned off, and even revolted plenty of ordinary voters.

His campaign was, of course, a disaster. Milk had no money, no staff, and no idea how to run an effective campaign. He did manage to get the support of some gay business owners tired of police harassment, and his personal charm helped win over a handful of converts, but when he finally ran for city supervisor in 1973, he

came in tenth out of thirty-two candidates. But Milk persevered. He discovered a talent for rousing speeches and gave them frequently, talking about persecution and the injustices of anti-gay legislation. He wanted to represent his community, and thought the best way to do that was by organizing all the gays together as one political bloc with a few key allies.

Again he failed. While he had managed to go more mainstream, making inroads with labor unions and firemen and meeting with regular people at bus stops and movie theaters, it still wasn't enough. This time, although he came closer to victory with a seventh-place showing, a margin of four thousand voters still guaranteed that Milk would remain little more than a well-meaning and talented niche activist.

And he would have remained one had he not finally understood the all-important principle of finding the small, winnable battles. Starting out, Harvey Milk did what all of us who are passionate enough to get involved with one cause or another do, which is to talk bravely and expect people to listen. If you are reading this book, I assume you care at least a little bit about making a change for the better in the world. At one point or another in your life, you've probably tried to petition, organize, march, or do something else to raise people's awareness of some very important topic or another. Maybe you just tried to convince a friend or a parent that their politics were all wrong. I'm willing to bet you a scoop of Israeli cottage cheese that I know what happened: you spoke passionately about saving the endangered North Atlantic salmon or about buying iPhones for chronically sad Bulgarian orphans, but people just nodded politely.

I'm being cynical, of course, but only because I want to be absolutely clear about this very important principle of nonviolent activism: namely, that people,

without exception and without fail, just don't give a damn.

This is not because they're bad. Most people are decent and kind and unassuming. They believe, in the immortal words of Liz Lemon from the television show *30 Rock*, that all anyone really wants in this life is to sit in peace and eat a sandwich. But they also have a lot on their minds, things like jobs and kids and big dreams and small grievances and favorite TV shows to keep up with and boxes filled with stuff they need to ship back to Amazon. You may think that these things are silly. You may accuse people who just care about taking it one day at a time and tending their own garden of being selfish or blind or even immoral. The worst activists I've ever seen did just that. They got nowhere, because it's unrealistic to expect people to care about more than what they already care about, and any attempt to make them do so is bound to fail. Benjamin Franklin is said to have remarked, "All mankind is divided into three classes: those that are unmovable, those that are movable, and those that move." I imagine you, the reader, are one who moves. Your task, then, is to find those who are movable and get them to join you.

As an activist, you have two choices. The first is to do what Harvey Milk started out doing and seek to rally the people who already more or less believe in what you have to say. This is a great way for coming in tenth at anything. You're always guaranteed a small and enthusiastic fan base—including your friends, your neighbors, and your grandma—who will support you no matter what. The beautiful thing about this method is that you always get to feel that you're right and just and pure and good. The downside is that you never win.

The other choice is much better and, surprisingly, not a lot more difficult. It requires listening and finding out what other people care about, and fighting your battles in that general vicinity. Milk, whose tenacity eventually

got him elected to the San Francisco city council, realized that average straight people really didn't care too much about the homosexual struggle for equal rights. That fight wasn't going to be won on the merits of justice and equality alone. Milk needed to attack it from a different angle, and even though hard-core evangelical Christians across the country were using San Francisco's gay community as a stand-in for all that was evil in America, Milk sought to stand up for his community by focusing on something that all San Franciscans lived in fear of: dog shit.

Because Milk listened to the people of San Francisco, he learned that the quality-of-life issue that most concerned the residents of the city had less to do with their souls and everything to do with their soles. Nearly all of them named the epidemic of uncollected dog poop sullying the city's parks as the worst nuisance imaginable. It was public enemy number one. If Milk had seen the same poll just two or three years earlier, he most likely would have stormed the streets of the Castro with some great speech about how stepping in shit was not a real inconvenience when every day scores of gay Americans were harassed for no other reason but whom they loved. Milk, however, had grown smarter. And he understood the power of street theater and symbolic public events. That day, he asked the media to meet him in a lovely local park to discuss some new ideas for legislation. When the press showed up, Milk walked up to the cameras and then, as if by accident, stepped in a huge turd. He lifted his foot in the air and stared at it in mock horror. It seemed like a spontaneous moment, a good prop illustrating how the city was failing to meet the needs of its residents. But this was all planned. He'd arrived at the park an hour earlier, combed it for dog excrement, and mapped his route carefully. With his soiled shoe firmly in place, he gave a lighthearted little talk about how he, like all San Franciscans, was sick of this smelly nuisance but that he, Harvey Milk, was going

to do something about it. He finally had found a cause everybody could identify with, and soon the fan mail flowed in.

After all his struggling, he had learned to fight the battles he could win. Struggling for gay rights in an apathetic straight city was hard. But cleaning up dog shit was easy. All you needed were plastic bags. From there on in, however, you would always be seen as the person who could back up talk with results, and everyone will listen to people who deliver. Now that Milk had a sympathetic and grateful audience, he was able to move on to the big issue of gay rights. When Milk finally marched into city hall in 1977, he linked his arm with his boyfriend's and gave a pretty good summary of an important principle. "You can stand around and throw bricks at Silly Hall," he said, "or you can take it over. Well, here we are." If you want to win, you need to pull people toward your movement and recognize that you can't win without them.

Once Milk found his platform and his grateful audience of average San Franciscans, he was able to get to work on his important issues. It took the national gay rights movement a few decades to catch on to Milk's strategy, but eventually they did. In the 1980s and 1990s, most of their efforts were directed at organizing their own ranks as an insular political faction, and few people outside the gay community cared enough to join them in their marches or support their legislative efforts. Then, the movement had its Milk moment. It started thinking not in terms of moral absolutes but in terms of individual motivations. And the movement recognized that most people only get involved with issues when they feel directly connected to them. As experience had shown, the basic gay issues up until then didn't affect the everyday heterosexual American in any meaningful way. For most Americans, the crises affecting the gay community—from the deadly AIDS epidemic of the

1980s to the more recent efforts to end a host of legal discriminations—simply didn't register. Most people aren't gay, and so they had other things to worry about. But that all changed when the gay rights movement began to frame the issue in terms that made sense to straight people. To bring the heterosexual community to join its cause, the movement turned outward. It turned to the mothers and fathers and siblings and friends of gay people and invited them to come along and march. By mainstreaming the cause, the gay rights movement was no longer defined by slogans like "We're here! We're queer!" and parades that featured all the characters from the Village People wearing nipple clamps. Nowadays at a gay parade you're more likely to find middle-aged American dads with beer bellies marching with signs that say they support their kids and love them no matter what. And when even staunch Republicans like Dick Cheney publicly come out in favor of gay marriage because they love their lesbian daughters, you can tell that society is shifting.

All of this was the result of a simple strategic calculation, the same one that was made in the civil rights movement in the American South a few decades earlier. During the 1960s, James Lawson, a Methodist preacher, was an organizer of black and white activists in Nashville, Tennessee. Lawson understood that the white community of Nashville was opposed to civil rights because they were afraid of blacks, who they felt were little more than animals. He instructed his students to overcome this perception by maintaining a dress code and behaving as perfect ladies and gentlemen whenever they went out to protest. Lawson knew that the marchers could win over some of the whites if they could demonstrate to the whites that their fears were unfounded.

When Lawson's activists set out to occupy the segregated lunch counters in the city, he urged them to

react nonviolently to whatever threats came their way. After all, went the reasoning, if the activists fought back at the lunch counters when the police arrived to arrest them, it would validate whites' fears about black activists, and civil rights would remain nothing but a faraway dream. But if the activists maintained their dignity and composure as the whites beat them and threw milkshakes at their heads, it would be clear to the whole world which side was acting like a pack of animals, and that might force some neutral whites to reassess their opinions.

Lawson knew that in a nonviolent struggle, numbers are the only way to achieve a victory. You need to go where the numbers are. In order for Lawson and the civil rights protestors to succeed, they needed white support. And to do that they needed the majority of white Nashville to see blacks as ordinary people who basically resembled themselves. Likewise, the gay rights movement really took off when the straight public stopped seeing homosexuals as outsiders with short shorts and fishnet tops and began to view them as decent, hardworking Americans who deserve rights like everyone else. In the process, the gay rights movement became a lot less colorful but much more effective.

James Lawson also recognized that although the civil rights cause was just and its ultimate goals were honorable, the key to achieving victory was to take an incremental approach. He didn't shoot for the moon and fight for full and unconditional equality from the get-go. Instead, he picked the battles he could win. While giving instructions to one group of activists at his church about marching through the streets, he went out of his way to caution his listeners, "We don't want a white person with a negro of the opposite sex, because we don't want to fight that battle." It was a battle that needed to be fought, but not just yet. In the 1960s, desegregation was

possible, but mixed-race relationships weren't. But they sure as hell would be—in time.

Back in my younger days, when everyone was running around Belgrade playing cat-and-mouse games with Milošević's goons, we spent a lot of time thinking about what small battles we could win and which were just a waste of our time and enthusiasm. For some of us, the idea of choosing easy battles to start with seemed a lot like trading in our principles for cheap and worthless victories. Others took the idea to its opposite extreme, boasting that every battle they picked was, by definition, also a battle they could win. But neither of these stances is totally correct. First, assume that most people are disinterested, unmotivated, apathetic, or downright hostile. Then, take a piece of paper—even a napkin can do the job—and draw a line. Mark yourself on one side of it, and then try to think who could stand together with you. If the answer is just a few people, start over—no matter how committed you are to a cause, or how troubled you are by a problem—and try again. When you've managed to place yourself and your friends and just about the rest of the world on one side of the line and a handful of evil bastards on the other, you've won. Make sure that the "line of division"—the phrase was used by an Otpor! buddy of mine named Ivan Marovic—that separates you and the bad guys gives you as many allies as possible.

Remember, in a nonviolent struggle, the only weapon that you're going to have is numbers. Itzik Alrov figured this out when he realized that everyone in Israel loved cottage cheese and hated paying a fortune for it. On his napkin, he managed to put seven million Israelis on one side of his imaginary "line of division" and just a handful of greedy executives on the other. Harvey Milk did something similar when he stopped talking and started listening to his neighbors. He had the whole town on his side and only a few dogs on the other.

I've seen this principle at play everywhere from Tbilisi to Harare, from Caracas to Rangoon. People and movements who know how to break their strategy into small, achievable tasks are more likely to succeed than those who shout platitudes and form drum circles. But knowing what minor battles you can win and how to get numbers to your side is only half the challenge. The other is ensuring that you can offer your newfound followers something that they can believe in. And for that, you're going to need to develop your vision of tomorrow.

(illustration credit 2.2)

(illustration credit 3.1)

CHAPTER III

Vision of Tomorrow

Harvey Milk was able to use the scourge of dog shit in the streets to energize the gay rights movement in America, and people in Israel fought for economic justice with cottage cheese. So it shouldn't be too surprising that activists in the Maldives were able to launch a revolution with a big batch of rice pudding. Still, that usually catches people off guard, especially since the Maldives is a lavish vacation spot perhaps best known as the place where Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes spent their honeymoon in 2006. You wouldn't exactly expect the people who live in the Maldives to go through any big political upheavals, as they are blessed with one of the most beautiful countries in the world, a tropical paradise made up of twelve hundred coral islands spread out across dozens of atolls in the Indian Ocean. And, fittingly, Maldivians are an easygoing bunch. As they can catch tuna with little more than a metal hook and a torn plastic bag for bait, nobody here goes hungry. If you shake a palm tree, you'll get all the coconuts you need. As for everything else—anything from tomatoes to Coca-Cola—there's plenty of tourism cash to go around, allowing the Maldivians to import whatever they need from India or Sri Lanka. This is why the national pastime here is chilling, which entails everyone coming together and watching the sunset on the beach. All these quaint island traditions and crystal-clear lagoons can be deceptive, though, because the Maldives is also the place where a man named Mamoon Abdul Gayoom ruled as a brutal dictator for thirty years.

Not that you'd necessarily know it. If you ever visited the Maldives as a tourist, chances are that you landed at the main airport in the capital city, Malé, hopped on a puddle jumper, and then made your way straight to one of the hundred or so islands set aside for use as resorts. And because the regime depends on these resorts for most of its income, Gayoom and his goons made sure to keep them clean and trouble-free; the resorts, for example, remain the only place in the strictly Muslim Maldives where it's legal to serve and drink alcohol. As guests luxuriated in their seaside fantasies—one of the hotels even has an underwater restaurant where guests can sip champagne beneath the waves, surrounded by friendly sharks and a living coral reef—the rest of the Maldives' population was not so fortunate. The rest of the population, for the most part, lives in Malé.

The capital is as gritty and grim as the resort islands are charming and pristine. Step onto the jetty in the city's port, and the first thing you see isn't one of the thatched-roof bungalows advertised on travel websites but the foreboding Ministry of Defense and National Security, a whitewashed fortress with turreted guard towers and signs sternly warning you not to take any photographs. It's a perfectly frosty welcome to this sweltering city of a hundred thousand residents, all shoehorned into a sardine can of an island that measures just over two square miles, making Malé one of the densest and most congested cities in the world. It's been called "Manhattan in a bottle," and for good reason. Little more than a warren of midrise buildings, a stadium, and a small park, the capital of the Maldives is overrun by frantic swarms of motorbike drivers who crowd the crooked streets while they weave their way through the city and take over most of the sidewalks when they park. Paramilitaries patrol the streets of the tiny island wearing blue camouflage uniforms, and you can often see smoke rising on the horizon as the incinerators at the largest garbage island in the world—

an artificial reef four miles off the coast of Malé—work overtime to deal with the 330 tons of trash that are added to the heap each day. Malé is humid, and you sweat constantly. Between the temperature and the stress, it's hard not to get headaches.

Still, there's one place in the city that's relatively relaxing. It's an artificial beach on the eastern side of the island. While this beach is not much by the Maldives' standards—it's really just a thin strip of sand in the middle of the urban sprawl—the beach is your best option if you find yourself in Malé and want to escape the city. Here, at least, there are a few open-air cafés facing the ocean that attract hip young Maldivians, and you can always see a few middle-aged men smoking hashish in the nearby bushes. Women dressed in burkas will bring their children to frolic in the surf, and depending on the season whole sections of the beachfront are taken over by either young surfers or skateboarders.

In a normal city, a beach like this wouldn't get much attention. But there is little else to do in Malé: the city has no shopping malls, no big movie theaters, no alcohol, no cultural scene. If you're looking for some reason to get out of the house and escape the heat, the beach is really your only bet. Sure, there's the official main square down by the jetties, but that's just a mangy rectangle with a preposterously large Maldivian flag and dry patches of dead grass. Besides, that square is flanked by the Grand Mosque and the mirrored glass headquarters of the police forces, and given the Maldives' recent history, you might understand why people wouldn't want to meet up with their friends right in front of the cops.

That's because when Gayoom was in charge, he ran his country like a little Baghdad-by-the-sea. A close friend of Saddam Hussein's, the Maldivian dictator learned a lot from the Iraqi despot about the finer points

of running an oppressive regime. Just like in Iraq, the cops in the Maldives had a well-earned reputation for brutality, enabled by a perpetual state of emergency and a license to imprison or beat whomever they wanted. Or worse: Gayoom's goons excelled in devising creative and horrific punishments to visit on anyone who expressed a lick of criticism. Dissenters would be covered in coconut honey and left in the sands for the insects to devour, or handcuffed to palm trees and beaten or raped for hours, or locked inside corrugated metal sheds to bake in the stifling heat for years on some remote prison island. Opposition parties were forbidden, freedom of speech nonexistent. In this environment, opposing Gayoom hardly seemed possible, especially as the regime enjoyed a steady influx of tourism money.

And then came the waters.

On the day after Christmas in 2004, the breakfast buffets on the Maldives' resort islands looked just as tempting and perfect as they did every other day of the year. As the last guests to arrive at the open-air dining areas were finishing up their meals and taking the final sips of their mango juice and black tea, children ran barefoot toward beaches that were just a few yards away. It was looking like a perfect morning in paradise. Temperatures were around ninety degrees, and a soft breeze made the palm trees sway ever so gently. The tourists who had decided to sleep in were getting a late start to their morning, slowly waking up as the bright sunlight filtered in through the closed shutters of their villas.

Suddenly, screams came from the direction of the shore. A low rumbling grew to a deafening roar. A giant wave charged across the island, snapping trees in half and demolishing everything in its way. The colossal wall of water smashed against the villas like a bomb going off, shattering windows in an instant. White surf gushed through buckled doorways and over broken windowsills.

A swirling tide of beach towels, curtains, and coffeemakers flooded the rooms. The water was rising everywhere, and there was no place to hide. Some people ran outside and climbed trees, while others raced toward reception areas and clung to sturdy pillars. A few made it to the tops of hotel spas or storage sheds, where they could get a clear view of all the destruction. When the waves receded, after what seemed like an eternity, all they could see was a mess of wooden planks, broken furniture, and torn thatched roofs. The wounded were bloodied and moaning.

As the highest point in the country is around nine feet, rising sea levels have always posed an existential threat to the Maldives, and people here knew that someday climate change was going to radically alter their lives. But that was something in the future, part of a long and slow process that would take place over decades. And yet, in a single instant, the Indian Ocean had washed half of the Maldives' economy out to sea. Almost a quarter of the country's inhabited islands were severely damaged. Ten percent of them were declared uninhabitable. Almost a full third of the population was affected by the devastation, and Gayoom knew that the aftermath of the tsunami wasn't something he could handle on his own. He was going to have to appeal for international assistance.

But the Western countries that were soon being asked to provide hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance demanded some things in return. They would give Gayoom the aid he needed, they said, but the Maldives would have to allow political parties and hold actual elections; there would be no more elaborately staged 99 percent victories for the despot. Gayoom quickly agreed to the terms, which didn't sound so bad to him. The international community was offering him money, and allowing political parties seemed little more than a

token gesture. After all, Gayoom figured, he had little to fear from the fractured opposition in his country.

And if you listened to the way a group of Maldivian revolutionaries described their situation to a bunch of us Serbs in 2005, you would probably agree with him. You couldn't imagine a less promising bunch of people leading an opposition. Historically, the Maldivians explained, the forces working against Gayoom could rely on only three groups of people who were willing to confront the authorities. First among them were the political dissidents, who had been educated in foreign schools and were mostly living outside the country. This, in fact, was by design, as the regime relied on an educational system that encouraged the best and the brightest—in other words, those most likely to clamor for better things—to hightail it out of the country. Naturally, these dissidents were the ones who spoke about abstract things, like freedom of the press, that not a single ordinary fisherman living on the atolls really cared about. Then you had the Islamist groups who weren't happy with the secular Gayoom and wanted to impose sharia law on the Maldives. These folks weren't too popular, especially as most of the money in the country came from frolicking tourists who came to wear bikinis and drink on private beaches. Finally, there were the drug addicts, whose only real connection to the dissidents and the Islamists was that they'd all slept in the same jail cells. These guys were familiar to me, because we had a similar situation in Serbia. You often find that dictatorships and drugs go hand in hand: without much hope, people turn to whatever comfort they can find. But in the Maldives the situation was complicated by the fact that the authorities were said to occasionally offer low-grade heroin to prisoners in order to turn them into loyal and obedient junkies. These addicts would then be forced to do "dirty tasks" for the regime. No matter, then, if you were a dissident, an

Islamist, or a junkie—if you opposed Gayoom, you were likely to be distrusted by the population at large.

Obviously, the educated dissidents were the only ones who really stood a chance of bringing about any positve change, but if they were to succeed, they were going to need a plan. They weren't interested in working with the Islamist groups, which was good, and they also didn't love the idea of marching hand in hand through the streets of Malé with the heroin addicts, which made sense. But who else would be willing to work with them? What interests did the dissidents share with the common people? They couldn't think of any. But they did understand that there is one thing all Maldivians can get behind, and that is rice pudding. And while rice pudding might not seem like such a major issue for a young pro-democracy movement to champion, sometimes you play the card you're dealt.

If this sounds silly, try to imagine how popular rice pudding is in the Maldives. To Maldivians, pudding is almost a national obsession. It's like vodka in Russia or pasta in Italy, a daily staple that brings together people from all walks of life. So when word spread through Malé one morning that there was going to be a rice pudding cookout near that artificial beach, hundreds of curious people made sure to be there in time for the party. In boring old Malé, this was shaping to be the biggest event of the year.

As the sun set, people hopped on their motorbikes and drove from all corners of the capital for the free pudding and the sea breeze. Soon the streets around the beach were jammed with people, and when the crowds finally made their way to the plaza by the water they found plenty of other people chilling there, all holding disposable plates with loads of pudding piled up high. There too were the dissident leaders, happily ladling out pudding and glad-handing the boat mechanics, musicians, and resort workers who came to taste the

goods. It seemed like everyone in the city was there, and even a few curious veiled women showed up to see what was going on. When the Maldivian police in their ridiculous blue camouflage uniforms eventually came to break up the party and carry away all the pudding—mass gatherings were against the law—the fun came to an end. Still, as the Maldivian dissidents watched Gayoom's enforcers stuffing vats of rice pudding into the back of their police vehicles, the activists knew that they had at least found a rallying point for their movement. Soon rice pudding feasts were being held all across the Maldives, giving people a chance to get together, talk, and build a sense of community. And in time the dessert became synonymous with the dissident-led opposition, a symbol as immediately recognizable in the Maldives as the fist had once been in Serbia.

But revolutions aren't won with rice pudding alone. Although the dissidents were building awareness and managed to find a symbol for their movement, Gayoom still had the support of all the main institutions in the Maldives. It was unlikely that many people were going to vote for a bunch of foreign-educated upstarts just because they'd been served dessert. Besides, the dissidents' Western-inspired political positions—human rights, freedom of expression—only appealed to a small fraction of Maldivians. How, the dissidents wondered, could they take the attention their rice pudding parties were stirring up in the Maldives and turn it into political power?

Like so many great revelations, the answer came to them in a movie.

In 2002, a director named Steve York made a documentary about the Otpor! campaign called *Bringing Down a Dictator*. Narrated by Martin Sheen, *Bringing Down a Dictator* was initially shown on PBS and then distributed to wider audiences on DVD. A few pirated copies somehow made their way to the Maldives, where

they were translated into Dhivehi and shown in secret screenings. There, in open-air, makeshift cinemas, Maldivian activists sat under the stars and watched how we young Serbs had managed to topple Milošević's regime using peaceful means five years earlier.

It was at some boring NGO conference in Nantes, France—in a venue about as far removed from the tropical beaches of the Indian Ocean that you can imagine—that I first made contact with two of these Maldivians who had watched *Bringing Down a Dictator*. They were there on unrelated business and approached me after I had just finished participating in a talk. I remember holding a cup of stale coffee in my hand and wearing a ridiculous laminated name tag when these two very weird men walked over to me and shook my hand enthusiastically. My brain had been rotting from two days of endless discussions about international development, so when the Maldivians first came up to me and began by telling me that I was famous in their country, I had no idea what they were talking about. But it didn't matter: once we started speaking and they told me all their bloodcurdling stories about beachfront prisons and this scary guy named Gayoom, I knew that we were kindred spirits, and I had just the person for them to meet.

Like most Maldivians, my two new friends were pretty small; they barely reached my rib cage. But my dear friend Slobodan Djinovic is even bigger than I am. He's tall and broad, and with his close-cropped hair he looks and carries himself like a general. In fact, if I told you that he was a key player during the Serbian Revolution, you'd probably guess that he was one of Milošević's most fearsome secret police commanders. He wasn't: Slobodan was one of us, one of the best Otpor! had, a brilliant strategist with a gift for organizing. I told the diminutive Maldivians all about him and reassured them

that he'd be happy to travel to Malé, meet them in person, and help out.

Since 2003, Slobodan and I had been working together at an organization we founded called CANVAS—the Centre for Applied NonViolent Actions and Strategies—which is dedicated to spreading the gospel of peaceful activism all over the world. The Maldivians' plea was the type of thing Slobodan lives for, and within days of my meeting in Nantes he was boarding a plane to paradise.

From the moment Slobodan arrived in Malé, the activists who escorted him around were gracious hosts. They organized clandestine meetings in cafés and on beaches, and at one point stuffed Slobodan's enormous body into the largest cardboard box they could find so that he could be smuggled into the home of Mohammed Nasheed, a leading journalist and activist who was being held under house arrest. Nasheed—because he was bright and hardworking, with passion and political talent—posed a huge threat to Gayoom's regime, which was perpetually locking him up or forcing him to flee to foreign countries. Everyone Slobodan met with told him pretty much the same things about Gayoom, the budding protest movement, and the rice pudding parties. But one of the dissident organizers was more interested in questions than in answers. What, he asked Slobo, was the democracy movement's missing piece?

Slobodan didn't even have to think for a moment.

"It's a major one," the hulking Serb explained. "It's a vision. Look, the pudding parties are great. They're popular. But it's never enough just to throw a party. After all, people go to parties every day and nothing really comes of them except maybe a hangover. If you really want to change the world, you're going to need what we in the business call a 'vision of tomorrow.' "

In the United States, Slobodan continued, you have the Declaration of Independence, in which the revolutionaries announced to the world what the foundations of a democratic society would look like. In South Africa, the African National Congress did something similar with the Freedom Charter. But in the Maldives, Slobodan said, the dissidents just offered rice pudding.

The inquisitive Maldivian activist seemed a little dismayed. He and his colleagues had worked so hard, he said, and here they were being told that they didn't even have the most basic thing they needed. But Slobodan tried to cheer him up. Even though the Maldivians didn't have much of a vision at the moment, he explained, there was no reason they couldn't build one. And doing it didn't have to be hard.

Slobodan was about to offer a more concrete explanation, but Gayoom's spies had him on their radar and "advised" him to leave the country. It hardly mattered, though, because a few months later a team from CANVAS made their way to Sri Lanka, where we organized a training session for a large group of Maldivian dissidents on an empty beach near Hikaduwa. And one of the first things we did was help them come up with their missing vision.

We started out by telling the Maldivians that even under the dictatorship of Slobodan Milošević, we Serbs were lucky in one sense: we instinctively knew what our vision of tomorrow had to be, because we'd already lived something very close to it under our previous ruler, Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia. Despite being a Communist strongman, Tito was more than just some decorative footnote in the melodrama of the Cold War. That's because Tito, like Frank Sinatra, did things his way. Tito was a complex and nuanced leader, which made him respected even among us young and educated democratic activists. Under Tito, we were free to travel

the world, and despite the fact that we didn't have elected leaders or any real liberties, Tito made sure that we had access to the best music and culture the rest of the world had to offer. In 1966, we even had our own Communist version of *Rolling Stone*, a magazine called *Jukebox* that featured rock stars like Mick Jagger on the cover, and in 1969 the antiwar musical *Hair* premiered in Belgrade—before it played in either Berlin or Paris. While the show's themes and its onstage nudity outraged plenty of Western audiences, *Hair* received a different sort of response in communist Yugoslavia. The musical was the toast of Belgrade, and apparently Tito himself loved *Hair* so much that on New Year's Eve of 1970 our gallant dictator was said to have hosted a sing-along with the cast of lookalike San Francisco hippies. As Tito took to the stage and belted out "Let the Sunshine In," it must have been clear to all who watched him that ours was a different sort of autocrat. After all, this was the same Tito who in 1973 would arrange for Richard Burton to play, well, Marshall Tito in a big Hollywood-style movie. Tito's liberal attitude toward the arts also explains why Yugoslavia's official record label, Jugoton, was the only music company in the Eastern Bloc that released records by artists like the Beatles, David Bowie, Kraftwerk, Whitesnake, and Deep Purple. Growing up in the 1980s, my friends and I barely felt the yoke of the dictatorship, busy as we were with great music from around the world.

And then it all changed: After the death of Tito and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia broke apart into little splinter states, and Serbia, which was taken over by Slobodan Milošević and his thugs in 1989, traded in the international vision of Tito in favor of a xenophobic interpretation of history. For those of us who were raised on the spirit of brotherhood and friendship between Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Macedonians, Slovenians, and Montenegrins, it was a shock to now be told by state servants and their

propaganda machinery that our neighbors were evil and that the only good things in the world were those that were authentically Serbian. The answer to all of our problems, it seemed, was to kill our neighbors and toss out our Jugoton records of foreign bands. Before too long, all foreign music was frowned upon, and we were left with a horrendous genre called "turbo folk," campy folk songs set to a high-octane techno beat, sort of a cross between the worst country music you can imagine and the bass-heavy stuff you hear and feel when you walk by a cheesy nightclub. In those days, unless you tuned in to an independent radio station like B92 in Belgrade, all you heard on Serbia's airwaves was turbo folk and talk of war. It was depressing. And that's why, when Otpor! was created, we pretty much knew what our vision of tomorrow needed to be.

The phrase "vision of tomorrow" sounds like something you'd find in a boring corporate PowerPoint presentation, but it has to be neither dull nor very technical. For us, the vision of tomorrow was a much simpler and more meaningful thing: we just wanted a normal country with cool music. That's it. We wanted a Serbia that was open to the world, as it had been under Tito. We wanted an end to ethnic conflicts, a return to normalcy, good neighborly relations, and a functioning democracy. That was Otpor!'s vision of tomorrow for Serbia.

Fortunately for us, even if Serbs living under Tito's dictatorship had never really had a chance to vote in a meaningful election, they at least knew what it meant to be integrated into the rest of the world. So Otpor! wasn't selling them on a vision that appeared impossibly far-fetched—we had *all* lived through it. The guys in the Maldives, however, weren't so lucky: Gayoom had been in charge for decades, and there was no way for the average Maldivian to even imagine an alternative life. So the dissident opposition had to start from scratch. In

order to come up with a vision of tomorrow that might appeal to their fellow citizens, we told them, they had to understand what kind of country the average Maldivian wanted to live in.

So there we sat, two tall Serbs and a bunch of Maldivian hobbits, plotting the future for the Maldives on an isolated beach near Hikaduwa, Sri Lanka. We were holding our training session out in the open, far away from Gayoom's spies, and between the salt air and the palm trees it was a welcome change from the fluorescent-lit office buildings and grimy meeting rooms in two-star hotels where our seminars are usually held. We asked the Maldivians to break into groups and do a little role-playing. For the next hour or so, we told them, they wouldn't be London- and Paris-educated activists. They would just be average people. We had two or three Maldivians volunteer to be the leaders of the business community and hotel owners, a few others who were representing the island elders, and yet others who were to assume the role of the expatriate community in India and elsewhere; someone was even chosen to play the part of the police and security services. Each of the groups represented a major sector of Maldivian society.

Next, my colleague Sinisa went around asking each Maldivian what was important to the sector of the population he was assigned to represent. The guy playing the policeman, for example, said he needed to be respected and paid on time, and wanted to live in a country with order and stability. Is this, we asked the group, something that the dissident vision of tomorrow could promise the Maldives? That people would get the recognition they deserved, that their salaries would arrive on the first of the month, and that they could walk safely in the streets? Of course, replied the dissidents; who in the world, they asked, wouldn't want that?

If that was the case, I said, then there was a chance that the police might actually end up joining their cause, but only if their vision of tomorrow specifically addressed the police officers' concerns. Some of the activists grumbled at the very possibility of working with the reviled cops, but we told them about Zoran Djindjic, a friend to the Otpor! campaign and a man who eventually became Serbia's first post-revolutionary prime minister. During the struggle against Milošević, when the cops were beating us up and throwing us in jail, Djindjic always reminded us kids that a policeman is just a man in a police uniform, and that we shouldn't pick a fight with him. If we spoke to the policeman as if he were one of us, Djindjic advised us, he might just decide to become one of us. And he was right.

What we wanted our new friends to realize was that it wasn't enough for the dissidents to just fight for rights and freedoms. To succeed, they would have to listen to what the people actually cared about and make sure to incorporate their needs into their vision of tomorrow. Most people in society will take risks and participate in a movement only if the cause is personally important to them, which is why it's imperative that you know what people cherish.

And here's the tricky part: every time we run this exercise, in which we ask people to imagine what's important to their fellow countrymen, no one ever speaks of things like civil rights, or freedom of religion, or the right to assemble. Those are big things. Instead, people—in the Maldives, in Syria, in Serbia—talk about the little things: they want respect and dignity, they want their families to be safe, and they want honest pay for honest work. That's it. It's never sweeping stuff. Too often, however, dissidents fail to realize that it's the mundane things that move people. Well-educated and passionate, these aspiring revolutionaries focus on lofty quotations from historical leaders and abstract ideas of

liberty, forgetting that their constituent is a tired shopkeeper whose needs and thoughts and beliefs are far more basic.

And so, eager to find out what it was that Maldivians really wanted, one of our trainees, Imran Zahir, went on a boat trip, visiting some of the nation's most far-flung atolls ahead of the first election since the tsunami hit. Imran has always been a social butterfly and is probably friends with more people in Malé than anybody else in that city. That's because Imran listens when others speak, and he pays attention to both people and things. One day, after mooring his boat and wading ashore to an island that had about fifty people living on it, something dawned on him. He realized that he'd been seeing the same thing on all these small islands that he'd been stopping at: human statues, old Maldivians who just sat there at the ocean's edge and stared off into the distance all day long. They were, Imran said, almost catatonic. This, he quickly realized, was what life was like in the remote islands, far from Gayoom's largesse, where nobody bothered to lavish tourism dollars on the inhabitants or offer them bribes. In the dysfunctional economic system of the Maldives, where actual jobs with decent salaries were hard to come by if you didn't know the right people, these old folks represented the whole broken enterprise. They were relying on their barely employed children and grandchildren to support them, and with no money, no jobs, and no hope, all these Maldivians could do was sit on the beach and stare. The sight of the comatose old men distressed Imran, but it also inspired him. What if, he wondered, the Maldivian opposition could make old-age pensions and universal health care a big part of their party's platform? Wasn't that all these living statues really needed? Granted, handing out pensions wasn't going to win international press and attention from Amnesty International the way opposing torture and censorship surely would, but unlike those issues, promising the old

people something concrete to count on might actually make a difference when the elections came around.

Imran might not have known it at the time, but he'd stumbled on something major because he was paying close attention. The elderly have always been hugely important in successful nonviolent campaigns. They have much time on their hands, and they care about their grandkids more than anyone else in the world. In Serbia, my grandmother, Branka, was in her seventies when we students were marching day in and day out for three months during the freezing winter of 1996. Obviously, she couldn't join us, and even if she had been able I wouldn't have let her, because she was too frail. But she could, God bless her golden soul, spend hours hitting pots and pans from her window in support of the protestors. And since she bakes some of the best Bosnian sweets in the known universe, the student marchers always had something to eat. And it wasn't just her. We had hundreds of thousands of grandmas, retired volunteers who were vital to the Otpor! campaign: who baked cakes and made us tea and poured us wine and generally kept my generation of troublemakers alive and kicking during the exhausting weeks of street occupations and endless marches. They did it because the movement represented something important to them. Milošević wasn't paying too much attention to my elderly grandmother and her peers, but we sure were.

Imran's idea of offering pensions and health care to the old people of the Maldives was a perfect way to convince one of the main sectors of Maldivian society to join with the dissidents. In time, Imran and the others were able to find more unexpected allies by coming up with similar plans, like promising to end Gayoom's rampant corruption and use the money they would save —about $350 million—to create affordable housing, social programs, and new jetties. This was their vision of tomorrow: a functioning Maldives that took care of its

citizens' needs. But having a vision is just the beginning for any nonviolent movement. There's still the whole matter of the pillars of power, and for your campaign to have any chance of succeeding, you'll need to figure out what they look like in your society.

(illustration credit 3.2)

(illustration credit 4.1)

CHAPTER IV

The Almighty Pillars of Power

It's hard to book travel arrangements when you're starting a revolution.

When I got a call from some Syrian activists trying to inject some critically needed nonviolent action into a country soaked in blood, my main concern was where to meet. If we just booked a block of rooms at the Sheraton in Damascus, we knew, we'd be seized by the secret police even before we made our way to the minibar. Initially, then, I thought about inviting my new Syrian friends to Belgrade, just as I'd done with the Egyptians, but soon enough Bashar al-Assad's government started grumbling about "Serbian agents" causing trouble in the Middle East, which meant that a recent Serbian stamp in any Syrian's passport was a death sentence. The next best thing we could do was meet in Turkey, but that too presented its challenges: since the Arab Spring, every dictator in the Middle East had flooded Istanbul with spies, turning it into a modern-day version of the film *Casablanca*. Every shady gunrunner in North Africa has followed the action to the city, and you can't walk from the Grand Bazaar to the Blue Mosque without someone trying to sell you surplus AK-47s and sniper rifles. The arms dealers are bigger pests than the shoeshine kids along the Bosporus, and the last thing I need while I'm explaining the importance of nonviolent action to my activists is a sweat-stained Libyan in a tracksuit trying to sell them anti-tank rockets.

With no good options, we ended up at a three-star hotel in a dull town in a neutral Mediterranean country along a no-name beach. All throughout this part of the

world, there are magnificent places, with sleepy fishing villages nestled in the shadows of sheer mountains, but this was not one of them. A parking lot and a gas station separated our hotel from a beachfront promenade pockmarked by vendors selling helium balloons and grilled meats, and on my first night in the room I was kept awake by a gang of drunken Brits who sang soccer chants until sunrise. My breakfast the next morning was hardly more relaxing, as I battled for a spot at the buffet with hordes of Russian tourists on packaged vacations. In case the inflatable pool floats for sale in the lobby hadn't given it away, this wasn't Monte Carlo. For my purposes, though, it was going to be perfect. Here, at least, we could strategize away from prying eyes and distractions, safely ensconced in a spot so godforsaken and dull that even Assad's omnipresent agents wouldn't think to watch it.

Even without the presence of spies at our hotel, though, I knew that training these Syrian activists wasn't going to be a cakewalk. It's hard enough for me to convince people that the best way to overthrow a dictatorship is through nonviolent action, but Assad's exceptional brutality has made it difficult to get Syrians on board with peaceful resistance. I can't blame them: it's hard to sell someone on the nonviolent approach when their cousin was just murdered by the police in Homs. And the depressing news that a government militia had butchered a slew of children a few days earlier wasn't going to make my guys any less eager to engage in mortal combat with Assad's thugs.

But that was only half of it. The Syrian resistance was completely disorganized. They'd jumped the gun on their revolution and started marching in the streets before they were ready. It wasn't exactly their fault, though. With images of the Arab Spring inspiring millions throughout the region, the Syrians thought it would be a simple enough thing to take down Assad.

They thought that all they needed was a few tens of thousands of eager young people showing up in the middle of Damascus waving their fists, and their dictator would fall just as quickly as had Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia before him. But the Syrians, like the leaders of the Occupy movement in the United States, were deceived by the apparent simplicity of the revolutions in Egypt and elsewhere. What people didn't realize was that the group of Egyptian revolutionaries trained by CANVAS in Belgrade had spent two years winning small victories, building coalitions, and branding their movement before they undertook their Tahrir Square action. Proper revolutions are not cataclysmic explosions; they are long, controlled burns. Unfortunately, the Syrians just dove right in, and now the anti-regime people were scrambling to develop a unified message against the backdrop of Assad's daily massacres and the ruins of devastated cities. These were dangerous straits to be in, and as we finished up our breakfasts the team from CANVAS wondered how we would address the Syrians. It was almost time to start the meeting.

At nine in the morning, the first of the Syrians started to assemble in the conference hall of the hotel. I was surprised to see so many people in the room this early. Usually with Arabs you'll wait for hours before everyone shows up. But already a few of them were out on the terrace, lighting their first cigarettes of the day and preparing for the week ahead. The smokers looked out at the nearby beach as it came to life. They watched the first wave of sunbathers searching for the best spots in the sand, while a trio of young kids hosed down the patio next to their family's newsstand. Inside the room, more activists were killing time before our session began. One person was scribbling the flags of various resistance groups in his notebook, while another put the finishing touches on a cartoon of a beaten Bashar al-Assad, complete with an unprintable Arabic caption

beneath the dictator's mangled body. A number of rebels waited patiently by the instant coffee machine in the corner, watching as the morning's dose of Nescafé filled their cups.

Once the entire group was gathered in the room, we closed the doors. It was our first chance to survey the group as a whole. There were seventeen of them, and none looked older than thirty-five. They wore fashionably ripped jeans and T-shirts, and no one appeared to be especially religious. One of the girls was even wearing a tank top, exposing more of her bare shoulders than we'd ever seen while working with Egyptians or even the Tunisians a few years back. Likewise, the men in the room who had facial hair kept their beards short and sculpted, looking less like the Taliban and more like Turtle from *Entourage*. If you didn't know any better, you could mistake them for a group of well-intentioned American college students spending their summer break abroad learning about the world. But as I waited for the chatter to die down, I took a closer look and realized right away the central problem that I'd be facing in the week to come. The men and women in the room, I knew, might resemble one another at first glance, but a second look revealed a hundred tiny differences. The girl in the tank top, for example, was clearly from Damascus, Aleppo, or one of the other big cities. Her nails were nicely done, and her purse was from a luxury brand. She spoke fluent English, which meant she was well educated. Two chairs to her left, however, sat a short, burly man. I wasn't sure, but his cracked hands and his bent back suggested that he made his living from hard manual labor. He also wore the sort of woven leather sandals that farmers favor but that no city dweller would ever be caught dead in. How to get Farmer Man and *Sex and the City* Girl to work together? That is the central question of building movements. If these guys wanted Assad gone, they couldn't just count only on the young and the rich,

or only on the poor and the peripheral. As we've learned from the Egyptians and the Maldivians, a revolution only picks up steam once two or more groups that have nothing to do with one another decide to join together for their mutual benefit. That was the real challenge. And while I was pretty confident that I knew how to plan strategies for democratic regime change, I am not a therapist and didn't really know how I might get the people in the room to genuinely trust one another. I took a deep breath and started the meeting.

"I would like to thank you for joining us," I said. "Is everyone still alive?"

The Syrians put down their cups of Nescafé and adjusted their headphones, through which they heard the voice of our Jordanian translator repeating the same question to them in Arabic.

"No, not everyone is alive," answered one of the Syrians, a tall fellow with a prominent brow. This guy was a smuggler who had joined the peaceful resistance and volunteered to sneak our activists out of Syria. For some he had arranged permits that allowed them to drive straight across the frontier and into more friendly territories, while others had been booked on flights under assumed names with two or three stops in neutral countries.

"Three people are not here," he explained. "One person was killed two days ago, another girl was arrested as she tried to leave the country, and the third realized that the police were following him, so he decided not to join us. We don't know what has happened to him since then."

I thanked the smuggler for his report and invited the other Syrians to introduce themselves. A professional dancer who lived in Damascus spoke first. Up until the revolution, he said, his days had been spent practicing classical ballet and his nights watching *How I Met Your*

Mother and *Friends*. Perhaps Syria could one day be a normal country, he imagined; his vision of tomorrow looked a lot like something out of a sitcom. Even though Syria was engaged in civil war, the dancer said, he still believed in peaceful resistance.

The dancer seemed like a gentle enough creature, but an attractive girl sitting a few seats down from him didn't share his mild temperament. With her eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses, she smirked and stated flatly that, unlike the dancer, she didn't believe nonviolent resistance on it's own could topple Assad; the dictator would only be removed through bloodshed. She was a student in one of the smaller towns in the north and had joined the fight against Assad because she saw no future for herself under his regime. She felt that peaceful opposition was preferable to violence but the grim reality in the country meant that there would probably be more bloodshed if things were to change in Syria. I was disappointed to hear that, but I wasn't there to argue with these people, who had risked their lives to come hear what I had to say. Instead, I nodded and listened to the other introductions: a factory worker, an insurance salesman, a young widow, an unemployed teenager. They were very different, but what united all of them was that they were not revolutionaries. None of them had ever expressed any burning interest in politics before the previous year. None of them identified him- or herself as a Marxist or a nationalist or any other kind of *-ist*. When you asked them what kind of country they wanted Syria to be, they all said, "Normal." They were just decent people who were never given opportunities to advance in their society and were bitter because they felt their futures were being unjustly robbed. The activist who made that point most loudly was a doctor from Latakia. He wore jeans and a yellow windbreaker and a thin gold chain, and he told us that he was a very good doctor, with years of training. If he had lived in New Jersey, he said, like some of his distant cousins,

there was no doubt that he would be a successful "multi." It took me a second to realize that he meant multimillionaire. But, the doctor continued, in Syria he sometimes had trouble feeding his family. Even with all of his education and capabilities, he often felt ashamed of himself. And so he had decided that Assad, who presided over a corrupt system that provided no outlet for talented people, must be removed. He believed that a combination of violent and nonviolent action would be required in the fight to free Syria.

All of the Syrians had spoken, and it was now my turn to address the group. I adjusted my small laptop and connected a few wires. My colleague Breza turned off the lights. The room went dark, and I pressed a button on the computer.

"Out of mayhem," I said, "comes knowledge."

Behind me, images from Serbia during the late 1990s were projected onto a large screen for the Syrians. Just like with the Egyptians in Belgrade, I wanted these Syrians to understand what I had been through. They saw a picture of Slobodan Milošević, whose bloated face and ill-fitting suit now illuminating the screen gave no indication of the evil this man had unleashed on the world. I told the Syrians about Milošević's wars, and showed them a photograph of Bosnian Muslim corpses being carelessly tossed into mass graves. The doctor hissed a soft curse. This was Serbia, I said. The Syrians saw images of Belgrade being hammered by the American air force over the course of a three-month bombing campaign, and I described the nightly explosions that instantly vaporized many of my city's familiar landmarks and how my own mother had nearly died. At that time, I said, there had been no viable opposition to Milošević inside Serbia, and neither his neighbors nor the United States had been able to force his exit through military means.

Leaning over my laptop, I pressed another button. An image of a frail, malnourished man appeared on the screen. “Who is this?” I asked the Syrians.

“Gandhi,” a few voices called out. That one was easy.

Then I put up a photo of Martin Luther King, Jr., giving his “I Have a Dream” speech, in which the civil rights leader is waving to the peaceful crowd of thousands who marched with him on Washington.

“Does anyone know who this guy is?”

A Kurdish engineer leaned forward to answer. “Isn’t he the liberator of blacks?”

“Close enough.”

For a moment, I told the group, ignore the fact that these two men never took up arms against anyone but managed in one case to radically alter a society’s sense of justice and in another to cast off the shackles of imperial rule. Forget about the moral superiority of peaceful resistance for now. Let’s just look at the situation from a practical standpoint, I said. And with that, I introduced my partner Slobodan, who rose to take the podium.

First, Slobo explained, whether you’re fighting Miloševićs or Assads, their strength will always lie in their ability and readiness to engage in violence. It’s the one thing that these regimes excel at. And these guys have trained armies at their disposal. So a violent campaign against a dictator already starts out at a disadvantage. You’re attacking the enemy where he is strongest. If you’re up against David Beckham, Slobo said, you don’t want to meet him on the soccer field. You want to play him at chess. That’s where you can win. Taking up arms against a dictator is a silly way to face him down.

Second, a violent campaign can make effective use of only your physically strongest activists. Those are the

guys who can battle in the streets, lug the heavy equipment around, and work the machine guns. Everyone else in your society who might otherwise want to support you—grandmothers, professors, or poets—won't be able to take part. And to take down a dictatorship, you need to build a critical mass with everyone on your side. It's almost impossible to do that with violence.

"You don't understand," said the student in the dark sunglasses. "Assad is strong. Syria is not Serbia. We're not Europeans. You saw what happened with all those little kids."

Yes, Slobo said, he did. And yes, there were obvious differences. But all dictators, he replied, were similar in one important way. He asked if they knew what it was.

"They all need to be killed," said the student.

This sent the young woman in the tank top over the edge. She stood up and started talking, waving her arms as she did. The translator did his best to keep up, but from his breathless sentences I understood that the woman in the tank top—whose name, I learned, was Sabeen—was berating the student, telling her that she was being disrespectful and that people like her and their barbaric insistence on solving every problem with violence was exactly the reason the Arab world was so messed up. Before things could get out of hand, I asked Sabeen a question.

"OK," I said, "then what are you here for?"

"I'm here to learn how to replace Assad through peace, not through war," she said in lightly accented English. You could tell by how easily she spoke that she had gone to good schools and was probably the daughter of some wealthy Syrians. "We've had enough war."

“So how do you win, if not with a war?” I asked. “You just ask Assad to go away?” With my very limited acting skills, I put on a whiny voice and made a funny face. “Please, Mr. Assad, please can you not be a murderer anymore? It’s not nice!” Sabeen seemed embarrassed, but the rest of the Syrians were laughing, amused by my antics and happy to see the conceited Sabeen brought down a notch.

“Sabeen,” Slobo said, “I can tell that you have very good intentions. And because you’re here, I know that you are very, very courageous. But you have to understand that we are here to plan a war.”

She looked confused. “I don’t understand,” she said. “I thought you were all about nonviolence, like Gandhi.”

“I am,” he said quickly, “but being nonviolent doesn’t mean that you’re not fighting hard. You just fight with other means, with other weapons.”

She seemed skeptical. It was time to deliver our first important point of the day.

“Ever hear of sanctions?”

“Of course,” the Kurdish engineer said. “But sanctions never work. They’re all about oil. All America cares about is oil.” And off he went on a long rant, filled with conspiratorial nonsense about Israel and foreign policy and the war in Iraq. It made little sense, but the bottom line was that there was nothing activists could do because economic sanctions were a game played by superpowers, not ordinary people. The group nodded in agreement. The dentist said that he had tried organizing a letter-writing campaign to convince Congress to punish Assad economically, but that hadn’t worked. “Why would they listen to us?” he said. “We’re nobodies.”

“Maybe they won’t listen to you,” I said. “But they’ll listen to Sabeen.”

The group seemed confused, Sabeen first and foremost. “Why would they listen to me if I told them not to buy oil?” she asked.

“Who said anything about oil?” I replied, smiling. “I was thinking more like cool hotels.”

“Come on,” Sabeen said.

“I’m serious. You’ve got them in Damascus, right?” She nodded. I asked her to name a few of the ritziest spots, and she started counting. When she got to the Four Seasons, I stopped her.

“The Four Seasons!” I cried out. “Excellent suggestion.” I pointed at the burly worker. “You go there all the time, right?” He grinned broadly, and the others laughed. “OK,” I said, smiling, “so you don’t go there, but all the important people who come in from all over the world do. Now imagine if you could shut down the hotel.”

“How can we do that?” asked a Kurd.

“You guys tell me. What would keep someone from staying at that hotel?”

“The price!” said the farmer. It wasn’t a bad answer.

A hand shot up. It belonged to an eager young student. “What if,” he asked, “someone snuck into the hotel and slipped pictures under the doors of the rooms that showed what Aleppo looked like after a bombing?”

The room went silent.

“But how would that work?” someone countered in a serious tone. “There’s got to be cameras everywhere in that place. Whoever did something so risky would be sent straight to prison.”

It wasn’t perfect, but the Syrians were getting on the right track.

“Anyone know who owns the Four Seasons?” I asked.

Nobody did.

“I don’t either,” I confessed. “But I bet it’s someone closely related to the Assad crew. Probably somebody like Rami Makhlouf. Isn’t he Assad’s cousin and one of the pillars of the Syrian economy? Well, I’m guessing that whoever owns the biggest, most prestigious hotel in Damascus has got to be somebody pretty well connected. And whoever he is, the international hotel chain is probably happy with the agreement they have with him, because money is flowing in. But what if you pressured the hotel chain into dropping the franchise?”

“Why would they do that?” Sabeen asked.

“Because hotel chains,” answered the doctor, “are much easier to deal with than dictators like Assad, and if a hotel chain becomes identified with the family and friends of a brutal regime, it’s very likely to say, ‘You know what? We don’t need the trouble and all the bad press.’ ”

“In that case, you don’t even have to sneak pictures inside the hotel in Damascus,” the student elaborated. “Because if you have a protest in London or Paris or wherever the hotel chain is based, and if we have journalists and bloggers focus on the companies working with the regime, maybe that would work.”

“And probably other brands would get nervous,” Sabeen said.

“Exactly,” I replied. “International companies that have been doing business with Assad for years will now think twice and three times before investing in Syria. Who does that hurt?”

“The business community,” Sabeen said.

“The business community,” I said. “And who does the business community support?”

“Usually,” said the student, looking at Sabeen, “they support Assad.”

“Exactly! So instead of writing to the U.S. Congress and talking about oil or human rights, which are really big issues, we focus on one hotel, and we get it to close, and then others close, and then Assad’s associates aren’t so happy anymore because their revenue is drying up. What happens next?”

“They freak out,” said Sabeen.

“Of course. It’s natural. And when they do, they’ll probably start to think that Assad isn’t the only show in town, and that they’d better get ready for life in the event of his fall. What else happens?”

No one said anything, so I went on. “What else happens is that the well-off, connected folks have less and less money to give to Assad. Here’s how corruption works: Assad says to his cousin, ‘You can have a bunch of monopolies and businesses if you pay me a tribute.’ So the cousin gets rich, and the cousin gives Assad a portion of his money, and everybody’s cool. Except you. So now the cousin just lost the hotel, and he no longer has so much money, which means he no longer has so much money to give back to Assad. What does that mean to Assad?”

“That his wife has less money for shopping in Europe?” quipped the doctor.

“Yes,” I said, “but also that he has less money to pay for bombs and bullets to kill you guys. Bullets are expensive. Bombs are expensive. So he needs money, badly, and we have the power to make sure he doesn’t get it.”

I paused for a moment to let it all sink in, and then announced that we’d be playing a game. I asked the group to split into threes and make a list of all of the things—from luxury hotels to soft drinks—they enjoyed every day and whose companies they thought might be convinced to withdraw their investments from Syria. Soon the room was noisy with animated Arabic

conversations. Here and there I could make out words like “Adidas.” And I was happy to see the occasional slap on the back or high five. It meant that they were getting excited, but also that they were learning how to work together. They had come here expecting to talk about revolution, and instead they were talking about sneakers. It felt more normal, and that was the entire point: show them that the first step to toppling a dictator is making sure everyone understands that life under dictatorship is never normal.

Ten minutes later, I clapped my hands and the group returned to its circle. Enthusiastically they presented their findings: we could make sure no international movies play in Syria, we could convince people not to buy Syrian olive oil. Some of their ideas were good, others misguided. But they understood the point. They realized now that Assad wasn’t an unstoppable beast, but a man who depended on vast sums of money to stay afloat and run his armies. Every tyrant rests on economic pillars, and economic pillars are much easier targets than military bases or presidential palaces. Shake them, and the tyrant will eventually fall.

But don’t take my word for it. This theory, focusing on the pillars of support, was developed by the American academic Dr. Gene Sharp, known as “the father of nonviolent struggle theory.” Every regime, Sharp argues, is held in place by a handful of pillars; apply enough pressure to one or more pillar, and the whole system will soon collapse. All leaders and governments, Sharp believes, no matter where you find them, rely on the same sorts of mechanisms to stay in power, which makes their power more transient than it seems. No power is ever absolute. Not even Assad’s. Dictators invest much in appearing infallible, making it hard to forget that they are merely men overseeing other men and dependent on the labor and compliance of many to stay in power. A dictator’s authority comes

from the willing consent of the people who obey him. That's what Slobo was getting at when he told the Syrians that all dictators are similar in one important way: they depend on people. A dictator really needs ordinary citizens to go to work in the morning and make sure that the airports and television studios and soldiers' pension plans run smoothly. And it's important to understand that these average Joes who follow his orders just want to do their jobs and go home; even when they wear uniforms and get violent, they're not necessarily evil and they're not necessarily beyond redemption. As I told the Syrians, the policeman bashing their heads with a riot shield is probably happy to do so, not because he fears and despises freedom but because he's being paid overtime. And as long as he's paid, as long as everything keeps working smoothly, the dictator is safe on his throne. The activist's first task, then, is to make sure the normal course of affairs comes to a screeching halt—to make sure the pillars are shaken.

Of course, the pillars differ from place to place. In small rural villages in Africa, you'll find that the most important pillars might be the tribal elders, while in the small towns of Serbia we found that the most crucial people to win over to our side during the Otpor! campaign were the provincial doctors, priests, and teachers. They were the opinion leaders. When it comes to a corporation, the pillars of support are the stockholders who invest their money, and maybe the business media like CNBC and the *Wall Street Journal*, whose positive coverage keeps the share price high. Whether you want to get the villagers on your side against a bloodthirsty dictator or force McDonald's to add healthy options to the dollar menu, you have to know which pillars you need to jostle.

It took them a while, but the Syrians warmed up to the idea. It was getting late, and so I concluded the session and told my trainees I'd see them again in the

morning, but as I collected my things I noticed a few of the Syrians lingering behind, talking to one another. I slowly made my way outside to the street and noticed a few of my students ducking into an ice-cream stall next door. Among them were Sabeen and the student. There was no sign of their former animosity. Now they were both laughing.

(illustration credit 4.2)

(illustration credit 5.1)

CHAPTER V

Laugh Your Way to Victory

I want you to take a moment and play one of my favorite games. It's called "Pretend Police." It's fun. Here goes.

Pretend you're the police in Ankara, Turkey. A few days ago, security guards in one of the busiest subway stations in town spotted a couple making out on the platform. Strict Muslims, the guards were bugged by such immodest behavior in public, so they did the only thing they could really do, which was get on the subway's PA system and ask all passengers to behave themselves and stop kissing each other. Because everyone in Ankara has smartphones, this little incident was leaked to the press within minutes; by the afternoon, politicians opposed to the ruling Islamist-based party realized that they had gold on their hands and started encouraging their supporters to stage huge demonstrations to protest this silly anti-smooching bias. This is where you come in. On Saturday, the day of the demonstration, you show up in uniform, baton at hand, ready to keep the peace. Walking into the subway station, you see more than a hundred young men and women chanting anti-government slogans and provoking your colleagues. Someone shoves someone. Someone loses their cool. Soon it's a full-blown riot.

If you're seriously playing along, it's probably not hard to figure out what to do. You're a police officer, and you've probably spent a whole week at the academy training for situations just like this. It's what police all over the world do. You move in, you get in formation, you put on your riot gear, and you start to thump your

baton on your shield to intimidate the crowd. You probably don't feel too bad about it, either; you're only doing your job. Besides, you're just protecting yourself and your fellow cops from flying stones or whatever else the people decide to throw your way. You move in. It takes you an hour, maybe two, before thirty or forty of the protestors are in jail, ten or twenty are in the hospital, and the rest have run away. You return to the precinct house, drink a coffee with your buddies, and go to bed feeling content with a day's work.

That was easy. Now, let's play again.

It's Saturday morning. You arrive at the subway station. There are more than a hundred people there, protesting against the censorious announcement from the day before. But they're not saying anything against the government. They're not shouting or chanting. They're kissing each other loudly, making these gross slurpy sounds nobody likes, drooling and giggling. There are almost no signs to be seen, but the ones you do notice have little pink hearts on them and read "Kiss me" or "Free hugs." The women are in short-sleeved, low-cut blouses. The men have their button-downs on. No one seems to notice you—they're too busy holding each other's heads as they suck face.

What do you do now? Go ahead and game it out if you'd like, but let me save you the trouble. The answer is that there's nothing you can do. It's not only that the amorous demonstrators aren't breaking any laws; it's also their attitude that makes a world of difference. If you're a cop, you spend a lot of time thinking about how to deal with people who are violent. But nothing in your training prepares you for dealing with people who are funny.

This is the genius of laughtivism. I know, the name is stupid; my friends who are native English-speakers tell me so all the time. But the principle is solid, and like many things, I stumbled upon it completely by mistake.

It was early on in our efforts to take down Milošević, and like all novice activists, we had a moment of reckoning. Looking around the room at one of our meetings, we realized that we were kids, and rather than focus on what we had going for us, we began obsessing about everything we didn't have. We didn't have an army. We didn't have a lot of money. We had no access to media, which was virtually all state-run. The dictator, we realized, had both a vision and the means to make it come true; his means involved instilling fear. We had a much better vision, but, we thought on that grim evening, no way of turning it into a reality.

It was then that we came up with the smiling barrel.

The idea was really very simple. As we chatted, someone kept talking about how Milošević only won because he made people afraid, and someone else said that the only thing that could trump fear was laughter. It was one of the wisest things I've ever heard. As Monty Python skits have always been up there right with Tolkien for me, I knew very well that humor doesn't just make you chuckle—it makes you think. We started telling jokes. Within the hour, it seemed to us entirely possible that all we really needed to bring down the regime were a few healthy laughs. And we were eager to start laughing.

We retrieved an old and battered barrel from a nearby construction site and delivered it to our movement's "official" designer—my best friend, Duda, designer of the Otpor! clenched-fist symbol—and asked him to draw a realistic portrait of the fearsome leader's face. Duda was delighted to comply. When we came back a day or two later, we had ourselves Milošević-on-a-barrel, grinning an evil grin, his forehead marked by the barrel's numerous rust spots. It was a face so comical that even a two-year-old would have found it amusing. But we weren't done. We asked Duda to paint a big,

pretty sign that read “Smash his face for just a dinar.” That was about two cents at the time, so it was a pretty good deal. Then we took the sign, the barrel, and a baseball bat to Knez Mihailova Street, the main pedestrian boulevard in Belgrade. Right off Republic Square, Knez Mihailova Street is always filled with shoppers and strollers, as this is where everyone comes to check out the latest fashions and meet their friends for drinks in the afternoons. We placed the inanimate objects smack in the middle of the street—right at the center of all the action—and hastily retreated to a nearby coffee shop, the Russian Emperor.

The first few passersby who noticed the barrel and the sign seemed confused, unsure what to make of the brazen display of dissidence right there in the open. The following ten people who checked it out were more relaxed; some even smiled, and one went as far as picking up the bat and holding it for a few moments before putting it down and quickly walking away. Then, the moment we’d been waiting for: a young man, just a few years younger than us, laughed out loud, searched his pockets, took out a dinar, plopped it into a hole on top of the barrel, picked up the bat, and with a gigantic swing smashed Milošević’s face. You could hear the solid thud reverberate five blocks in each direction. He must have realized that with the few remaining independent radio and newspapers of Belgrade criticizing the government all the time, one dent in a barrel wasn’t going to land him a prison sentence. To him, the risk of action was acceptably low. And once he took his first crack at Milošević’s face, others started to realize that they too could get away with it. It was something between peer pressure and a mob mentality. Soon curious bystanders lined up for a turn at bat and took their own swings. People started to stare, then to point, then to laugh. Before long some parents were encouraging their children who were too small for the bat to kick the barrel instead with their tiny legs.

Everybody was having fun, and the sound of this barrel being smashed was echoing all the way down to Kalemegdan Park. It didn't take long for dinars to pour into the barrel and for poor Duda's artistic masterpiece —the stern and serious mug of Mr. Milošević—to get beaten into unrecognizability by an enthusiastic and cheerful crowd.

As this was happening, my friends and I were sitting outside at the café, sipping double espressos, smoking Marlboros, and cracking up. It was fun to see all these people blowing off steam with our barrel. But the best part, we knew, still lay ahead.

It came when the police arrived. It took ten or fifteen minutes. A patrol car stopped nearby and two pudgy policemen stepped out and surveyed the scene. This is when I came up with my beloved "Pretend Police" game. I played it for the first time at the café that day. The police's first instinct, I knew, would be to arrest people. Ordinarily, of course, they'd arrest the demonstration's organizers, but we were nowhere to be found. That left the officers with only two choices. They could arrest the people lining up to smack the barrel—including waiters from nearby cafés, really good-looking girls holding shopping bags, and a bunch of parents with children—or they could just arrest the barrel itself. If they went for the people, they would cause an outrage, as there's hardly a law on the books prohibiting violence against rusty metal cylinders, and mass arrests of innocent bystanders is the surest way for a regime to radicalize even its previously pacified citizens. Which left only one viable choice: arrest the barrel. Within minutes of their arrival, the two rotund officers shooed away the onlookers, positioned themselves on either side of the filthy thing, and hauled it off in their squad car. Another friend of ours, a photographer from a small students' newspaper, was on hand to shoot this spectacle. The next day, we made sure to disseminate

his photographs far and wide. Our stunt ended up on the cover of two opposition newspapers, the type of publicity that you literally couldn't buy. That picture was truly worth a thousand words: it told anyone who so much as glimpsed at it that Milošević's feared police really only consisted of a bunch of comically inept dweebs.

I like this barrel story. It's usually one of the first that our CANVAS trainers Sandra, Sinisa, or Rasko share with aspiring activists. And without fail, every time people hear about it they say more or less what my Egyptian friends did when we walked with them through Republic Square: "It'll never work back where I'm from." I have two things to say in response. The first is to quote Mark Twain (you can't argue with Mark Twain!), who said, "The human race has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter.... Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand." The second is to remind my new friends that while humor varies from country to country, the need to laugh is universal. I've noticed this as I've traveled to meet with activists around the world. People from Western Sahara or Papua New Guinea might not agree with me on what exactly makes something funny—for more on this, see the French obsession with Jerry Lewis or check out any German "comedy"—but everyone agrees that funny trumps fearsome anytime. Good activists, like good stand-up comedians, just need to practice a few acquired skills.

The first is to know your audience. I heard a funny story once about a comedian—I forget his name, so my apologies to whoever it was—who was paying his dues by working the club circuit. He was a funny but clueless guy who could put together a punch line but couldn't read social cues too well. One night the hapless jokester took the stage and started riffing about his girlfriend's cat. The animal, he said, was a bastard; he knew just

when things were getting hot and heavy in the bedroom, and then jumped on the bed and refused to move, meowing and ruining the moment. Then the comic launched into a tirade about how he'd love to kill that cat, describing all the ways—most of which were outlandish and cartoonish—in which he dreamed of robbing the feline of all nine of its lives. It was a great bit, fast-moving and punchy, but no one was laughing. The comic said goodnight and walked off the stage. A few people booed. Only later in the evening did he learn that the evening's performance was a benefit for a local animal shelter.

Had he done his homework, he could have tailored his jokes to the audience's sensibilities and walked home a winner. That's just what the Poles did, and often, in the days of Solidarity. In the 1980s, Solidarity was the labor movement that led the fight against Polish Communism. And its activists knew that their audience, the Communist officials who ruled the country, didn't tolerate outright dissent. It wasn't like Belgrade, where the culture of an independent media and a grudging acceptance of opposition voices allowed shoppers to feel comfortable smashing a barrel with Milošević's face on it. In Communist Poland, the activists' gambits needed to be not only funny but also subtle.

And so it was that on a very cold February evening in 1982, the people of Świdnik, a small town in eastern Poland, took their television sets for a walk.

This legendary bit of protest began when a few activists in town grew tired of turning on their TVs every evening at seven-thirty and watching smiley announcers with fancy haircuts reading government-approved scripts that were ridiculously rosy and full of lies. They decided to protest by not watching the news. Soon enough, it occurred to them that simply not watching the news wouldn't do: if all you did was turn off the set and sit around in the dark, nobody would

ever know. For the boycott to work, it had to be public, but also subtle enough to avoid a police crackdown.

Like comics trying out new material, they improvised. At first, they made a point of unplugging their sets and placing them on their windowsills every evening at 7:30. It was a good first step, public and visible and sending a clear message. But it wasn't funny at all, and therefore it was uninspiring. This is where the wheelbarrows came into the picture. Someone procured a bunch of them and encouraged a group of friends to take their sets down to the street, load them onto the wheelbarrow, and stroll around leisurely. Before too long, anyone walking the streets of Świdnik at dusk could see friends and neighbors ambling and laughing, pushing along their TVs as if they were baby carriages, using the half hour previously spent listening to the official newscast to greet one another, gossip, and share in the thrill of standing up to the regime together.

It was a great gag, and the practice soon spread to other Polish towns. Flabbergasted, the government weighed its options. It couldn't arrest anyone; there was no law specifying that Polish citizens were prohibited from placing their television sets in wheelbarrows and walking them around. All it could do was move up its curfew from 10:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M., forcing everyone indoors. This, they were certain, would stop the shenanigans.

It didn't. Like any budding comedian who gets a taste of the audience's applause and is hooked for life, the Polish resistance wanted to move on to bigger and flashier displays. It was getting more and more difficult, though, with the Communists now on the lookout for any sign of civil disobedience. By 1987, with the showdown with the dictatorship growing more and more inevitable, they decided to stage their biggest joke yet. They would take to the streets, en masse, to display their absolute and manic love of Communism.

In October, as the government celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Solidarity announced that it would stage its own commemorative rally. Adopting the bombastic language of Communism, it printed brochures calling on the people to "break the passivity of the popular masses." Come to the square, it ordered the faithful, and wear red.

Soon the streets were filled with red shoes and red scarves, red ties and red lipsticks, red shirts and red coats. Seeing so many people they knew dressed up like extras in a bad Soviet propaganda film made Poles laugh. The authorities, on the other hand, weren't amused. It was obvious that the red-clad marchers were mocking the regime's ideology, but how could the Communists break up a rally in support of Communism? The police positioned themselves on the sidelines, waiting for any excuse to act. Finally, when a few people who didn't have anything red to wear asked a nearby food stall for a breadstick smeared with ketchup to wave around, the police pounced, shutting down the stall and arresting one of its customers. It was the best they could do. By 1989, the opposition succeeded in instituting semi-free elections. And by 1990, it was in power.

It wasn't only knowing their audience that helped the Poles use humor effectively. It was also that other tenet of good comedy: timing is everything. Using the occasion of International Women's Day one year, for example, groups of activists positioned themselves in central spots all over Poland distributing free sanitary napkins to passersby. It was a clever way to use the calendar to stage a piece of theater that reminded people that basic supplies, sanitary napkins among them, were nearly impossible to get in the shortage-stricken and disastrously run Polish marketplace.

Iranian nonviolent activists, too, have a great knack for timing. Soccer in Iran is second only to Islam in sanctity. It is beloved by everyone and stands just a notch above nuclear armament on the national priority scale. So when Iran played South Korea for a spot at the 2014 World Cup, you could count on everyone's full and undivided attention.

Fatma Iktasari and Shabnam Kazimi knew this when they dressed up for the decisive match one afternoon in 2012. Even though it was hot outside, they put on blue jeans, long black jackets, and wool caps. It was the only way into the stadium: by long-standing custom, women aren't allowed to attend soccer games in Iran. There, in one of the most religiously conservative societies in the world, it's just another restriction placed on women. The mullahs, of course, say that this "protective" measure exists to prevent the country's ladies from hearing the sort of foul language that's thrown around during sporting events, the type of chant that might corrupt the purity of the delicate feminine soul. But Iktasari and Kazimi weren't afraid of learning new dirty words. With generic costumes concealing their gender, the two women walked right past the guards and hoped to see their beloved national team beat its opponent and secure a berth in soccer's most prestigious global tournament. But once the game was underway they quickly ditched their disguises. It was clear to all who were watching that there were real live women inside the stadium, watching the match. In between cheering and chanting, Iktasari and Kazimi also took a few photos of themselves in the stands, which they knew would be big hits on all the social media networks.

Had the same feat been attempted on any other day, it's likely that it would have gotten a bit of attention and then been forgotten. But with soccer and the victory and the World Cup on everybody's minds, the two women's dress-up stunt quickly became something much larger

than it actually was. First, it presented the Iranian authorities with what we at CANVAS call a dilemma situation. It's lose-lose for the police all around. They could arrest the women, which would make them look foolish to a worldwide sporting audience of millions—and, what's worse, perhaps risk some sanction or disqualification from the World Cup tournament—or they could just grin and play nice, let the women sit there to enjoy the game, and give similar ideas to the other thirty-five million women in Iran who are stifling under oppressive laws.

The soccer sit-in became a symbol and, like all symbols, a vessel for anyone to read anything into it. In the popular imagination, Iktasari and Kazimi weren't just activists protesting an oppressive and discriminatory law many Iranians despised; they symbolized hope itself, the promise of one day living in a country where all citizens, regardless of their gender, could go to a soccer match freely and happily. One Iranian blogger even expressed this desire in the form of really bad poetry: "Heroes," he wrote, dedicating his words to the two daring women, "warriors, dream one day of a workshop with the kids in the 'freedom' gym." The word choice was poor, but the meaning was clear: the comical costumed stunt had gone over very well. By exploiting this dilemma situation, the Iranian activists pushed one of the most feared security apparatuses in the world into a lose-lose scenario.

You may doubt that this approach is applicable to political comedy. After all, if they are to succeed, activists must convey meanings and deliver messages, not just pull off a pratfall or a sight gag. But there is a reason humor is such a popular tool in the modern activist's arsenal: it works. For one thing, it breaks fear and builds confidence. It also adds the necessary cool factor, which helps movements attract new members. Finally, humor can incite clumsy reactions from your

opponent. The best humorous actions—or laughtivism—force autocrats and their security pillars into lose-lose scenarios, undermining the credibility of their regimes or institutions no matter how they manage to respond. Politicians, whether they are democratically elected or harsh dictators, usually share an inflated sense of self-importance. After too long in power, and after seeing their own Photoshopped face too many times in newspapers and on the covers of magazines, they start taking themselves too seriously. It's as if they start believing their own propaganda. This is why they make stupid mistakes when challenged with laughtivism. The high and mighty can't take a joke.

Beyond this, laughtivism takes your movement beyond mere pranks, because it helps to corrode the very mortar that keeps most dictators in place: fear. You can see how that has been happening in one of the least funny places in the world right now, Bashar al-Assad's Syria. When my CANVAS colleague Breza and I met with some leading Syrian activists—a solid nonviolent crew who are trying to take the lead of the revolution away from the murderous jihadist thugs who have infiltrated the country—they too, like all others before them, started out by saying that what had worked in Serbia and elsewhere could never happen in Syria. And the reason they gave, as expected, was fear. "This won't work in Damascus," we were told, "because now everyone is too afraid of everything around them." But, we suggested, it's possible to pop that bubble of fear. And once it breaks, anything is possible.

Now, with tens of thousands of civilians massacred by the regime, and with the opposition—violent and nonviolent alike—struggling to break the dictator's stronghold on every aspect of human life, these activists (whose names, for obvious reasons, I'll keep to myself) thought we were crazy. But in the weeks and months following our training session, a few Syrians came

around. They found creative ways to fight horror with humor. They understood that laughtivism isn't just a series of juvenile pranks but rather the stuff of serious strategic decision making. One of the oldest tropes filmmakers rely on when trying to make people laugh is the Keystone Kops, those clumsy and inept bozos who stumble around and wave their batons but never catch the crooks. If Syrians saw Assad's thugs as bumbling buffoons, the Syrian activists slowly realized, the regime would lose one of its major deterrents: its ability to terrify.

One of the first things the activists did was buy several buckets of red food coloring. Then they waited for nightfall, crept up to a few fountains located in major squares throughout Damascus, and dropped the red dye into the water. The next morning, as the capital awoke to its morning gridlock, all of the fountains looked like they were spitting out blood, an apt visual metaphor for Assad's brutal oppression. Enter the Keystone Kops: furious at the spectacle, the police sent entire squads to deal with the problem, but they soon learned that the only way to rid the fountains of their bloodlike hue was to wait for the coloring to circulate out of the system. In the meantime, Damascenes were treated to amusing scenes of cops crowding the fountains with confused looks on their faces, awaiting instructions from their superiors and generally looking like they had no clue what they were supposed to be doing. It took a week for the water to return to normal.

But it wasn't just the fountains that were keeping the police in Damascus occupied. They also had to deal with Ping-Pong balls. Thousands of them. The trouble all began when a group of Syrian activists started inscribing anti-Assad slogans like "Freedom" and "Enough" on masses of Ping-Pong balls, which they then dumped out of huge garbage bags on to the narrow—and steep—streets of Damascus. People could be forgiven for

doubting the effectiveness of such a silly tactic against a murderous dictatorship. What would these brave activists do next, observers might have chuckled, ring Assad's doorbell and run away? Call Domino's and have them deliver pizzas to the presidential palace? But the activists were undeterred. The Ping-Pong protests happened again, and again. Soon enough, the unmistakable pitter-patter of Ping-Pong balls bouncing down the hilly avenues and alleyways of the capital could only mean one thing: the nonviolent opposition was sticking its finger into the eye of Assad's regime.

The chiefs of the security services began to worry. By openly flouting the rule of law, these fugitive Ping-Pong balls were starting to pose a threat to the security of the state. People might get encouraged. Perhaps other sporting goods would start to form a dangerous coalition with them. The Ping-Pong balls needed to be stopped before it was too late. The order went out to the police: round up and arrest all the Ping-Pong balls they could find. And here's where it got good. As soon as a box or a bag of anti-Assad Ping-Pong balls was dumped anywhere in Damascus, the fearsome, ferocious security services would race to the scene, arrive within minutes, and—armed to the teeth, mind you—chase after each and every ball they could find. Huffing and puffing, these guys scoured the capital, scooping up Ping-Pong balls one by one. What the police didn't seem to realize was that in this slapstick comedy, the Ping-Pong balls—much like the earlier fountains—were just the props. It was they themselves, the regime's enforcers, who had been cast to star as the clowns.

It was time to up the ante. Like Harvey Milk, the Syrians knew that nothing gets results quite like shit. Thanks to the wonders of technology, the merry pranksters secured a few hundred USB speakers, tiny little sticks that could play a few songs out loud. To these they uploaded popular hymns of the resistance

—“Assad Is a Pig” and so on. Then they concealed the miniature speakers in the worst places they could find: rancid garbage cans, piles of manure, and anywhere else that reeked. Soon the cities were alive with the sound of music. Illegal, anti-regime music. Ordered to put an end to the forbidden songs, the cops had to find the speakers and destroy them. But to do that, they had to roll up their sleeves and shove their hands into one disgusting mess after another, all in full view of the public. The Ping-Pong balls were good. But this was great. In fact, it was probably the best piece of comic theater Damascus had seen in a long time.

(illustration credit 5.2)

With a little creativity and a few dollars’ worth of supplies, it’s always possible to get your message out there. The Sudanese activists of GIRIFNA—which means “We Are Fed Up”—have long hoped to topple the dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir, the genocidal maniac who has denied freedom to his citizens for decades and turned Darfur into a living hell for its inhabitants. Naturally, Sudan isn’t the type of place where you can just call for a rally in Khartoum and expect to not get tortured, nor would activists feel comfortable openly declaring their allegiance to a pro-democracy movement under the watchful eyes of Bashir’s omnipresent spies.

So how did GIRIFNA spread its message? They adopted the color orange as their symbol and encouraged their supporters to carry oranges everywhere they went. It worked, and soon more and more people mysteriously started carrying oranges as they went about their errands. You'd see oranges everywhere. And it was perfect, because it was low risk. After all, who is going to get arrested for carrying a common fruit? Nobody. And on the off chance that trouble came their way, the GIRIFNA supporters could either eat their orange, toss it aside, or play dumb. It was a cheeky solution to a very real problem.

(illustration credit 5.3)

Acts of irreverent defiance like these are effective because they are carefully planned. At the same time, comedy, as we know, is sometimes all about improvisation: reacting to developments, coming up with gags on the spur of the moment, stepping into a given situation and making it weirder and funnier all the time. And there's always a place for this sort of

humor in nonviolent campaigns as well. My dear friends the Yes Men have mastered this brand of sidesplitting activism. To me, they are America's version of Monty Python, and true national treasures. Of course, there are plenty of stories about the Yes Men worth sharing, but allow me just to mention my favorite prank of theirs, the classic bit where Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno shut down the World Trade Organization.

Let me set up the scene. The WTO is an international organization regulating trade between nations and, to many, a place where rich nations promote their interests at the expense of much poorer ones. Andy and Mike, on the other hand, are middle-aged, middle-class, and not above buying all their clothes at cheap secondhand stores. In 1999, outraged by the WTO's policies, they set up a website that was just a few letters away from the URL of the real international organization. If you looked for the WTO's site and stumbled upon Mike and Andy's by mistake, you wouldn't know the difference. They made sure a "contact us" button was prominently displayed on the site's home page, then sat back and waited for someone to bite.

For a long time, no one did. Then a few questions and queries trickled in. Finally an invitation found its way to their inbox, asking for a WTO representative to speak at a prestigious conference in Salzburg. Andy and Mike scraped together every penny they had, borrowed some more money from friends, and bought a couple of suits and two plane tickets to Austria. When it was their turn to speak, they pulled out a professional-looking presentation arguing that the only way to save democracy from its myriad life-threatening challenges was to privatize it, with citizens selling off votes to the highest bidder.

The joke got some press, but not much. Andy and Mike repeated it a few more times, including a trip to a panel discussion in Finland where they presented a

gigantic phallus-shaped object that emitted electrical shocks to sweatshop workers who slouched on the job. But like the Poles and the Syrians and virtually every successful entertainer, they wanted the comedy to get more and more audacious. One afternoon, speaking at an event in Sydney, they took the stage and announced, still pretending to be WTO officials, that it was time to shut down the WTO.

After about an hour of presenting dry statistics about corporate malfeasance, they delivered the shocker. The WTO, Andy said, had finally realized that corporate globalization was benefiting only wealthy corporations, not the little guy. As such, he said, it was doing more damage than good, and would immediately cease to exist. It would be relaunched, Andy said, as the Trade Regulation Organization, a global institution devoted to protecting consumer rights and holding corporations accountable. Andy and Mike made headline news twice that day: once when some gullible journalists published their quips as facts, and again when the media reported the hoax. It brought the WTO to the attention of people who otherwise might not have known it existed, and it made Andy and Mike look far smarter and infinitely more appealing than the faceless international conglomerate they were trying to shame. And all these improv comedians had was a website and a couple of plane tickets.

Some people don't have even that and still pull off great pranks. Siberia, the infamous Russian region whose soil is rich but whose people are poor, is home to one of the most accomplished groups of hilarious activists. They didn't start out that way. In 2012, with Vladimir Putin once again winning election and Russia's small and omnipotent oligarchy tightening its grip on the Kremlin, a number of Siberian supporters of the opposition, encouraged by video evidence of election fraud, applied to the town of Barnaul for a permit to

protest Putin's rigged victory. The authorities refused. Not wanting to break the law and risk arrest, the activists applied again for a permit, and again they were denied. So it went a number of times, until finally even the most idealistic of the bunch realized that they would never be able to stage a demonstration in town.

But their toys could.

(illustration credit 5.4)

One freezing day—imagine Siberia in February—the activists gathered in the center of town with all of their children's favorite playthings. They had a hundred figurines collected from the popular candy-toy combo the Kinder Surprise egg. They had a hundred Lego men. Twenty toy soldiers. Fifteen plush animals. Ten model cars. The toys were all carrying tiny signs—the penguins crying out against corruption, the moose denouncing electoral malpractice.

Snapshots were taken, of course, and soon all of Russia learned about the famous toy protest. In one photo, even the police were caught laughing at this little revolutionary Lego town. And who could blame them? It

was funny. Within weeks, teddy bears, action figures, and stuffed animals all across the vast country were mobilized, given small hand-painted signs, and sent to the streets.

Encouraged by the spread of this miniature protest movement, the Barnaul organizers of the original toy rally applied to hold another Lego and Kinder Surprise demonstration in their city, but by now the humorless Russian authorities had had enough of all these disloyal toys. The Kremlin-directed bureaucracy decided to put an end to the childish protests once and for all. In the local paper, the government informed the public that congregations of inanimate objects could be considered against the law.

"As you understand, toys, especially imported toys, are not only not citizens of Russia but they are not even people," Andrei Lyapunov, a local official, told the media. "It is possible that the people who have applied are inspired by their toys … and consider them their friends, but the law unfortunately has a different point of view. Neither toys nor, for example, flags, plates, or domestic appliances can take part in a meeting."

Lyapunov was the best straight man a comedian could ever hope for. The Russian state invests much time and effort in projecting a certain image of Putin to its citizens. We've all seen those ridiculous photographs of King Vladimir, the bare-chested tough hero who wrestles with animals, dives in submarines, and practices judo. How could this same man be threatened by some Lego figures and a stuffed moose? In the end, the joke was on Putin.

Not only can laughtivism break the fear and ferocious public image that cement an autocrat's legitimacy, but it also serves to burnish the "cool" image of your movement. In Egypt, Mohammed Adel and his friends were great masters of the art of laughtivism. Humor quickly became a central part of their anti-Mubarak

strategy. People were showing up at rallies holding their school notebooks to prove that they had left their "foreign agendas" at home, and a popular image circulated around Egypt showing a typical Microsoft Windows installation screen, where the file "freedom" was being copied from a server called "Tunisia." But an error message popped up, indicating that there was a glitch. "Please remove Mubarak and try again," the message read. It was a great gag, and it's been the background of my computer to this day. Mohammed and his friends managed to make it cool to come to Tahrir Square and to be *seen* as politically active. Every day, larger crowds came to join the action—not only because people wanted to oust Mubarak, but also because they wanted to take part in the comic upheaval unfolding across the nation.

(illustration credit 5.5)

What Mohamed Adel and his brave friends understood well was that humor offers a low-cost point of entry for ordinary citizens. At the time of the Egyptian Revolution, I remember watching serious political analysts on TV shoveling bullshit into my living room with claims like "The people will eventually get tired of coming to Tahrir Square and the movement will fizzle out." But those guys didn't understand the game. If

you're in your twenties—as a majority of Egyptians are—would you even think of missing the best party in town?

Revolutions are serious business. They shake societies and nations, make tectonic changes to political and economic systems, and affect the lives of millions of people. That's probably why for so long they've only been entrusted to the hands of very serious people. Just recall the dour faces of older revolutionaries like Lenin, Mao, Fidel, and Che. If you can find more than three pictures of those guys laughing and actually enjoying themselves, I'll send you a cookie. But fast-forward to the protests of the last few decades and you see a new form of activism at work. Political humor is as old as politics itself, and satire and jokes have been used to speak truth to power for centuries. But the laughtivists of the modern age have taken humor to a new level. Laughter and fun are no longer marginal to a movement's strategy. In many cases, they *are* the strategy. Today's nonviolent activists are launching a global shift in protest tactics away from anger, resentment, and rage and toward a more powerful form of activism rooted in fun. And, surprisingly, all of this works even better the harder dictators crack down on it.

(illustration credit 6.1)

CHAPTER VI

Make Oppression Backfire

Remember that movie in which George Clooney plays a businessman who spends most of his time in airports and on airplanes? I may not look as cool as Clooney walking through security with my dirty sneakers in my hand, but traveling more than a hundred thousand miles each year means that I basically spend my life on the road. In fact, my wife, Masha, often says that I only pretend to live in Belgrade, and that my true home is the Lufthansa lounge at the Frankfurt airport. It's been that way for years. By now I can tell you which major world airport has the best slice of pizza, which offers the most comfortable chairs for a quick nap, and which boasts the least disgusting bathrooms. Actually, I can tell you more than that: airports are perfect microcosms of their societies, and if you study an airport closely enough, you'll be able to learn a lot about the culture that built it. Americans, for example, are absolutely obsessed with security, which is why there are so many ridiculous screening hoops to jump through before you're allowed in the terminal. They're also strongly family oriented and sensitive to the needs of the disabled, which is why airports in the States have a lot of low water fountains, diaper changing stations for the little ones, and ramps for people in wheelchairs. In Europe, tobacco is a big thing, which is why they got around the requirement to ban smoking at the airport by building enclosed glass booths next to every other gate so that passengers can rush off the planes and light up. In Italy they demonstrate their legendary sense for organization by efficiently losing your luggage as soon as your plane reaches the terminal.

In much of Southeast Asia, they're more spiritual: at airports, attendants practically bend over backward to treat monks with deep respect. Fly to Thailand, say, and there'll be a little sign alerting you that Buddhist monks have priority along with the elderly and disabled. Monks even have their own departure lounges, partitioned off from the rest of us more worldly travelers. Stand in line in Cambodia, and some beatific-looking young man wearing an orange robe might zoom past you as everyone else nods reverentially. It's equal parts charming and annoying, and it tells you just how elevated monks are in primarily Buddhist societies. Burma is no exception—the half a million holy men in saffron are the nation's favorite sons, offered everything from worshipful looks to financial aid. They're also considered above the fray of ordinary political events, which in Burma is an enviable place to be. The country has been groaning under a military dictatorship since 1962, and the Burmese have repeatedly tried, with little success, to shake off the generals' yoke.

When an election was held in 1990, the pro-democracy figure Aung San Suu Kyi won big. Naturally, the regime annulled the results and cracked down hard on democracy. They put everyone back into a political refrigerator, and nothing much happened for nearly two decades, until a host of harsh economic measures sent people to the streets in 2007. One of those people was Ashin Kovida.

If you met Kovida at a party without knowing that his first name was an honorific by which the Burmese call their monks, you'd still get the sense that he's a holy man. He is small, and he speaks so softly you have to lean in to understand what he's saying. But in 2007, with government subsidies removed and oil prices soaring, this gentle man decided he'd had enough. The military junta had to go. And just like many other

hobbits, he felt it was his responsibility to lead the charge.

Luckily, inspiration came Kovida's way. A copy of *Bringing Down the Dictator*, that DVD about Otpor!'s success in bringing down Milošević, was somehow smuggled into the country, translated into Burmese, and sent to the remote Buddhist monastery where Kovida was living at the time. Watching this documentary, Kovida felt inspired: the men and women he saw on the screen were nowhere near as pious and pure as he was —we are, after all, rowdy Serbs—but they were just as young and just as driven and, most important, they had succeeded in doing something in their homeland that Kovida desperately wanted to do in his. He, too, wanted to bring down the dictators. So to get his revolution started, he took the extreme step of selling his Buddhist robes, and with the money he received he printed out pamphlets that invited Burmese of all walks of life to join him in a march.

The march took place on September 19, 2007. About four hundred of Kovida's fellow monks joined him. Even though there's only a little bit more freedom to protest in Burma than there is in North Korea, people reasoned that the army wouldn't dare get violent with this bunch. After all, these weren't your run-of-the-mill political troublemakers. These were monks, the highest moral authority in the nation. Even the ruling generals, they figured, had their limits.

They were wrong.

No sooner had Kovida and his supporters shown up than the army opened fire. Dozens were killed. Massive arrests followed, with thousands of monks sent away for sentences of sixty years or more, often at hard labor. It was the harshest measure the regime had taken in decades. But it also went a step too far: in acting against the monks, the generals learned the bitter lesson tyrants always learn when it's too late, which is that sooner or

later oppression always backfires. Enraged by this act of violence perpetrated against the monks, the Burmese began what many started to call the Saffron Revolution. Now, on the heels of that upheaval, Burma is taking steps toward democracy, and the formerly imprisoned dissident leader Aung San Suu Kyi is now the most prominent member of Burma's parliament, while Kovida, the monk who started it all, is still campaigning for democratic reform in his homeland.

In a way, the revolutionaries were fortunate that the regime cracked down so hard on the monks. Because of the government's brutality and stupidity, average Burmese who never would have thought of taking a stand against the generals were so swept up in emotion that they couldn't just sit there and do nothing. The clueless generals had brought about their own downfall. It's a common mistake, and that's why making oppression backfire is a skill every activist can and must master. Sometimes it alone can spell the difference between failure and success.

Making oppression backfire is a skill, sort of like jujitsu, that's all about playing your opponents' strongest card against them. Before you can do that, though, you need to understand exactly how oppression works. It's important to realize that oppression isn't some demonic force that bubbles up from some deep, festering well of evil in the blackened hearts of your opponents. Rather, it is almost always a calculated decision. In the hands of authorities everywhere—from dictators to elementary school principals—oppression achieves two immediate results: it punishes disobedience, and it prevents future problems by sending a message to potential troublemakers. Like so much we've been talking about, all oppression relies on fear in order to be effective: fear of punishment, fear of getting detention, fear of being sent to a gulag, fear of embarrassment, fear of whatever.

But the ultimate point of all this fear is not merely to make you afraid. A dictator isn't interested in running a haunted house. Instead, he wants to make you obey. And when it comes down to it, whether or not you obey is always your choice. Let's say that you wake up in some nightmare scenario out of a mafia movie, where some wacko tries to force you to dig a ditch. They put a gun to your head and threaten to kill you if you don't start shoveling. Now, they certainly have the power to scare you, and it's certainly not easy to argue with someone who has a pistol pointed right at your temple. But can anybody really make you do something? Nope. Only you can decide whether or not to dig that ditch. You are totally free to say no. The punishment will certainly be severe, but it's still your choice to decline. And, if you absolutely refuse to pick up that shovel and they shoot you dead, you still haven't dug them a ditch. So the point of oppression and fear isn't to force you to do something against your will—which is impossible—but rather to make you obey. That's where they get you.

This insight, I must say, came from the master of nonviolent action, Dr. Gene Sharp. Sharp realized that dictators succeed because people choose to obey, and while people might choose to obey for many reasons, for the most part they obey out of fear. So if we want people to stop complying with the regime, they have to stop being scared. And one of the scariest things in any society, whether it's a dictatorship or a democracy, is the great unknown. That's why kids are afraid of the dark, and that's the reason that your average citizen sweats bullets when he walks into the oncologist's office for the first time.

But as we learned in Serbia, the best way to overcome the fear of the unknown is with knowledge. From the earliest days of Otpor!, one of the most effective tools the police had against us was the threat of arrest. Notice I didn't say *arrest*, but just the *threat* of it. The threat was

much more effective than the thing itself, because before we actually started getting arrested by Milošević's police, we didn't know what jails were like, and because people are normally much more afraid of the unknown, we imagined Milošević's prisons to be the worst kind of hell, a Serbian version of the Sarlacc Pit in *Star Wars* and only slightly less terrifying. But then when things started getting heated, a lot of us actually were arrested, and when we got back we told the others all about it. We left out none of the details. We wrote down and shared with our fellow revolutionaries every bit of what had happened in the jails. We wanted those about to be arrested themselves—we knew there were bound to be many, many more of us picked up by the dictator's goons—to understand every step of what was going to happen to them.

First, you'd be handcuffed. And one handcuff would be locked much tighter than the other, so one of your wrists would feel like it was going to explode. Then we alerted our male friends that they were likely to find themselves in a small cell with thugs and drunk drivers who would be puking all over the cell, and our female friends that they were likely to spend a few hours in close quarters with prostitutes. Everything would smell like vomit and piss. Your belt would be taken and your pants would fall down, embarrassing you even further. Since they also took your shoelaces and now your sneakers hardly fit, you'd be walking around with awkward, clumsy steps. Then everyone would be taken for fingerprints and sent off to interrogation rooms, where, just like in bad television shows, there's a good cop and a bad cop. The first offers you coffee and a smoke; the second yells and bangs on the table. Both ask you exactly the same questions: Who is Otpor!'s leader? How is Otpor! organized? Where does Otpor! get its money? "Otpor! is a leaderless movement," we told people to say, and "Otpor! is organized in every neighborhood," and "Otpor! is financed by the Serbian

diaspora and ordinary people who want us to live in freedom." When the table-banging began, all you had to do was remember those three lines. The whole thing was a lot like being in a high school play, and it always followed the same predictable pattern.

We called our preparations for being arrested "Plan B," and it worked wonders. Soon, instead of speaking of prison in hushed tones, our friends and acquaintances spoke of it dismissively, even humorously. They knew what to look forward to. Being in prison was still scary, sure, but it was much less scary than the dark things we used to imagine before we gained experience and started educating one another. And we covered for each other too. If the police actually got one of us, we all had legal documents signed and ready, giving a few lawyers sympathetic to our cause power of attorney. Finally, we had elaborate phone lists in place, so that if any of us got arrested there was always someone notifying parents and friends and loved ones. And, of course, there were piles of pre-made press releases sitting on top of desks and tables ready to be sent out to the media seconds after shit went down, with only the names of the activists and the address of the jail left blank and waiting to be filled in.

Plan B worked wonders because it blunted the dictator's means of oppression and helped us turn the tide of fear. Obviously we knew that even with Plan B we couldn't control what Milošević was going to do to us, and everybody understood that at some point there were going to be casualties. It was a given that some of our people would lose their jobs, some of them would be sentenced to long prison terms, and some might even be tortured or killed. But the way we dealt with this was by giving each case the human attention it deserved. We in Otpor! always reminded ourselves that each member of our group was an individual, with a family and responsibilities. We were sworn, like American soldiers,

to “leave no man behind,” and trained ourselves to endure the worst. Soon people were willing to take incredible risks because they knew that as soon as Milošević’s guys slapped the handcuffs on them, there would be an entire movement working behind the scenes to set them free.

With Plan B, the fear of the unknown melted away. Getting arrested soon meant that you joined an exclusive club and that you wouldn’t be facing the full weight of the security forces all by yourself. Not only that, but once we stopped being scared and started getting organized, the police realized that the harder they cracked down on us, the worse it got for them. Their oppression was backfiring.

Think of the situation from their point of view. You’re in Serbia. You’re a police officer. You’ve joined the force to protect and serve and arrest the bad guys. But now you’re being told to interrogate ten young students from this organization called Otpor!. Most of their get-togethers are filled with laughter and joking around, and although you’d be punished for admitting it, some of their pranks are actually sort of funny. Maybe these kids even remind you of yourself when you were younger. But this is work, so you have to leave your feelings in your locker with the rest of your personal belongings. You begin by asking the kids a list of questions you’ve been handed, and the arrestees give you the same absolutely useless answers that you’ve heard hundreds of times before. From outside the windows of the police station you hear about fifty people in front of the station singing pop songs and chanting the names of the kids you’re interrogating, and you can see that the crowd gathered in front of the precinct house is handing out flowers and cookies to every single policeman who walks by. Parents and lawyers of the arrested kids are also crowding the corridors of your building and tying up the phone lines

with their calls, making it difficult for your colleagues to concentrate on real criminal investigations. Every three seconds, it seems, a polite retired grandparent—maybe your neighbor from the apartment across the hall—asks in a soft voice, "Why are you beating our wonderful children?" At this point it would be hard to say who's under siege from all these arrests, Otpor! or the police.

Now imagine the scene when the people who are arrested are finally let go. Upon stepping out into the street, these kids are greeted by throngs of adoring fans shouting at the top of their lungs, hooting, whistling, and applauding. We called it the rock star reception tactic, and it worked beautifully. Before too long, being arrested made you sexy even if you were a pale and pimply nerd. The clever members of Milošević's inner circle were able to grasp what was going on. In May 2000, we heard serious rumors that the head of Serbia's secret police had submitted a report to the government stating that oppression was only making things worse for the regime, and that each arrested Otpor! member caused twenty more people to join the movement. But the dictator wouldn't listen. Milošević and his wife—the one with the flower in her hair—demanded more arrests. And that was exactly what Otpor! wanted.

Since getting arrested was now the coolest thing you could do for your social life, Otpor! decided to capitalize on this marketing bonanza. We printed up three different colored T-shirts with the Otpor! fist on them, each color representing how many times its wearer had been arrested. Within weeks, the black T-shirts—with a fist in a white circle—became the hottest fashion item in Belgrade, cooler than anything either Abercrombie or Prada could design (this was the 90's after all). That's because the black T-shirt was given to people who'd been arrested more than ten times.

All this was a tremendous boost for Otpor!, but it still got us only halfway to where we needed to be. We

understood fear and the nature of oppression, we'd learned everything that we could about the mechanics of oppression, and we'd succeeded in making oppression seem like nothing more than a minor and acceptable risk, just part of the job. Now we had to develop strategies to overcome oppression. This was much harder to pull off, and nowhere, perhaps, was it done more beautifully than in Subotica.

Subotica is a midsized town in the north of Serbia, not far from our border with Hungary. Even though more than a hundred thousand people live there, the town is still very much true to its name, which literally means "little Saturday." There's much industry in Subotica, and people there work hard, but they also go to church much more than the rest of us, and spend most of their leisure time in a variety of ornate and well-preserved public buildings, such as theaters, schools, and libraries. If I weren't the sort of maniac who needed the constant hum of news and bars and people and rock concerts and action, I'd love to live somewhere like that. And so it was in Subotica, at the height of Milošević's power, that a certain police officer ruled supreme. Let's call him Ivan.

If you've ever seen *Robocop*, you have a pretty good idea of what Ivan looked like. If you haven't, imagine a six-foot-five gentleman whose skin closely resembles well-oiled steel, whose low voice is so frightening it makes pets whimper and run away, and whose disposition is sadistic on good days and outwardly psychopathic on bad ones. When members of Otpor! got together to trade stories of who had it worst, the guys from Subotica would always win by telling how Ivan had crushed someone's wrist with his boot heel just for fun, or about how he'd smacked a young woman so hard she literally spun around in place like a cartoon character before falling to the ground in shock and pain. And as Otpor!'s demonstration against Milošević's

dictatorship grew more and more heated, our friends in Subotica had a very serious question on their hands: how do you solve a problem like Ivan?

At first glance, their prospects were grim. With Ivan, knowledge did very little to dissipate the terror—he really was that awful. And he had every measure of power at his disposal. He was not only a giant, a strongman, and a brute, but he had a badge that, in a smallish town like Subotica, allowed him to do pretty much whatever he wanted. This wasn't Belgrade, where at least we could rely on independent media to make heroes out of us. This was the sticks. And since Subotica had a mixed population of Hungarians and Croats, Ivan, a fire-breathing Serb, would go at his targets with nationalistic fervor. The man was a holy terror. Naturally, because Ivan instilled tremendous fear in nearly everyone in town, he was dearly beloved by his bosses. Guys like him were crucial to keeping the masses in check. Had they tried the same tactic of throwing parties outside the prison to support Ivan's victims, Subotica's nonviolent activists most likely would have found themselves on the wrong side of the madman's fist. There was no getting around the man. And that's when someone mentioned the beauty salon.

It was a grimy little place in a grimy little neighborhood, the sort of poorly lit, unappealing establishment only locals frequented, and even then they went there more to gossip with their friends and neighbors than for the hairdresser's very limited understanding of hair styling. One morning, however, anyone walking by the place could see, plastered to a rarely washed window, a small homemade sign. It had a picture of Ivan on it, looking like his usual menacing self, below which was a short but blunt statement: "This man is a bully." Soon posters with Ivan's ugly mug were everywhere in sleepy little Subotica. "Call this man," the posters went on to say, "and ask him *why he is beating*

our kids," followed by his phone number at the precinct house.

Now, Ivan was much worse than a bully, and there were plenty of names that we could have called him. But the activists who had put up the signs didn't want to challenge Ivan's authority, call into question his unlawful and violent conduct, or make any comment whatsoever about his attitude toward Otpor!. People could agree with Otpor! or not; that wasn't the issue. Our activists were interested in much more basic stuff. That salon where the poster first went up, they knew, was where Mrs. Ivan—who we can imagine as being only slightly smaller and less menacing than her husband—had her hair cut and blow-dried. When she walked in and saw the sign, her pleasurable routine would be interrupted by anger and shame. And when she returned home later that day, she was bound to ask her husband what was going on.

Now, Ivan could beat us all he wanted. But he was powerless against the clucking tongues of his neighbors, the friends of his wife. These weren't punkish rebels like us—they were his people. He really wanted them to like him. Before the signs popped up, each person maligned by Ivan was likely to keep his grudge private, thinking that it was only his or her personal opinion and that the rest of Subotica considered the officer to be a pillar of the community. But the poster campaign gave a public airing to what everyone in town felt deep in their hearts yet were too afraid to say out loud: that Ivan was a bully. And in the context of communal life, a bully who beats up other people's children is an outcast.

It only got worse for Ivan. The next morning, arriving at school, Ivan's children were greeted by their father's face nailed to every tree. That day, the kids were called names and mocked by their friends. Soon the other parents didn't want their children playing with Ivan's little darlings. Life at Ivan's house was getting tense.

Rumors swirled that his drinking buddies were avoiding him at the local bar. Ivan was finally paying for his brutality, and the price, he was learning, was much higher than he had expected. He was living in total social isolation. I wish I could tell you that all this public shaming started a campaign that got Ivan fired, or even that he was made to see the error of his ways and joined us at Otpor!. But I don't really know. Most likely Ivan remained a police officer until he retired years later with a full pension. Yet it hardly matters, because in the months that followed the brilliant campaign against Ivan, our friends in Subotica reported that this goon just wasn't the same man. He still showed up to arrest protestors, but now he did so with a disinterested air, just going through the motions. There was no more wrist-twisting or shin-crushing. I'm sure that in his mind, *he* was the one being oppressed.

The shaming posters, admittedly, were nothing more than a tactic, a way to neutralize a powerful foe. We've seen the same methods of social ostracism used recently during the Occupy protests in the United States, when police officers like Anthony Bologna of the NYPD and John Pike of the police force at the University of California, Davis—both of whom pepper-sprayed protestors who had been posing no threat to the police or anyone else—were singled out and publicly shamed for their actions. But because we all live in the age of social media, making oppression backfire can be used not just as a response to an unlucky encounter, the way you might do with Ivan in Subotica or Tony in New York, but as a core strategy as well, as a means to capture your message and force your opponent into a debate he otherwise never would have had. To illustrate this point, consider the story of my favorite modern monarch, Russia's Vladimir Putin the First.

We all remember when King Putin was confronted by a band of musical provocateurs, about a dozen young

women who wore ski masks and called themselves by the endlessly entertaining name Pussy Riot. Their songs were just as understated as their band's name, with their biggest hit to date being "Putin Zassal," or "Kill the Sexist." Like the Sex Pistols who came before them, they staged rowdy and theatrical public concerts. And like the Sex Pistols, Pussy Riot was in it for a bit of press. They stormed into an Orthodox cathedral in the heart of Moscow and put on an impromptu performance of their song "Punk Prayer—Mother of God, Chase Putin Away," an event that shocked nearly all of the pious Russians who saw the video of the event online. But unlike the Pistols—who always did their best to rile up the British crown but were perpetually hampered by that stiff upper lip—Pussy Riot was blessed with the perfect foil in the vindictive Putin and the egomaniacal bureaucrats who lived to win the boss's favor. Rather than shrug the whole thing off, the Russian leadership orchestrated a massive and forceful legal prosecution, with an indictment that ran to 2,800 pages and a sentence that involved years of incarceration in a penal colony.

In February 2012, before the crackdown on Pussy Riot, very few people outside of Russia's activist circle had heard of them. But in an instant, their arrest made news all over the world. The more Putin's people pushed, the more famous Pussy Riot became. The members of the band who were still at large recorded another song, taunting Putin to make the prison sentence against their friends even longer. Even Madonna gave the girls of Pussy Riot a shout-out in her Moscow concert. There was no mistaking who was in command of the situation: by goading Putin's regime into using its power in such a vindictive way, Pussy Riot succeeded in showing the rest of the world not only that Putin was a despot but also that he was not a particularly effective one, as he was evidently failing in the most basic task of shutting down a rowdy rock band made up of young women in their twenties who were

perhaps overly fond of salty language. He was like a chef who couldn't cook an egg. To a man like Putin, fond of having his picture taken with his shirt off while diving for ancient vases or wrestling tigers, there was no worse insult than to be needled by a bunch of kids named Pussy Riot.

The trick for activists looking to make oppression backfire lies in identifying situations in which people are using their authority beyond reasonable limits. There was an incident not so long ago in the lovely state of Kansas, where a group of ordinary high school students took a class trip to Topeka to speak with Governor Sam Brownback. Now, when I was a student in a Communist country during the 1980s, I didn't exactly enjoy the freedom of speech that Americans are so lucky to have, and there were no cell phones for me to play with during school outings. But you can bet that if I had been in a situation like the one Emma Sullivan found herself in that day, I probably would have done exactly what she did. That's because Emma, a high school senior with no special affection for the governor's politics, snuck out her phone during the assembly, logged into Twitter, and sent the message "Just made mean comments at gov brownback and told him he sucked, in person #heblowsalot" to all of her sixty-five followers.

As a matter of fact, she didn't say anything of the sort during the meeting—but, as anyone who has ever been on the Internet can tell you, facts don't really matter once you're online. And when the staff at the governor's office saw Emma's comment pop up on his Twitter feed, her statement was deemed offensive enough, whether she'd spoken it aloud or only typed the words. A decision was made: she needed to be punished. Brownback's team brought Emma's tweet to the attention of her school's administration, which was equally disturbed by this display of teenage

impertinence. After a tense, hour-long meeting, Emma's principal handed down her punishment: a demand that Emma write the governor an apology.

Up until that point, the only people who knew what Emma had done were a few officials on Brownback's staff, a couple of people at her school, and whichever of her followers had actually read her message. We can probably agree that what Emma did was bad—at the very least, kids shouldn't be using their cell phones during a school event. But as my friend the political expert Will Dobson likes to point out, ordinary people don't take to the barricades because things are bad. In order for your average citizen to really get engaged with an issue, he needs to think that it's unfair or wrong. A snowstorm that shuts down an entire city is bad—but nobody would organize a protest against the weather. If it's discovered, however, that the streets in certain neighborhoods remain unplowed long after others have been cleared, simply because their residents voted against the mayor, that would strike people as unfair. And forcing a teenage girl to apologize in writing for expressing her feelings about a sitting governor—with all the power and might that such a position entails—seemed wrong.

It didn't take long for Emma's story to be all over the national news. Within days she was appearing on CNN and the other major news outlets. In all the press coverage she received, nobody seemed to care that Emma had said the governor sucked. Her bad deed wasn't the issue. Rather, what people really took offense at was how heavy-handed the adults' behavior was in this situation. Their exercise of authority had backfired. And that's because what they were doing was wrong. After all, how could the governor and a high school administration punish a young kid for exercising her constitutionally protected right to express herself? With pressure mounting on Brownback and the principal, the

governor eventually apologized for the way his staff had handled the situation, the school dropped the issue, and the newly vindicated Emma gained almost seven thousand Twitter followers in the course of a week.

Whether your fight is with a school board or a brutal dictator, making oppression backfire relies on simple mental arithmetic, the kind that even a guy like me, who barely passed high school calculus and needs his wife to figure out the tip at a restaurant, can easily do. When you think of power, remember that exercising it comes at a cost, and that your job as an activist is to make that cost rise ever upward until your opponent is no longer able to afford the charges. Nobody is omnipotent, and even the most powerful rulers on the planet still rely on the same scarce and finite resources we all need. After all, in order to do anything, the strongmen of the world still need to come up with manpower, time, and money. In that regard, they're just like everybody else.

In a very basic and ugly example, the type of oppression that Bashar al-Assad's regime relies on in Syria—the destruction of entire cities—requires not just a maniacal bloodlust but also lots of money. After all, somebody has to pay for all the tanks, planes, bullets, and soldiers' salaries so that Assad's armies can kill their own people. And this cost of oppression to Assad is compounded by the fact that each time Assad bombs a city with chemical munitions, he's destroying businesses and neighborhoods that will no longer be able to contribute to Syria's economy. Forget even the moral cost of murdering his own citizens—Assad is also wiping out his tax base. It's a grim arithmetic, and it's not very fun to calculate how many more taxpaying civilians the despot can kill before there's no one left to supply the government with income. As all dictators eventually learn, there's a price to be paid for oppression.

Oppression of the dictator variety will no doubt end up creating martyrs, and movements would be well advised to use their fallen or imprisoned comrades as rallying points. In 2005, for example, after cops in the Maldives caused an outrage by torturing and murdering a teenager, an activist by the name of Jennifer Latheef joined in a large protest against the police. The boys in blue, naturally, were none too pleased and arrested Latheef and a few others. For her participation in the rallies, Latheef was charged, preposterously, with terrorism. But if the Maldivian authorities thought their tough stance against protestors would intimidate members of the pro-democracy movement in the island nation, they were wrong.

That's because the Maldivian activists decided to put a very high price on oppression. They wanted to hit the dictatorship right where it was most vulnerable: in the wallet. With a keen understanding that the regime was dependent on tourist dollars, Jennifer Latheef's comrades reached out to the travel industry and told the world her story. As a result, the Lonely Planet travel guidebooks included a few sentences about this brave young woman's imprisonment in all copies of their Maldives editions. Not only that, but the publishers made a note of all the resorts in the Maldives that were owned or operated by people with close ties to the dictatorship and "named and shamed" those properties in its pages. Thus Western tourists—who provided most of the milk on which the Maldivian regime suckled—were able to send a message to the authorities that the police's heavy-handed attempts at silencing dissent would cost the national treasury a substantial amount of money. And it worked. In 2006, Latheef was offered a presidential pardon, which, as a matter of principle, she refused. For the regime, the whole affair proved to be a huge embarrassment, and the level of oppression used against the protests was seen as a colossal mistake.

We can also consider the case of Khaled Said in Egypt. Just an ordinary young man from Alexandria, Said was killed in 2010 by the police for no apparent reason in the vestibule of a residential building. A few hours later, when his shocked family was called to the morgue to collect his body, they couldn't believe what they saw. Although their beloved Khaled was lying lifeless before their eyes, the family could barely recognize their son and brother's body on the table. That's because the police had beaten him so badly that his swollen corpse was little more than a collection of black-and-blue bruises and raised red welts. Horrified, Khaled's brother snuck a photograph of the body with his cell phone, which the family later decided to upload to the Internet in order to draw attention to the case. Among those who saw and were shocked by the picture of Khaled Said was Wael Ghonim, a Google marketing executive who used the photo to start a Facebook page called "We Are All Khaled Said." Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians "liked"—what an awful use of the phrase—Ghonim's page, and the outrage stirred up by Khaled's death was one of the sparks that Mohammed Adel and the April 6 organization used to launch the Egyptian Revolution.

Because the police decided to murder him for no reason, Khaled Said went from being an anonymous kid in Alexandria to a national icon and a trigger for regional upheaval. Much like the suicide of Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian fruit vendor who was humiliated by the police and set himself on fire to protest the misery and oppression that he endured every day at the hands of the government, the murder of Khaled Said proved once again that occasionally bills do get sent to dictators for their crimes.

And trust me, there's always a way to make the bad guys pay. When the Islamic Republic of Iran banned all mention of Neda Agha-Soltan, the young woman murdered by the regime's security services during a

2009 rally for democracy in Tehran, plenty of activists were searching for ways to keep the name of their martyred comrade alive. But things didn't look good for the pro-democracy crowd. The government declared Neda's funeral off-limits to the public, and pro-regime militiamen were prowling the streets of Tehran looking to make trouble for anyone who stepped out of line. Confronted with all this, a few Iranian activists asked for my advice. After discussing the problem for a while, we realized that while the authorities could easily keep people from speaking Neda's name, it would be almost impossible for them to stop people from singing about her.

And that's because "Neda," like "Susie" or "Mary" in English, is a common enough name, and there are heaps of cheesy Farsi-language pop and folk songs about "the beauty of my darling Neda's eyes" or "how much I love it when the charming Neda smiles." All the Iranians needed to do was to cut some ringtones using these popular songs and send them around. Then whenever somebody received a phone call on a bus or a text message in a café, everybody in the immediate vicinity would hear Neda's name and know that plenty of others out there were also thinking about her. What could the ayatollahs do? Sure, they could ban a few dozen iconic pop songs, but the further down this rabbit hole of diminishing returns the regime went, the more ridiculous they would appear to the general public.

In order to make oppression backfire, it pays to know which of the pillars of power you can use to bolster your case. In Burma, the heavy-handed reaction to Ashin Kovida's march cost the regime the support of the crucial religious pillar. Kovida wisely bet that the monks would eventually overcome any other opposing faction, and even though many were killed and many more arrested, the junta proved powerless against the monks because the men of the cloth won the sympathy of an

intensely pious population by enduring their oppression with grace and fortitude. In Serbia, we took a very similar bet on provincial doctors: with the corrupt socialized national health system, people, particularly in small towns, depended on their local family doctors for every health-related issue imaginable. For that reason, in those regions Serbs revered their doctors, and on a practical level the regime simply couldn't touch them. All you had to do to make oppression backfire in those places was convert a handful of doctors to your cause and watch as the police struggled to follow orders on one hand and respect their beloved physicians on the other.

Believing that change can happen to you, dreaming big and starting small, having a vision of tomorrow, practicing laughtivism, and making oppression backfire: these are the foundations of every successful nonviolent movement. But like every building, the foundations aren't enough. Unless a solid structure is erected slowly and deliberately, the whole thing is likely to collapse. And the first thing you need for a house to stand united is for everyone to work in unity.

(illustration credit 6.2)

(illustration credit 7.1)

CHAPTER VII

It's Unity, Stupid!

If you've gotten to this point in the book, I'm going to assume that you care about more than just my world-famous Serbian humor and that you're genuinely interested in the circumstances by which ordinary people can do extraordinary things and change their community, their country, and the world. The next chapters, then, will be less about the *what* of nonviolent action and more about the *how*, the principles without which no movement can survive.

To begin this section of the book, let's go to Belarus. There are few better places I can think of to start in. This lovely country, right next to Russia, somehow missed the fall of the Berlin Wall and is today still living the Soviet dream. Now, let's go back in time and pretend it's 2010, on the eve of Belarus's presidential elections. Since 1994 the country has been under the thumb of a ruthless and corrupt despot named Alexander Lukashenko, who lords over the last dictatorship in Europe. A man of many talents, the tall and mustachioed Lukashenko is a big fan of hockey, cross-country skiing, and torture. He's also read every page in the tyrant handbook: just a few years after he was first elected, he had already managed to dismantle the parliament, beef up the secret police, and build a regime considered oppressive even in a region where many still remember Stalin fondly.

Sick of what their beloved president had become, the people of Belarus rebelled. In 2006, they demonstrated by the tens of thousands, launching the stylishly named Jeans Revolution, because in Belarus denim still

represents the promise of Western democracy and affluence. It was a noble attempt at bringing down a dictator, but it failed—Lukashenko's goons were too entrenched, the protest movement was too disorganized, and that year's election saw another landslide for the despot. Unbroken, the opposition continued its efforts, and by the time the 2010 elections rolled around, pro-democracy activists in Belarus had managed to generate enough pressure, at home and abroad, to force Lukashenko into something vaguely resembling a fair vote. More than 90 percent of the eligible population went to the ballot box and most Belarusians were certain that Lukashenko was facing imminent defeat.

So what happened next?

Here's how election night in Minsk would have looked if life were a Hollywood movie. In his dark and gloomy headquarters, the dictator limply concedes defeat as his henchmen make preparations to flee the country rather than face the criminal investigations that the new democratically elected government is almost certain to launch against them. Across town, in some cheerful banquet hall packed with rowdy supporters, the new president, a smart, normal, inspiring person, gives an uplifting speech about change and hope and promise. Happy hour goes on for days in every bar in town. International credit ratings spike. Anderson Cooper flies in to interview the heroes of the peaceful revolution.

But election night in Minsk was nothing like that. Instead, it looked a lot like that famous bit from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, in which a handful of Judeans are sitting in the amphitheater, busy not talking to one another because each one represents his own splinter political sect. Nine candidates ran against Lukashenko in 2010, representing the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Party, the Modernization Union and the United Civil Party and the Belarusian People's Front. Confused? So were the Belarusians. The

opposition's candidates were all fine men—they included a lawyer, a poet, and an economist—but there were too many of them to choose from. Each received a small portion of the vote, and much of the opposition's energy went into fighting one another over minute differences rather than uniting against their common opponent. By the time all of the votes were counted, Lukashenko could boast of having won a major victory in a more or less free election. It was the worst outcome imaginable for the opposition.

This was something I'd seen previously. In Serbia, before we had Otpor! to unite behind, elections under Milošević followed this exact pattern. The people who study this type of thing call it "atomization." Milošević would garner a sizable number of votes, steal a few thousand more, and then just wait for the splintered opposition to squander any chance of getting anything accomplished by fighting among themselves. By bickering, we were doing the dictator's work for him. Which is why from the very start of Otpor! we fought two parallel battles—one to topple the dictatorship, and a second to unite the feuding political parties under a single umbrella. We intentionally baked the struggle for unity into our anti-Milošević casserole, and it worked.

Unity is a tricky thing, though. It's not only one of the most important elements of successful nonviolent action but also the hardest to achieve, and for several good reasons. The first has to do with the nature of oppressive regimes. In Hosni Mubarak's Egypt—as in many dictatorships—any gathering of more than five people was considered illegal, which made the foundation of a civic society virtually impossible. By atomizing Egyptian society into tiny fragments, Mubarak followed the age-old dictatorial principle of divide and conquer. Like so many other autocrats, he knew that unity depends on building coalitions, and coalitions depend on people's ability to get together, share their views, and work out

their differences. When this very opportunity is rendered illegal, an organized and well-oiled opposition is unlikely.

Unity, however, is a difficult concept for another, far more fundamental reason: the innate tendency, which almost all people share to some degree, that leads us to the conviction that we know better than anyone else. I'm the first to admit being guilty of this kind of folly. When you're very young and very passionate—and many activists are—and you find yourself working together with other young and passionate people, it is likely that at some point you will look up at your buddy sitting next to you and wonder how you ever got involved with such a moron. This is because movements are crucibles, hot and crowded and designed to melt even the toughest of metals. Even today, my friends from Otpor! still like to rib each other about things they said more than a decade ago in moments of anger, and many of those quarrels—which now look so silly and negligible to us—easily could have ended in some of us quitting the group and vowing to start a "more pure" competing movement.

But there's more. The problem of unity is made even thornier because there are so many different types of unity out there. In Serbia, for example, we needed to get nineteen different opposition parties to work together, and every one of them hated the others. For us, the trick was winning through political unity. In a sense we were lucky, because when facing the challenge of achieving political unity you can always fall back on the time-worn traditions of horse-trading and cutting backroom deals. But imagine the activists during the struggle for civil rights in the United States and South Africa who needed to forge racial unity between whites and blacks. That's tough. Similarly, the gay rights movement needed to create cultural unity between homosexuals and straight people, and God bless those poor souls in places

like Egypt and Syria who are today trying to create a spirit of religious unity in the fight against violent sectarianism in the Middle East. Elsewhere, in cities from Rio to New York and from Tel Aviv to Moscow, you can find people desperately trying to create social unity by demonstrating that the desires of people living in cosmopolitan urban centers aren't that far removed from the hopes and wishes of rural citizens who live far from the centers of power. Doing that isn't easy.

But there's no reason to get depressed, because bringing together even the most disparate groups is possible if you approach the problem correctly. And that involves realizing that within these big strategic unities are smaller tactical unities, which is where we begin.

The first step involves understanding the nature of compromise. Asked a long time ago to define democracy, the writer E. B. White said that it was the recurrent suspicion that more than half the people are right more than half the time. He wasn't kidding, but he left out one key component, namely, that for such a system to work, a great degree of give-and-take is necessary. And compromise, sad to say, isn't sexy. No one has ever marched or protested or gathered at the town's square just to yell, "I don't entirely agree with your views, but in the interest of moving forward I'm willing to reconsider and amend my own." On the other hand, going all out with your own ideas and pet messages is a mistake. Just ask the members of FEMEN.

Started in 2008 by a young Ukrainian economist troubled by the thriving sex trade that subjected so many women in her country and elsewhere to a life of misery and violence, the activist group soon came up with the very effective tactic of having young women wearing skimpy clothes stage demonstrations. This may surprise you, but near-nudity got people excited, and the news media began to pay serious attention to FEMEN's message. Soon enough, one of FEMEN's members

realized that she was likely to get even more attention with no clothes on at all, and stepped out shirtless to protest. It didn't take long for a bare chest to become the group's signature look.

At first, FEMEN focused its activities on core topics pertaining to women's rights. They picketed the embassies of countries whose regimes oppressed women, and fought for strict policies banning prostitution. At this point, FEMEN had a nice united position. Their breasts kept the media coming, and once the spotlights were turned on them, these brave women were very good at sharing their message. But once the movement grew, so did the temptation to veer off in all directions. In Kiev, for example, FEMEN activists went bare to protest the lack of public toilets in town. Members of the group used chain saws to cut down wooden crosses in support of Pussy Riot. In Berlin, they stripped down, then burned a crucified Barbie doll outside a new museum dedicated to the famous doll, protesting Barbie's status as the so-called embodiment of the female ideal. During the 2010 London Summer Olympics, they showed up on the scene smeared in fake blood and crowned with floral wreaths to protest the sporting event's inclusion of unspecified "bloody Islamist regimes." I don't mean to belittle any of these actions. They were all staged in support of valid causes, and the fact that I've heard about them means that all were also, at the very least, somewhat successful.

But FEMEN's diversification of targets, causes, and messages took a bite out of the group's formerly singular focus. It has cost the group the message discipline its actions once had: nowadays, when the media spot one of FEMEN's topless activists engaging in protest, they no longer know if the demonstration pertains to women's rights, secularism, or something else entirely.

This is the risk of jeopardizing the first, and arguably the most important, tactical unity: the unity of message.

It took us a while at Otpor! to understand this important principle; had we not done so, it's very likely that Milošević would still be in power and I would be either dead, in prison, or spending a long and forced exile at some miserable job gutting fish in California. When we discussed our vision of tomorrow, it was clear to us that it contained multitudes: we wanted a good educational system that didn't brainwash kids with nationalistic rubbish, a free economy that wasn't run by incompetents and thugs, peaceful relations with our neighbors, a robust culture that allowed all varieties of art to thrive, and many more aspects that, woven together, make for a normal and happy life. But demonstrating for each of those things would have sent the message that we weren't serious, that we weren't focused, that we were, to use one of my favorite bits of American slang, all over the place. To avoid that, we folded all of our ideas and all of our hopes into one unified slogan—"He's finished," the "he" in question being the dictator—which helped us all forget our differences and come together for one common goal.

That simple slogan, "He's finished," was enough to get everyone who wanted a future without Milošević to join our side, and it allowed us to maintain a sharp focus on "him" despite all the other things that different interest groups also wanted to achieve. We needed one message, not the nineteen separate platforms of all the opposition parties. There's a reason why the FedEx corporation uses the same purple and orange logo on all its planes, trucks, envelopes, forms, polo shirts, and hats. They need to maintain a unified message, and so do you.

(illustration credit 7.2)

Maintaining unity of message is hard enough, but where it gets really tricky is keeping the unity of your movement. When my colleague Slobodan, the one who looks like a tough and battle-hardened general, meets with activists, he likes to talk about the unity of movement by starting with a simple slideshow of iconic photographs. First, he'll show his audience some pictures of the 2003 protests against the Iraq War. These are familiar images pulled straight from CNN broadcasts and the pages of the *New York Times*, featuring throngs of passionate people who'd taken time off from work in order to march with signs and banners denouncing President Bush and the looming American invasion. The pictures show all sorts of people, ranging from well-dressed professionals to slightly unhinged conspiracy theorists, all united behind a single cause and taking to the streets.

"What do you see?" Slobo asks his students.

"An anti-war protest," comes the inevitable answer.

Next, Slobo will show pictures from the original Woodstock music festival. In these photos, mud-covered hippies in tie-dyed clothing are frolicking in fields, getting high, and making out with strangers.

"What do you see here?" Slobo asks.

"An anti-war movement," they say automatically.

No matter where in the world Slobo shows those two sets of images, he always gets the same responses. That colorful bunch of muddy hippies is united in so many ways that people automatically know it's a movement. Without any other prompting—no signs or slogans—you know the Woodstock hippies' musical tastes, the types of drugs they're probably on, and how bad they smell, just by seeing their matted hair and crazy clothes. There's no question about their politics, either. They stand for peace and love. That's because hippies, whether they live in California or Belgrade, are united by a common

identity. And it's exactly this sense of group identity that separates broad movements from single protests.

A group identity is necessary for any movement, whether its aim is to bring down a dictator or to promote organic farming. Members of the green movement, for example, will always turn the lights off when leaving home, recycle their plastics, and under no circumstances litter the street—and that's true whether you're talking about my Californian vegan friend Ariane Sommer or my best friend Duda's wife, Ana, an eco-conscious Serbian woman who grows her own vegetables on the other side of the world in faraway Belgrade. It doesn't matter where they are or what other issues they care about. They're part of something bigger. This is what a unified movement looks like, and, as Slobo's students demonstrated, it's immediately apparent once you see it.

The unity of a movement, though, isn't only a question of its culture. It's also a matter of its administration. The American organization called Students for a Democratic Society provides a good cautionary example. In the 1960s, SDS was a big deal. It enjoyed explosive growth: it went from having twenty-five hundred members in the fall of 1964 to more than twenty-five thousand just a year later, and by 1969 it had roughly a hundred thousand members and a presence in almost four hundred colleges. The political movement it helped create brought hundreds of thousands of people to march on Washington, D.C., and attracted a coterie of rock stars and other beautiful and famous fans. You would think, then, that SDS was primed to achieve its goals and successfully end the war in Vietnam. Many in the movement thought exactly that.

But the more prominent the movement became, the less comfortable the members of SDS were with the whole notion of structure. They hated that their

organization had a president and a vice president. Those were things you had at a bank, they argued, not in a movement that genuinely aspired to present an alternative to what it perceived as a largely corrupt and violent system. And so in 1967, eager to make the organization more democratic, SDS convened and voted on major changes, doing away with the president and his second-in-command and instituting instead a much more porous structure. It made many members happy, but it did very little to protect the organization from what came next. Two years later, with the war raging and America swept by race riots and assassinations and other bad vibes, SDS convened again to discuss its future.

From the very get-go, it was clear that the 1969 SDS convention was going to be like no other. Representatives of various factions roamed the hall and distributed literature; if you took the time to read it, you could see that these people had almost nothing in common. The various factions came in many ideological shapes and sizes, but, generally speaking, the fight at that chaotic convention was between those members of SDS who believed in protests and procedure and remained committed to nonviolent action and those who thought that the only way to stop the war was to "bring it home," which meant setting off a campaign of bombings and shootings in American cities—a despicable idea morally, politically, and practically. After a lot of shouting, and a large number of badly written manifestos, SDS splintered and broke into two factions. It was to be its last convention: as the 1960s turned to the 1970s, SDS remained an organization in name only.

To an extent the split could be blamed on the intoxicating appeal of revolutionary politics. In part it's due to the fact that all the people involved were young, in their very early twenties. But in large part, what

happened to SDS was simply unavoidable. Without organizational unity, everything will fall apart. That's one of the few guarantees that I can give you in this book. Politics, by definition, is about factions vying for power. As of this writing, Yemen, for example, is following up its very successful ouster of its own dictator, Ali Abdullah Saleh, with endless negotiations about negotiations, all the political parties bickering about what measure of representation they ought to have in the National Dialogue Conference, the much-anticipated site for democratically shaping the nation's future. And let's not even get started about what happened in Egypt after Mubarak fell—that's for another chapter. The point here is that movements are like airplanes. Without a pilot at the controls, they will crash. And you never know who will pick up the pieces.

How, then, to ensure unity? The short answer is that you can't. There is very little you can do to make sure that humans don't behave like humans and find reasons to fight and split up. You can be like SDS and give everyone a great deal of freedom, or you can be like the Yemenis and have a very rigid committee structure, but sooner or later there's bound to be tension. What you can do, however, is learn from the experience of others. Earlier, I talked about the principle we developed in Otpor! that requires drawing a line on a piece of paper and seeing how many people you can include on your side of the page. We call it the line of division. Harvey Milk, you'll recall, finally won an election when he figured out that campaigning about quality-of-life issues would get many more people on his side than merely talking about the specific issues that interested primarily the gay community.

As you might imagine, this is a fine tactic for achieving unity, and, for all their later mistakes, the Egyptian revolutionaries initially did a good job of expanding the line of religious division. In the early

days of the 2011 uprising in Tahrir Square, for example, some commentators predicted that it was only a matter of time before sectarian violence would derail the whole feeling of euphoria in the country. So how did the activists respond to this concern? One Friday, as a throng of Muslims kneeled down for the holy prayer, their fellow Christians did something unheard of in the country's uneasy history: they held hands and formed a protective cordon, shielding their Muslim friends from harassment and giving them the space to pray in peace. Two days later, as Sunday rolled around, it was the Christians' turn to pray and the Muslims' turn to stand guard. At one point, a Christian couple organized a very public wedding ceremony amid all of the commotion in Tahrir Square, and when the newlyweds faced the crowd they were cheered by both Muslim and Christian well-wishers. Moved by the religious unity of the square, the Reverend Ihab al-Kharat addressed the protestors with an unlikely blessing. "In the name of Jesus and Mohammed, we unify our ranks," he said. "We will keep protesting until the fall of the tyranny." And they did.

It's a dramatic example, of course, and it ought to inspire anyone contemplating taking up nonviolent action. Sad to say, this spirit is too often lost, and rarely for any malicious reason. In Russia, for example, recent waves of demonstrations against the Kremlin's continuous consolidation of power have drawn tens of thousands of people to the street. Aided by creative activists like Pussy Riot, the anti-Putin movement soon gained international renown, giving hope to anyone who opposed Putin's despotic regime. But the one thing very few news reports have focused on turns out to have been the one thing that mattered most: all of the brave men and women who stepped up in public to demonstrate were, to some extent, cut from the same cloth and drawn from the same narrow sector of society. They were youngish, usually in their thirties or forties, well educated, and middle-class. They were people who

traveled abroad and surfed the Web and read independent news sources. They were sophisticated Moscow and Saint Petersburg residents for whom the antics of the crudely named punk band and the art group Voina were an inspired bit of pointed satire.

But much of the rest of Russia disagreed. For ordinary working people living in smaller towns or villages throughout that vast land, Pussy Riot was a bridge too far. These people may have believed that things were unequal and unfair in Russia, but looking at their neatly dressed, cosmopolitan brethren, they saw very little they could identify with. As a result, whatever efforts were taking place in Moscow and the other big cities didn't seem like something that belonged to them. The Russian rednecks—which are the vast majority of the country—saw no place for themselves in this hip urban protest movement. By the summer of 2013, only 11 percent of Russians expressed a willingness to protest, a steep decline from the opposition movement's heyday.

Had you asked any of the marchers in Moscow if they welcomed their cousins from the boondocks into the fray, you probably would have heard impassioned speeches about how important it was that all Russians stand together. But it didn't happen. It's not that the Muscovites weren't entirely welcoming of others. But they didn't do what our friend Imran Zahir did in the Maldives. They didn't go out and listen to people all over the country to figure out how they might be able to bring all sorts of different folks to join their cause. Movements are living things, and unless unity is planned for and worked at, it's never going to materialize on its own. And that's why it's important to make your movement relatable to the widest number of people at all times.

A while back I was having beers with two environmental activists from California, Rachel Hope and Chris Nahum. Rachel and Chris are better known as

the Pissed-Off Polar Bears, and won fame and laughs by protesting both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 2012, wearing polar bear costumes and holding signs like “Do I get to ask a question, ever?”

Rachel and Chris are both funny and supersmart, and there are few better hosts in Los Angeles. Their goal was to bring attention to global warming and the melting ice caps, and in that they were successful. But though polar bears and their shrinking habitat elicit lots of love and sympathy from vegans and eco-friendly people in California and elsewhere along the coasts, in the middle of America people really don’t seem to care too much about the plight of these exotic arctic animals. Outside of a National Geographic special, most people in the Midwest probably have never given more than five minutes’ thought to polar bears in their lives. So what if, I asked Rachel and Chris, instead of dressing up as polar bears in Iowa, they showed up at the next caucus debates dressed as dried-up cobs of corn, victims of rising temperatures and more-frequent droughts? Global warming, after all, has serious effects on agriculture, and farmers in Iowa were certain to respond more sympathetically to something that speaks to their own experiences. In Nebraska, for example, Rachel and Chris could show up as hungry cows with exposed rib bones, and so on.

Demonstrators in Brazil are learning this sort of lesson well. Their social uprisings are among the first occurrences ever of mass movements launched solely by members of the comfortable middle class, the same class that, throughout history, fussed with arranging the decorative plates in its china cabinet as the poor and the rich clashed with each other in repetitive cycles of violence. That these Brazilian men and women have bothered with politics at all instead of simply watching TV or shopping online is inspiring.

But with little experience in this sort of activism, participants in Brazil's so-called Vinegar Revolt initially failed the line-drawing exercise by limiting both their demands and their style of protest in a way that appealed only to urbanites like themselves, and managed to neglect huge swaths of their less educated, less affluent, but equally disenchanted countrymen who might have otherwise joined in the struggle. It didn't take long for people to learn from these early mistakes and figure out how to build a strong sense of social unity. Among the most interesting Brazilian activists was David Hertz, a well-known chef who is a more charming version of Jamie Oliver. Using food as a way to bring everyone to the table, Hertz launched a movement called Gastromotiva, where he brought together members of the middle classes and the impoverished poor in culinary seminars and cooking events attended by leading Brazilian politicians. By encouraging everyone to work together, Hertz and other activists in Brazil showed that it was possible to unite and demand concessions from the government. And in response to popular demands, in 2013 the president of Brazil promised to allocate 100 percent of the state's oil revenues to fund education.

It's important to note that while public figures like Hertz can add star power to a movement and unite people around their personalities, there is nevertheless a right way and a wrong way to use boldface names to help your cause. There's no doubt that charismatic figures can unify a movement, but charismatic leadership often comes with a burden: too many things depend on one person. That single person can be killed, like Benigno Aquino in the Philippines; imprisoned or put under house arrest, like Aung Sun Suu Kyi in Burma; or, in the case of someone like Morgan Tsvangirai in Zimbabwe, simply make a series of boneheaded moves and be co-opted by their opponents. And celebrities, although they love getting involved with all sorts of

crusades and causes, often are tricky assets to utilize. To make this point more clearly, consider Occupy Wall Street. Here's a brief and very incomplete list of stars who supported the movement: Kanye West, Russell Simmons, Alec Baldwin, Susan Sarandon, Deepak Chopra, Yoko Ono, Tim Robbins, Michael Moore, Lupe Fiasco, Mark Ruffalo, Talib Kweli, and Penn Badgley from *Gossip Girl*. It doesn't take a cultural critic to realize that these entertainers appeal to a very particular segment of the population, the segment that listens to rap and subscribes to liberal politics and digs highly praised but little-watched cult TV shows like *30 Rock* and movies like *The Kids Are All Right*.

Now imagine someone who lives in, say, Indiana, and listens to Brad Paisley, enjoys college football, and tends toward a more conservative worldview. It is quite possible that this person, stereotypes be damned, also agrees that the present system isn't quite working and that America could use some more social justice. But the culture and group identity of Occupy never made itself very inviting to this type of person. Which, if you think about it, would have been very easy to do: all it would have taken—and I'm oversimplifying here, but not by much—is for a few invitations to go out to musicians who weren't perceived as the usual suspects. What if, for example, instead of Talib Kweli leading the crowd in a rousing rap chant, someone like Lee Greenwood, best known for his "God Bless the U.S.A.," showed up and belted out a few patriotic tunes? Anyone watching in the heartland would get the feeling that the movement truly saw itself as a unifying force, not just a liberal outburst but a real attempt at an inclusive conversation.

And imagine what would have happened if Occupy activists, instead of taking over symbolic squares in bigger cities, tried to go where average Americans lived and worked, spreading their message in places like the imaginary South Park and sleepy little towns in the rust

belt. Achieving this would really be as easy as redrawing the line of division and making more people feel comfortable with the movement. After all, the distance between "We're a movement for liberal people who want to practice their ideology" and "We're a movement for people who believe ordinary Americans deserve a break" isn't as great as it may seem. While the former is exclusive, the latter will welcome a variety of personalities, interests, and points of view into the fold. I always wondered what might have happened if Occupy had ditched that name of theirs—which implied that the only way you could belong was if you dropped everything you were doing and started occupying something—and instead branded itself with the brilliant name "The 99 Percent." If someone asked me, "Srdja, do you feel like part of the 99 percent?" I might answer, "Well, my wife and I live in a five-hundred-square-foot apartment and drive a car that's almost a decade old. So yes, I guess I definitely feel like the 99 percent." I'd probably even wear a pin that said that. Why not? But if they asked me, "Do you feel like occupying Zuccotti Park?" I'd be less likely to sign up.

With just a simple name change, the Occupy movement could have shown themselves welcoming of so many people: the urban, the rural, the conservative, the liberal, the short, the tall, the drivers, and the pedestrians. I would have loved to see that happen.

That's because unity, in the end, is about much more than having everybody line up behind a particular candidate or issue. It's about creating a sense of community, building the elements of a group identity, having a cohesive organization, leaving none of your men or women behind, and sticking to your values. It's about doing plenty of things that make others feel as if your struggle is theirs as well. Often, it is about no more than holding hands in a crowded square or singing the right song. And it's immeasurably important.

But now that I've been about as mushy as a Serb is legally allowed to be, I'd like to talk about something just as important and far more concrete, the principle that makes or breaks movements: the sacred principle of planning.

(illustration credit 7.3)

(illustration credit 8.1)

CHAPTER VIII

Plan Your Way to Victory

Generally speaking, I'm a lousy prophet. When iPhones first came out, I told anyone who would listen that Apple was bound to go bankrupt soon because who on earth would want their phone calls to be interrupted by music and Internet access? When Serbia's national soccer team made it to the World Cup in South Africa in 2010, I had a strong feeling that this just might be our year. We finished twenty-third. It's sad to admit, but my friends are in the habit of asking me for my opinion about a new product or service simply in order to do the exact opposite. But the first time I spent a few hours meeting with an enthusiastic group of activists from Occupy Wall Street in one of New York University's impressive classrooms overlooking Washington Square Park, I felt that they were gearing up for a tough battle, and that their prospects of winning it were slim.

The following chapter is strictly about planning, and nothing I'm going to say is intended as a value judgment of any sort. You can think whatever you like about the folks who plopped themselves down in Zuccotti Park and attempted to change the national conversation. You might believe that they're a bunch of aimless hipsters, or, like myself, you might share their hunger for more justice in a ruthless world. But regardless of your opinion of Occupy's people, studying its planning, or lack thereof, is a valuable lesson for activists everywhere.

Why, then, was I so pessimistic about the movement's prospects, even as opinion polls showed that nearly half of the American population agreed with its ideas? It's

simple: just look at its name. Instead of dubbing themselves “The 99 Percent,” which would have implied that the movement was based on a group identity, the American activists instead named themselves after a single tactic. And although nonviolent activists have been occupying all sorts of things for years, from segregated lunch counters in the American South to Tiananmen Square, occupying is still just a single weapon in the enormous arsenal of peaceful protest—and, more to the point, one that tends to invite only a certain type of dedicated person. As we’ve already seen earlier in this book, movements, which are always fighting uphill battles, need to draw in more casual participants if they are to succeed. It’s true that Occupy did plenty of outreach to all sorts of people. But the message of their movement, which you could sense just from their name, was that it was all about this occupation of Zuccotti Park.

That was another thing that gave me pause about Occupy. A mass demonstration, as anyone who has ever organized any successful campaign will tell you, is the last step you take, not the first. You urge the masses to march in the streets when you know you have enough of the masses on your side, and only when you’ve already done all the preparations necessary to bring your campaign to a showdown. The big rally isn’t the spark that launches your movement. It’s actually the victory lap. Our friends in Egypt realized this very well; they had organized for nearly two years, used lots of leaflets and street theater, and won lots of small battles, and only when they were certain that the moment was right did they rally the troops to Tahrir Square, where they ramped up the demand for Mubarak’s resignation. As a result of the Egyptians’ stellar though short-lived success with what my colleague Slobo called the “nonviolent blitzkrieg” of occupying Tahrir Square, others got the idea that winning was not about the Egyptians’ two-year slog through developing a vision and coming up with a

strategy but simply about their seemingly spontaneous occupation of a prominent space in front of their national museum and government offices.

To many outsiders, it seemed that the Egyptians' magical tactic of occupation was all that was needed, and activists across the world scrambled to get as many people as possible to march in the streets à la the Egyptians. From Cairo to Madrid, from Frankfurt to Damascus, the story had been distorted through breathless media coverage, and everyone, it seemed, got the completely wrong impression of what had taken place. All anybody would have to do, the story went, was occupy some main square for long enough and Santa Claus would descend from the North Pole with whatever you wished for, whether you were asking for Assad to step down or more financial regulation.

That's why I was worried about Occupy. It seemed to have taken the wrong lessons from the Arab Spring and elsewhere. And not only did it begin as a mass gathering, but it quickly lost whatever organizational unity it had through all sorts of internal discussions, clarifications, and the inevitable bouts of infighting. As a result, its philosophy was muddled, and the only way it could go was down.

"What might we have done differently?" is the question at the heart of every unsuccessful nonviolent campaign. I'd like to answer it in general terms with an anecdote of my own before turning the discussion over to the Colonel, a man whose organizational skills have served him and his country very well in times of war and peace.

The first principle of planning is timing. Like comedy and sports and sex, timing is everything when it comes to activism, and for the same reasons. People are fickle, easily distracted, and largely irrational. Hit them when they're paying attention to something else and all the

best planning will be lost, but strike when the hour is right and you are guaranteed to win.

Dictators, of course, do everything they can to make sure that no time will ever be right for resistance. They shut the opposition down at every turn. But even they are not above the natural rhythm of human life. Often this rhythm is the activist's best friend. We learned this in Serbia on the Orthodox New Year's Eve of January 13, 2000.

Our New Year's Eve was going to be a major party no matter what, even in a country like Serbia, crushed by Milošević, engaged in numerous wars, and rattled by growing demonstrations and civil unrest. And because we at Otpor! were the coolest cats in town, everyone expected us to join the festivities, to drop all that activism stuff for one night and just celebrate. Which is where the Red Hot Chili Peppers come in.

I'm probably betraying my age here, but the Peppers are one of my absolute favorite bands. I loved them in the early days, when they played punk music and walked around naked with only a single sock covering their business, and I still like them now, when they play more melodic and sentimental rock. At the beginning of 2000, however, they were in their prime, just after *Californication*. And in the weeks leading up to New Year's Eve, we were busily telling everybody we knew that we had it on good authority that the Peppers would join Otpor! in Republic Square for a surprise midnight bash.

For most of December, this rumored midnight concert thrown by the coolest group in town and featuring international bands was all any young person in Belgrade could think and talk about. Friends got into arguments about what songs the Peppers might sing, how long they might play, whether they would bring some other rock stars along for the ride, or which of the local bands might be lucky enough to share the stage

with them. And if that strikes you as overly gullible, kindly remember that in early 2000 Otpor! was perceived as being on the verge of bringing down Milošević, which was a much, much more complicated task than bringing a few musicians in to play a gig.

When New Year's Eve finally rolled around, tens of thousands of people packed the square, many wearing their Red Hot Chili Peppers T-shirts. A stellar lineup of local Serbian rock groups took the stage, each better and more popular than the previous one. Everyone was dancing and hugging and kissing. By a quarter to midnight, however, you could feel the anticipation vibrating in the air. People were growing restless. They wanted to see rock stars.

At a minute to midnight, the lights went dark. A great big screen came down, and people whispered enthusiastically that the Peppers would probably rip right through it, in true rock star fashion. The countdown began: five, four, three, two, one …

And then came sad music, followed by photographs of dead Serbian soldiers and policemen, all of whom had been slain in a decade of war, projected onto the screen. Anthony Kiedis and Flea and their friends weren't there on the stage, but one of my friends—Boris Tadic—was. Less than five years later, Boris would be sworn in as president of Serbia, but on this night he stood off to the side, hidden from view behind the screen, holding a microphone.

"We have nothing to celebrate," Boris told the stunned audience. "So I am inviting you to leave this square and celebration in order to show everybody that this year has been a year of war and oppression. But it doesn't have to be that way. Let's make the coming year count. Because 2000 is *the* year. This year *life* must finally win in Serbia."

(illustration credit 8.2)

The message wasn't lost on anyone: the coming year was election year. For two minutes, maybe three, people just stood there, silent, baffled, angry, confused. But then a few began to smile, and then a few more, and within five minutes some members of the audience began chanting, "Let's make the coming year count." The chants became a chorus. As the people in Republic Square stood before that empty stage, there was an energy in the air that no rock band could ever recreate. Everybody felt that they had something important to do. The message was sent, and the stage was set for a final confrontation with Milošević. "This is *the* year" became the new slogan of the movement, and everyone present knew that it actually meant something, that there was a good chance that, come October, we'd be rid of Milošević and his horrors. The Chili Peppers hadn't shown up, but it was still the best concert anyone in attendance had ever been to, because, if you were there that night, you realized that you yourself were the real star.

This is what great planning does. It takes an ordinary and inevitable event, comes up with a tactic, and executes to perfection. But don't believe all this military-style talk just on my say-so; besides cursing at invisible NATO planes from the rooftop of my building in 1999,

the closest I've ever come to battle was reading the sword-fighting scenes in *Lord of the Rings*. That's why when it comes to planning, I defer to my close friend and mentor Bob Helvey. He's a retired colonel in the U.S. Army, and I like to think of him as my very own Yoda.

A career officer, Bob fought in Vietnam and then served in a variety of roles in the region, including as the American defense attaché in Rangoon. After he had his fill of combat and his chest was covered with Purple Hearts and Silver Stars, he asked for and was awarded a fellowship at the Harvard Center for International Affairs.

Imagine the Colonel arriving on the Cambridge campus: he was in his thirties, with a career officer's crew cut and outlook, nothing like the long-haired and wide-eyed college kids around him. For them, a hard night meant one shot too many at the local bar. For him, it was a night spent lying on the floor of a muddy jungle under fire from a Vietcong ambush.

When Bob saw a notice for a program on "nonviolent sanctions" then, he just couldn't resist. Nothing, he imagined, would be more fun than sitting among a crowd of peaceniks, all reeking of patchouli, and terrifying them with a few particularly salty war stories. On the first day of the semester, he walked into the classroom with a swagger, as if he was walking into a briefing room in the Pentagon. He was ready to shock and awe those hippies into submission. But instead, *he* was shocked by what he saw. Everyone in the room was normal. No patchouli, no long hair, just a handful of curious students and a tough-talking teacher with a tall forehead and a pair of eagle eyes, named Gene Sharp.

I've already mentioned Gene Sharp, a man who has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times now, has been awarded just about every other major accolade in the world, and is largely considered the

father of contemporary nonviolent struggles. Sharp was very far from the mumbling ninny Bob had expected to find. Instead, Sharp talked tough, justifying his reputation for being, as one nickname poignantly puts it, the Machiavelli of nonviolence.

"Strategic nonviolent struggle," Sharp started his class by saying, "is all about political power, how to seize political power and how to deny it to others." Seizing and denying power—this was language Colonel Bob Helvey could understand. He listened intently, and what he heard made perfect sense to him. He remembered his frustrations, during the long years of the war in Vietnam, at attempting the same military strategies over and over again, even though none seemed to work, and wishing there was some other way to go about overcoming one's enemies. This seemed to be exactly what Sharp was talking about. This was war without weapons.

Bob Helvey became Gene Sharp's disciple for life. From Burma to Serbia, the colonel was now engaged in the same business in which he'd always excelled, but with marches and leaflets replacing bombers and tanks. Since I first met Bob in 2000, he has taught me about many things, but nothing more valuable, perhaps, than the goose egg.

The goose egg, according to Bob, is what you want. The phrase comes from the army, where officers poring over large-scale maps never surround their target with a neat black circle; instead, they draw a fast and furious shape that looks a lot like a goose egg. The goose egg is the ultimate target, and before you begin planning anything, you have to know exactly what it is.

Which is much harder than it may seem.

Our friends in Egypt, for example, got their goose egg all wrong. For them, and for their colleagues in Tunisia and Yemen and elsewhere around the Arab world, the

goose egg they had in mind was toppling the dictator, and when the target was achieved these bold activists thought their work was done. But they had selected the wrong objective: Mubarak was down, Ben Ali was down, Saleh was down, but radical Islam was on the rise, the army was jittery, the economy was on the brink of collapse, the international community was wavering in its support, there was chaos in the streets, and no one was really sure what to do or how to do it. The goose egg, Bob told me when we talked this situation through after the Arab Spring seemed to fizzle, was never those dictators. The goose egg was democracy. They missed it.

This is the perfect point to take a break and indulge in some Serbian-style self-help. When Slobo teaches college kids, they sometimes approach him when the semester is over to ask for advice about how to go about achieving this goal or that. Usually he'll interrupt them and ask a rude question: "What is it that you really want? If I could wave a magic wand and put you exactly where you want to be five years from now, where would that be?" You'd be amazed how many of them have no clue. And, to be fair, it's hardly their fault: their entire lives, they've been trained to think only of the next step. When they're in high school, they're told to focus on college. When they're in college, they're encouraged to think about their summer internships. As summer interns, they obsess over jobs. Then they get these jobs and worry about promotions. It's a vicious cycle, and not because it's a rat race. I'm pretty sure that some rats love racing. The reason this sort of life is brutal has little to do with its fast and exceedingly demanding pace, but a lot to do with the fact that it allows so little time and space to think about what is it that we truly want. And as a friend with a love of sailing once very poignantly told me, the captain who does not know where he wants to go will never find a ship to take him there.

Once you do know where you want to go, however, there's really only one way to go about the business of getting there, a method that Bob swears by. It's called *inverse sequence planning*.

To help you truly grasp the genius of this planning tool, I'll use myself as an example. Let's assume that I play the guitar pretty decently, and let's imagine that I know how to sing a song or two. And let's pretend that I'm done with all this nonviolent activism business and am looking for a new career. I'd like to be a rock star. So how do I come up with a plan for that?

Most aspiring rock stars—and in a different life I hung out with many, many people who fit this description—will probably wander into a big city, start playing gigs, put together a band, do some promotion, and wait for luck to take care of the rest. A few particularly disciplined souls might work hard, save some cash, and record a demo tape, or, if they're really attuned to how the game works, hire a publicist. But, as any Beatle-in-training who's ever spent an hour with Colonel Bob Helvey knows, this isn't enough. There's a good reason most people who want to be rock stars never make it, and it doesn't have to do only with the market being tight and tough.

So I begin not only by imagining myself as a rock star but also by getting far more granular. The inverse planning sequence means that I have to start with my imagined goal and work my way back to the present, step by step. For example, Bob told me that all the supporters of the jailed Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi imagined her eventual triumphant emergence after more than fifteen years of house arrest even during the dark days of their struggle in the 1990s. But the Burmese didn't just picture her opening the front door and stepping out into freedom. Rather, they thought about where her welcoming party might take place, what dignitaries would be invited, and where they

would sit. This might seem like a bad case of putting the cart before the horse, but the point of such detailed planning is that it then allows you a much clearer understanding of what it is that you really want. In thinking about the seating arrangements for Suu Kyi's party, for example, her supporters soon realized that they wanted the press and a handful of sympathetic opposition politicians right there in the front row, which led to another, far more important realization: that what they really wanted the party to be was not merely a celebration of their leader's freedom but also an announcement that she would soon be challenging her jailors and running for president.

So when I imagine my future dream career, I don't only think about the name Popovic in the limelight. I see the arena where I'm playing, I see members of my band and the kind of people I'd like to have shouting our names in the audience, and it doesn't take more than two minutes of this fantasy game for me to realize that I'm trying to be not just a rock star but a very particular kind of rock star. I'm not imagining throngs of screaming kids packing every row of the soccer stadium. I'm imagining a few hundred normal-looking older people who go out to a club on a rainy Tuesday to hear great music. So I know I'm not trying to become one of the Justins, neither a Bieber nor a Timberlake. No, I'd rather be a part of something much closer to the Pixies, say, or the Fall. Once I know that, my path is significantly easier, because now I know that there are entire audiences out there that I can safely ignore. I know, for example, that I probably shouldn't waste my time putting up cute videos on YouTube, because my audience isn't into that kind of stuff. I also know that playing the local club circuit is probably very important; after all, that's exactly where I imagine myself performing.

So after persuading my friends who can play better than I can to join me, and begging my wife to be the lead vocalist, I make a list of all the appropriate clubs, from the very big to the very small, and I consider what it takes to headline each and every one of them. Maybe some require that you start out on open mic night. Others may secure your spot only if you guarantee to bring with you a certain number of paying fans. If that's the case, my next step is probably to gather up a number of other aspiring musicians and make some sort of cross-attendance pact, promising that we'll all show up at one another's shows. Now I have an audience and a gig. I'm still not in rock star territory, but I'm much closer. Once the dream is strategically broken down into distinct steps, and once each step is considered in terms of logistical demands, your chances of achieving it are much, much higher. But you have to start by imagining the finished product, and all the while never forget the words of Winston Churchill, who said, "However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results."

In the 1990s and 2000s, Bob Helvey spent much of his time helping young Burmese men and women achieve their version of becoming rock stars, namely, ridding themselves of the military junta that took over the nation and repressed all attempts at opposition. When the colonel met his new students, they were guerillas in the jungle, and their idea of victory was to take down a small government post here or blow up a radio tower there. It was small stuff, without much thought of process or sequence, but clutching guns and explosives made these brave young Burmese feel good, as if they were doing their share of resisting. Ever the practical-minded army guy, Bob immediately sat his warriors down and quizzed them on basic math.

How many troops did the army have? His young charges put the number just north of two hundred

thousand. And how many fighting men, Bob continued, did the resistance have? Exactly a tenth of that. Then came a third, and crucial, question: how many people lived in Burma? The answer was more than forty-eight million. This wasn't just an empty exercise in counting. What the colonel was delivering was the most important first lesson for every fighting force, which is the need to tally up your resources. There were forty-eight million men and women, the colonel thundered, waiting to be mobilized. They could be organized to confront the junta from their vegetable gardens, their market stalls, and the driver's seats of their buses. If the opposition failed to utilize this tremendous resource, if it always limited itself to twenty thousand sweaty guys armed with AK-47s running around in the jungle, it was bound to lose.

His students, of course, admitted that he made a very good point. But they were baffled about how to proceed with recruitment. Bob quickly invoked a bit of the old inverse planning sequence. If the population was somehow engaged, he asked, what did they envision this engagement looking like? The guerillas started out by talking enthusiastically about mass protests, but quickly acknowledged that the army was likely to crack down on such expressions of freedom very quickly. They were deflated for a moment. But then someone's face lit up. If the monks led the way, they said, the army wouldn't dare shoot, and if they did, the consequences would be too dire for even the fearsome dictatorship to sustain for long. The first step, it seemed, was to recruit the monks. From there, grandmothers and grandfathers could make small, innocuous protests in front of their homes, and kids in schools could start organizing against the regime. The point, as Bob reminded his students, was that nonviolence is so much more powerful than violence because it will allow anybody, no matter where they live or how frail they are, to engage the enemy. The guerillas had been relying on twenty thousand young

men in the jungle to fight the regime's army, but they were ignoring the untapped forty-eight million Burmese who could be encouraged to fight against the dictatorship at every place they were present. Switching to a nonviolent campaign was a no-brainer.

I learned a lot from Bob Helvey and Gene Sharp, but I realize that they might not be too pleased with this chapter as it now stands. Gene and Bob, as I have mentioned, are fighting men, and they love nothing more than to see a page structured into categories, with bullet points and boldface type making abundantly clear what needs to be done. In their honor, I'd like to conclude with some clear takeaways, but because so far I've held back admirably and didn't afflict you with my fanatical love of everything pertaining to *Lord of the Rings*, I'll use examples from the greatest nonviolent struggle in history, the noble quest of a few unarmed hobbits to destroy a mad dictator and restore peace.

Before you sit down to plan, before you worry about inverse planning sequences and timing or anything like that, take a piece of paper and identify the following three categories.

GRAND STRATEGY. Gene Sharp defines this all-important principle as the "overall conception which serves to coordinate and direct all appropriate and available resources (economic, human, moral, political, organizational, etc.) of the nation or other group to attain its objectives in a conflict." It sounds like a handful, but Sharp breaks it down nicely by bringing it to a more human level, telling us that grand strategy includes "consideration of the rightness of the cause, assessment of other influences in the situation, and selection of the technique of action to be used," as well as evaluations of "how the objective will be achieved, and the long-term consequences."

So, say you're a peace-loving hobbit living quietly in the Shire, and one day a weird wizard shows up and

tells you about a strange ring you apparently have in your possession, a ring that makes the whole land unsafe for you and all of your loved ones. It is clear that the ring has to be destroyed—and I'm cutting through a lot of plot points here, so forgive me—and now you start considering the grand strategy. Is your cause just? You bet: unless the One Ring is destroyed, the evil Dark Lord Sauron will find it and use it to destroy the world. What else influences the situation? Said Dark Lord and his many evil minions. What's the technique to be used? Since you're a hobbit, and therefore somewhere between two and four feet tall, probably a method that doesn't call for too much sword-swinging. How will the objective be achieved? By finding the way to Sauron's evil realm of Mordor and tossing the darn thing into the unfortunately named Crack of Doom (hey, Tolkien had his weak moments just like everybody else). Do that, and the consequences are world peace and prosperity for you and your friends. With these objectives in place, you consider the next step.

STRATEGY. This, Sharp tells us, is "the conception of how best to achieve objectives in a conflict … Strategy is concerned with whether, when, or how to fight, and how to achieve maximum effectiveness in order to gain certain ends. Strategy is the plan for the practical distribution, adaptation, and application of the available means to attain desired objectives." Here too, our heroic hobbit Frodo Baggins is no slouch. Once he has the grand strategy in place, he realizes that his best bet at maximum effectiveness involves teaming up with people who know a lot about ass-kicking, namely, elves. And when he finally gets to the kingdom of the elves—I'm not going to trouble you with the proper names here, so read the books if you care—he further assesses his situation and sits down for a spell of practical distribution, selecting the best fellowship he can assemble under the circumstances, each participant with his own role to play in the upcoming battle. Which

comes in very handy when the time comes to choose his …

TACTICS. There's no need to trouble Gene Sharp for a definition here, as tactics are simply the very limited plans of action you devise at any given point. The Pass of Caradhras is under the cautious eye and wicked magic of Saruman? Try the mines of Moria. Boromir slain by orcs? Team up with his younger brother Faramir. Is the Black Gate closed? Then try to get to Mordor via the secret path of Minas Morgul. Unlike strategies, this realm of tactical planning is often immediate, may be constantly changing, and demands a keen understanding of the realities on the ground and an imaginative approach to optimally utilizing all available resources.

If you've been paying any attention so far, you've surely realized that strategies and tactics seem to require two very different attitudes. Strategic thinkers are wise and patient people who live for the long game. They think many steps ahead. As with artists, they put together their plans like mosaics, with each little piece neatly fitting in with the next one and with only the artist having a vision of what the final creation might look like. Tacticians, on the other hand, are mercurial fellows; masters of the now, they are often only as good as their instincts, and they possess the uncanny ability to abandon their plan midway through and adopt a better one if the situation on the ground so dictates. Sometimes movements are fortunate enough to have both kinds of people on board, those who are good at devising strategies and those who excel at tactics. Even less frequently, these two skills come alive in the same person; that's how we get Napoleons or Alexander the Greats. Much more often, however, we tend to confuse these two, and—like Occupy Wall Street, say—declare that our tactic is our strategy or vice versa. Good planning, and applying the all-important principle of the

inverse planning sequence, can solve some of these problems. But if that doesn't work, there's one more thing to keep in mind, and that's momentum.

If you ask Colonel Helvey, Frodo Baggins, or anyone else who has ever fought a war, momentum is everything. You spend the first half of your struggle building it up, and the second half keeping it up. Even if you have no plan whatsoever, even if you're allergic to bullet points and flowcharts and all the other methods of thinking systemically, even if you're perfectly happy just flying by the seat of your pants, you should at least strive to make sure that everything you do serves to keep up momentum.

This, I think, was the true reason for Otpor!'s success. Sometimes we were a bit more disorganized than I care to admit. But we always knew how to stay ahead of the game, realizing that the moment we started playing defense, our defeat was only a matter of time. And so we followed up a prank with a concert, a concert with a march, a march with an election, and election fraud with civil disobedience and strikes. We treated activism like an action movie, realizing that unless it always moves forward to something bigger and louder and cooler, it will just bore the audience. Think of it this way, and planning kind of takes care of itself, with everything falling into place.

Still, momentum is a living thing, and while a single event can launch your movement into the stratosphere, it can also cause it to come crashing down to earth. You can plan for some things, like the fact that election fraud would take place in Serbia, Georgia, or Ukraine, but others, including the bloody assassination of opposition leaders in the Philippines or Lebanon, are less easy to foresee. And for people engaged in the kind of work we do, the delicate and dangerous work of pursuing freedom and empowering people through peaceful means, the greatest threat is the decision that some

people on our side make—unfortunately, it's not too uncommon—that there's more to gain by waving around a loaded gun than by pulling off another funny prank. Violence is a real threat, not only because it very frequently costs innocent people their lives but also because just as frequently it guarantees the utter demise of the movement and the abject failure of its causes. Let us now, then, talk about the demons of violence.

(illustration credit 8.3)

(illustration credit 9.1)

CHAPTER IX

The Demons of Violence

In 1961, a young black man in South Africa was feeling desperate. An admirer of Gandhi's, he had spent years trying to implement all sorts of nonviolent methods to oppose the apartheid regime. Together with a friend, he formed a thriving law practice, specializing in pressing charges against police brutality. Threatened by the firm's success, the government forced it to relocate to a remote part of town, essentially killing the business. The party he was helping lead, the African National Congress, faced a similar trajectory: it was growing at a rapid pace, but just as it reached the point of drawing tens of thousands of marchers for each of its protests, the government declared martial law and all public gatherings became illegal overnight. Soon the young man, too, was arrested and sent to jail.

He emerged a changed man. Gone were the books by Gandhi, replaced by volumes of Mao and Che. He no longer spoke of nonviolence, instead praising Fidel Castro and his successful uprising. It was time for guns, he said. It was time to fight. With a few of his friends, he formed a new organization, Umkhonto we Sizwe, or Spear of the Nation, and became its first commander. It would be an army, and it would fight apartheid.

Ever the charismatic leader, the young man launched his new group with an impassioned speech. "At the beginning of June 1961," he thundered, "after a long and anxious assessment of the South African situation, I, and some colleagues, came to the conclusion that as violence in this country was inevitable, it would be unrealistic and wrong for African leaders to continue

preaching peace and nonviolence at a time when the government met our peaceful demands with force.… The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices—submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means in our power in defense of our people, our future, and our freedom." With all legal means of resistance cut off by the regime, the young man declared war on his country, and he made it abundantly clear that he was not afraid to die.

The first target was an electricity substation. As soon as the powerful explosives went off one day in December 1961, the enormous metal structures that supported the electric cables collapsed on their sides like hunted elephants, sending entire towns into darkness. It was the opening salvo of the war; soon government posts were blown up, infrastructure sabotaged, and crops deliberately burned. The young man, now sporting a revolutionary-looking beard, hid in a thatch-roofed room on a farm in the town of Rivonia. Under his leadership, the Spear launched almost two hundred attacks, becoming the government's most fearsome enemy.

On August 5, 1962, the young guerilla was seized by the police. In the trial that followed, he took responsibility for the acts of sabotage and was sentenced to prison in the notorious Robben Island penitentiary. His cell measured eight feet by seven feet, with a straw mat as the only furniture. He spent his days breaking rocks into gravel, enduring physical abuse and verbal taunts from his white guards with stoic calm. Contact with the world beyond the prison was severely limited, and he was allowed just one letter and one visit every six months.

To outsiders, the imprisoned violent revolutionary became a symbol of resistance, and admiring fans kept

up vigils around the world calling for his release. At one point, South African president P. W. Botha offered the man his freedom if he agreed unconditionally to reject violence as a political weapon. The man refused. But eventually the reflective guerilla softened his line. He came to understand that what South Africa needed in order to move forward wasn't more bloodshed but rather forgiveness and reconciliation. And so when Nelson Mandela was finally released, twenty-seven years after his arrest, he was celebrated as a champion of nonviolence, and rightly so: having tried his hand at an armed struggle, Mandela knew better than anyone that violence simply couldn't achieve the type of future that he and his people had hoped to enjoy. I bring up this story not to tarnish the reputation of a man I very deeply admire but to show that, faced with horrific oppression, even a righteous man like Mandela can be driven to despair and convinced to go the way of the gun.

Because guns—and it's very difficult for a nonviolent type like me to admit this—are cool. You can be the most peace-loving person in the world. You can be a vegan who meditates eight times a day and wears nothing but recycled hemp clothing. You can be opposed to violence in all of its forms. And yet when you pick up a gun, it's impossible not to feel, in some dark place deep within your soul, as if there's no challenge you can't confront and no problem you can't solve. Something about being armed changes people. They feel powerful. I remember when a cop shoved his gun into my mouth in December 1998, after I'd been arrested on my way to an Otpor! rally. At the precinct house, this thug and his buddies had just wrapped up an hour-long session of beating me while I sat in handcuffs, yet it was only when his sidearm came out that his eyes started to narrow and his tone got real tough, like he was Dirty Harry or something. It was like this guy was living a dream while I was cowering in front of him. All

because of the gun. Like motorcycles or shots of bourbon, guns seem to be instant agents of empowerment, which is why so many Hollywood movies, video games, and other forms of popular entertainment are rife with them. There's a reason statues of great men show them with weapons in their hands or on their belts, and it's because most people think that a person with a weapon is a person who gets shit done.

And yet, when it comes to social change, it's often the person with a gun who fails the most miserably.

Before I share some profoundly important empirical research, let me be absolutely clear about one thing: I did not choose to devote my life to nonviolent action because I strongly believe violence is never acceptable. If you live in the real world, you learn, sooner rather than later, that there are situations in which violence is inevitable. The Nazi horde, to name just one obvious example, could probably only be stopped by the actions of the American, British, and Russian armies, and I am truly grateful for the efforts of the brave Yugoslav guerillas, the partisans, who fought the Germans on our native soil. It was the partisans, truth be told, whose clenched-fist symbol inspired the logo of Otpor!.

And although some committed pacifists objected to World War II, most of humanity understood the fight against fascism to be a necessary evil. Even Gandhi, whom we revere as the very embodiment of nonviolent resistance, started out his political career by publicly calling on young Indian men to grab a gun and join the British army in World War I, a display of loyalty Gandhi thought would help hasten India's independence. "We should have the ability to defend ourselves, that is, the ability to bear arms and to use them," he wrote in the summer of 1918. "If we want to learn the use of arms with the greatest possible dispatch, it is our duty to enlist ourselves in the army."

My objection to violence, then, is not on a pure moral ground, although I think it is obvious that all decent men and women agree that it is generally a good idea to resolve conflicts peacefully. My biggest objection to violence stems from the fact that it simply doesn't work, or doesn't work nearly as well as nonviolent resistance. I'll let the experts do the talking.

In a stellar book titled *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, two brilliant young American academics, Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, did something that no scholar before them had done: they looked at every conflict they could find between 1900 and 2006, 323 in total, and analyzed them carefully to see which succeeded, which failed, and why. Their findings were astonishing. "Nonviolent resistance campaigns," they discovered, "were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts." Or, if you're a fan of exact figures, here's the score: Take up arms, and you have a 26 percent chance of succeeding. Practice the principles you have just read about in this book, and the number shoots up to 53 percent. Not surprisingly, if you look at the same statistics in the last two decades alone—with no more Cold War to spur the financing of armed conflicts across the globe—the ratio spikes even more dramatically in favor of nonviolence.

But that's not all. Armed movements, Chenoweth and Stephan discovered, were usually limited to somewhere around the order of fifty thousand participants. This makes perfect sense: thankfully, there are only so many people alive who are willing to carry arms, sleep in jungle camps, or otherwise kill and die for a cause. And that's true even if the cause is a very noble one. But when the movement is about having fun, being creative, and using hope to crush fear, you can expect your numbers to swell faster than you can count.

Still not convinced? Let's look at the long term. Countries that experienced nonviolent resistance, Chenoweth and Stephan found, had more than a 40 percent chance of remaining democracies five years after the conflict ended. Countries that took the violent path, on the other hand, had less than a 5 percent chance of becoming functioning democracies. Choose nonviolence, and you're looking at a 28 percent chance of experiencing a relapse into civil war within the decade; choose violence, and the number is 43 percent. The numbers are uniform, and what they tell us is irrefutable: if you want stable, durable, and inclusive democratic change, nonviolence works and violence doesn't.

The first time I met with Syrian activists was right around the time that the uprising against Bashar al-Assad began, and I begged them to share the results of the Chenoweth and Stephan study with their fellow countrymen. At that time, it seemed, the nonviolent elements in the movement against Assad might have been able to wrest control of the country from the armed groups who were starting to dominate the debate. It looked like there was a chance for sanity to prevail. But, alas, the peaceful activists were shouted down by others who claimed that a nonviolent approach was the wrong way to deal with the brutal Baathist regime, and that Assad only understood force. Soon steady flows of weapons and fighters made their way into Syria, and now, two years later, look where that violent approach has gotten the rebels. The bloodied and discredited Free Syrian Army is pinning all of its hopes on foreign intervention, which, if recent experience is any guide, will only end in disaster for all sides.

Not only has the Syrian rebels' violence failed to bring about the change they wished for, but it has in fact served to strengthen Assad's resolve. That's because it's in the very nature of human beings to work as

communities, a trait that comes from a prehistoric time when our rude ancestors wore leopard skins instead of jeans and spent their days protecting their caves instead of their social security numbers. Back then, I imagine, while our forefathers would have sometimes disagreed among themselves, they probably always came together whenever a bear, wooly mammoth, or some other enormous beast started to roar and kick up dirt in front of their cave. In that situation, the early humans would have had to find a way to unite and cooperate until they could neutralize the foreign danger, and only later would they continue arguing with one another about whose turn it was to go hunting or who would be lucky enough to marry the hairy beauty of the tribe. Subsequent ages may have massaged the details, but that prehistoric principle has always stayed the same.

When NATO started bombing Serbia in the spring of 1999, some of the people who were most bitterly opposed to Milošević's rule—including a few members of Otpor!—caught themselves supporting our genocidal president as he defiantly stood up to the West. It was like some primordial wellspring of tribalism bubbling up. During a speech by Milošević just after the bombs started falling, one of my fellow Otpor! leaders even caught himself cheering on the dictator, gushing (to his embarrassment only moments later), "Go get them, Slobo!" But it was a normal reaction, because when your cave is in danger, you root for the chief to succeed. Even if the guy is a jerk.

This helps explain why all forms of violence—whether we are speaking about the killing-fields variety we see in Syria or the protest burning of McMansions by militant environmentalists in the United States—are so much less effective in bringing about lasting social change than peaceful measures are. Violence scares people, and when people are scared, they look for a strong leader to protect them. And this relates, as does everything else in

this book, to the pillars of power. As my friend Slobo says, people in violent struggles are always trying to knock down pillars by *pushing* them, but in nonviolent campaigns people are working to *pull* the pillars to their side. In nonviolent action, you're trying to win by converting people to your cause—be they ordinary people like traffic policemen or big shots like newspaper columnists—and getting them to fight your battles for you. You're building group identities and creating new communities that will hopefully have enough mass to cause people to gravitate toward your cause. And because you're not frightening anybody off with violence, your friends and neighbors won't feel the instinctive need to be protected by a strongman. This, in the end, is the only way you'll get people to abandon that big ugly brute who guards your cave.

In order to pull off a nonviolent campaign, though, you need to be likable. Every movement, no matter its goals, exists primarily to arouse the sympathy of the masses. Men with beards and guns aren't the most sympathetic of figures. Even without witnessing gory images of victims and attacks, people will cross the street in order to avoid a dude who's carrying an AK-47 and walking like the Terminator. But a smiling young woman with a cool and witty sign is a different story. You want to join her, because it's hard not to be swept up in her energy, commitment, and enthusiasm. Just take a look at the YouTube videos of Manal al-Sharif, the brave Saudi woman who defied her country's ban on female drivers by making instructional videos of herself behind the wheel. You watch them and suddenly you want to ride shotgun in the car with her. This is also why so many of us, even those of us who couldn't really find Cairo on a map no matter how hard we tried, felt elated when we saw the images on TV of the young Egyptians filing into Tahrir Square in 2011: they were smiling, unarmed, and inspiring. Had Mubarak been toppled by a small armed militia or the officer corps of

his military, we'd most likely either tune out, advocate caution, or both.

Which leads me to the second, and closely related, reason for nonviolence's high rate of success. If you have machine guns and tanks on one side and tens of thousands of people marching with flags, signs, and flowers on the other, there can be very little confusion about who's the beauty and who's the brute. Martin Luther King, Jr., understood this principle well. "There is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in guns in the hands of a few desperate men," he wrote. "Our enemies would prefer to deal with a small armed group rather than with a huge, unarmed but resolute mass of people." When dictators open fire on huge, unarmed, and resolute masses of people—as they did, for example, in Burma—they immediately feel the sting of oppression backfiring.

Besides, with armed resistance you have to be careful, because the sword cuts both ways. One side shoots and bombs and kills, the other side shoots and bombs and kills back, and good luck figuring out who's to blame and who's simply practicing self-defense. There's a real danger to a movement that becomes violent, and it's that violence makes it hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. And if you're not careful, even the most thoughtfully planned nonviolent action can turn ugly, and fast.

Let's take a hypothetical example. Imagine you are in charge of a peaceful protest. It's well organized and looks like a party. You and your fellow activists have spent hours and days and months encouraging people to march through the streets and have always been rewarded with big, orderly turnouts filled with people who are visibly branded with the logos and messages of your movement. Today, the perennially enthusiastic crowd is singing and handing flowers to the police, with everybody from the very young to the very elderly

taking part in the action. Then, from out of nowhere, you spot some drunk idiots enjoying the afternoon in their own peculiar way. First they start throwing stones at the police, and then they break the window of a nearby barber shop. Now, you and I both know that there might be five thousand people in attendance singing and chanting and only five or so idiots who are looking for trouble. But take a guess what will appear on the front page of tomorrow's newspapers. The answer, unfortunately, is the idiots.

Soon your reputation is damaged, and you'll probably lose credibility with people like parents with young children and the old folks. It's a shame, because those were people you worked hard to get on your side. They're probably not fans of places where stones are flying and cars are burning. Next, the media that always enjoyed publishing stories of your clever stunts are quick to accuse you of being violent, and their editorial boards now view your cause with suspicion. Within a week, your momentum is stalled, the pillars you tried so hard to pull to your side are reluctant to move, and people in your community view you as a troublemaker. And it's all because you didn't maintain nonviolent discipline in your movement.

So how should you have gone about doing that? Throughout the course of the past decade, my friends and colleagues from CANVAS have met and worked with people from almost fifty countries, plenty of which could vie for the top spots on a list of the most violent places on the planet. Yet what we learned is that dedicated groups, no matter how bloody their culture or environment, can nevertheless build, perform, and maintain nonviolent discipline if they put their minds to it. It takes skill and practice, but in reality it's no more complicated than driving a car. And, just like they tell you in driver's ed, the trick is to start slow.

The first step might sound pretty Gandhian, but it works. You need to preach nonviolence within your movement—or, for the less religious among us, you should make it your movement's ideology. This came easy for us Serbs. During the dictatorship of the 1990s, the military and the police were anything but "cool," and so the type of violence they practiced had a certain negative stigma among us kids. Likewise, in the Buddhist society of Burma, the idea and importance of nonviolence weren't too hard for people to grasp. That's not to discount the horror caused by bloodthirsty gangs of Buddhist vigilantes in that country, but it would be tough to compare the general culture there to hotspots like Egypt or Yemen. Yet even in those countries, activists managed to convince others of the merits of nonviolence by sharing the stories of successful nonviolent movements, practicing its application through training, and using its techniques to gain the moral high ground—whether by hugging the police in Tahrir Square or giving them flowers on the streets of Sanaa. You and I might have thought that everybody knows about Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela, but the truth is that lots of people in lots of places have only heard of one way to solve intractable problems—violence—and so education is an important first step in spreading a nonviolent discipline.

The second thing you need to do is train your fellow activists to spot potential sources of friction. As my CANVAS colleagues Sinisa and Misko like to remind the groups we work with, outbreaks of violence are always more common whenever "you" are meeting "them," whether "them" means the security forces or members of an opposing political party. Imagine being present at a demonstration with thousands of people in attendance and riot policemen nervously surveying the scene. It's tense, and you know that some people on both sides are just waiting for some small incident to set off a confrontation. Naturally, the trick here is for people to

keep their cool. In order to help people do that, the civil rights leader Jim Lawson organized workshops in Nashville churches during the 1960s for activists just before they were to occupy segregated lunch counters in the city. Lawson's trainers would goad activists with the types of taunts and demeaning acts that the protestors could expect to be treated to in the streets of Nashville. The activists would be called names, spit upon, and have gum mashed into their hair by Lawson's people so that they would know how to respond to the exact same provocations in the real world. The activists were shown how to properly sit at the lunch counters, how to sing in police cars after they'd been arrested, and how to remain nonviolent in even the most humiliating circumstances.

During the Otpor! campaigns, we Serbs were clever enough to realize that by putting the most beautiful girls in the front ranks of our marches we minimized the chances of the police beating us from the get-go, as even the sadistic security forces were reluctant to start their day by roughing up women. And by having girls in the first rows of protestors, we were able to create a physical buffer between the cops and those on our side who were most likely to tussle with the police—rowdy young men. Otpor! members would also constantly play instruments, dance to music from loudspeakers, and call on officers to join our movement in order to show that we were not there to threaten the cops. In fact, we sang songs in honor of the police at our protests, mostly the same cheesy patriotic songs that we sing to our beloved but lousy national soccer team. And we deputized student volunteers who were identified by red ribbons on their sleeves as "protest police" working to isolate potential troublemakers in our ranks before they could get violent with the police or one another.

This, of course, brings us to the third step you need to take when securing your movement against the creeping

demons of violence: defending it against the provocateurs who will inevitably try to crash your party. Sad to say, fringe groups exist in every society, and plenty of them would love nothing more than a violent showdown—whether they are hankering for a race war, a cataclysmic confrontation with the government, or something even scarier. From soccer fans to radical anarchists, every country has its own "usual suspects," guys who will burn cars, wear balaclavas, and throw Molotov cocktails at the police for the flimsiest reason. And since these people love massive gatherings—because that's where they can cause the most mayhem—they will be more than happy to participate in whatever protest or demonstration you may be calling for. The trick here is to make a clear distinction between your nonviolent movement and these toxic groups, and it doesn't matter if you agree or disagree with whatever platform they claim to be championing. Avoid them at all costs. In every instance, you should do whatever you can to show that these people are not part of your world.

Luckily, new technologies can make this easier than ever before, as shown by the Italian activists who demonstrated in support of Occupy Wall Street in 2011 and took pictures of the anarchist Black Bloc members who tried to co-opt their protest. By identifying the provocateurs and uploading their images to social networks, the Occupy marchers were able to draw a clear line between themselves and those who had come to Rome looking for a violent extravaganza. Their efforts meant that nobody confused the hundreds of thousands of peaceful demonstrators with those few Black Bloc types who were hoping to steal the show.

All this nonviolent discipline, it is important to note, works internally to keep your movement peaceful and externally to demonstrate to others that you can be a good leader. For all of the reasons mentioned above,

nonviolent campaigns stand a much better chance of inspiring the loyalties of even high-level officials in the oppressive regime; as we'll see in the next chapter, the student movement that led to the famous Tiananmen Square standoff enjoyed some support from senior army officials who were ready to disobey orders and switch sides. The same is true for the international community, whose myriad organizations, from foreign governments to NGOs, would much rather support peaceful resistance than armed insurgencies.

This is exactly what happened in the Philippines, and it's a story that Cecilia—the youngest CANVAS trainer we have and our only Filipino—likes to share. In 1969, Ferdinand Marcos, who had distinguished himself as an anti-Japanese guerilla during World War II, was reelected president. Responding to a wave of Communist-led student demonstrations, Marcos soon declared martial law. "It is easier perhaps and more comfortable to look back to the solace of a familiar and mediocre past," he said in one typically creepy speech, "but the times are too grave and the stakes too high for us to permit the customary concessions to traditional democratic processes."

The opposition, unsurprisingly, took guns and headed off to the jungle. Calling themselves the New People's Army, the Communists were initially successful in waging guerilla war against the government, but they won little sympathy from ordinary Filipinos and were labeled as terrorists by the U.S. government.

Taking up the mantle of opposition was a senator named Benigno Aquino, Jr. In 1983, he agreed to return from a long exile in order to run against Marcos. The military entourage sent to greet him on the tarmac when he landed didn't wait too long to deal with him, though, and murdered him at the airport. Demonstrations grew quickly, and Marcos, now running out of options, agreed to call for an election, which he promptly stole.

This was the prime hour for Corazon Aquino, the slain senator's widow. Recognizing the momentum that her husband's killing had unleashed, Aquino organized a march on Manila. Two million people showed up. The day after Marcos's inauguration, she announced a campaign called Triumph of the People. At her urging, the majority of Filipinos staged a general strike. They organized runs on state banks, destabilizing these corrupt and crony-run institutions. They boycotted state media, relying instead on the newspapers and radio stations operated by the Catholic Church, a pillar of power that had shown no love for Marcos. Millions all over the country felt hopeful. And millions more watching around the world had no doubt who was in the right. On February 25, 1986, Aquino took the oath of office, setting up a parallel government. That evening, American military helicopters escorted Marcos and thirty members of his family and entourage to a nearby military base and from there to Hawaii, where the dictator would live out the rest of his days.

Nonviolent resistance, then, worked in the Philippines where violence had failed, as has happened in so many other places around the world. But while nonviolent discipline—which forms the holy trinity of successful nonviolent struggle, along with unity and planning—is vitally important, there are other things needed to guarantee success. Just as important as this trinity is knowing how—and when—to finish what you started. For that, we would do well to look at those famous and brave men and women who stared down the tanks in Beijing in 1989.

(illustration credit 9.2)

(illustration credit 10.1)

CHAPTER X

Finish What You Started

You're nearing the finish line if you've gotten this far in the book. The conclusion is in sight, and maybe your mind is already considering new and more exciting books to read next. And so this is probably a good place for us to address a critical but sadly underappreciated point of nonviolent struggle: namely, how to identify that critical moment in any campaign when you've stormed your "goose egg" and achieved the objective you set out to conquer. Because that's when you, as an activist, need to declare victory and get the hell out of Dodge—or at least move on to the next battle you can win.

It might seem pretty straightforward, but declaring victory is a delicate thing. It's a little like baking, because here, as in the kitchen, timing is everything. You don't want to end up with burnt cookies or a mushy mess. If you declare your movement a success too soon and send your activists home while lots of heavy lifting still needs to be done, you might end up in a situation like they have in Egypt right now, where everybody who fought for that revolution figured they'd won after Mubarak fell, only to watch the Muslim Brotherhood and then the powerful military swoop down and take control of the country. Even now, with the Brotherhood on the run and the army in charge, Egypt is hardly the kind of democracy that my friend Mohammed Adel had hoped for.

In hindsight, it seems obvious that the goof the Egyptians made was to call their revolution a success right after their dictator was hauled off into custody. In

any sort of chaotic political situation—such as the vacuum that followed Mubarak's hasty exit—it's a given that the most organized groups will be in the best position to take up the reins of power. And nobody in Egypt was more organized than the Muslim Brotherhood and the military. By not anticipating those groups' ability to take charge of the mess left by Mubarak's departure, the young nonviolent activists who were so successful at mobilizing people in the streets of Cairo and bringing real unity to the citizens of Egypt set themselves up for major disappointments. That's why we at CANVAS like to remind people that President Kennedy didn't just promise to send astronauts to the moon; he also promised to bring them back to earth. Getting those guys home, not just shooting them into space, was NASA's goose egg. For the Egyptians, the goose egg needed to be democracy, not just the end of Mubarak.

That's why it's important for nonviolent activists to finish what they start. The glamorous achievement of toppling a dictatorship only counts as a victory if the not-so-glamorous task of putting a democracy in its place has been accomplished. And while the Chenoweth and Stephan study that I mentioned earlier has concluded that nonviolent action gives you the best chance at lasting social change—42 percent over the course of five years—that still leaves you with a 58 percent chance of an unhappy conclusion to your valiant efforts. So, to make sure that you don't walk away empty-handed, let's look at some of the common pitfalls into which even incredibly successful movements occasionally wander.

Naturally, as we saw in Egypt, you can celebrate too early and leave an opening for more malevolent actors to take advantage of your hard work. But it's also dangerous to wait too long before declaring victory. Momentum, as I mentioned earlier, is a tricky thing, and

you don't want to squander it. That's what happened to the brave young Chinese activists who occupied Tiananmen Square in 1989. In one of the most spellbinding moments in modern history, students staged a peaceful mass protest and managed to force the Communist government of China to offer tangible concessions and reforms, only to see the whole thing blow up in their faces when the students refused each small offer of compromise made by the government. Instead of accepting the government's offers, the students demanded—unrealistically—that a total and true democracy replace the Chinese system. Because the Tiananmen Square activists refused to accept the minor yet meaningful victories they'd already been handed by the party, the government panicked at the thought of further unrest and crushed the uprising. As a result, social movements in China were set back nearly two decades.

Like everything else pertaining to Chinese history, what happened in Tiananmen Square is linked to dozens of historical processes, some dating back decades. Now, I'm no political scientist, but in a simple—though I hope not too simplistic—telling, this is what went down. On April 15, Hu Yaobang, the Communist Party's secretary general and a man known as a reformer, died suddenly of a heart attack. Beijing's students, a liberal bunch who had spent years dreaming, like so many Guns N' Roses fans, for Chinese democracy, mourned the man they considered to be the champion of their cause. Quickly the students began to converge on Tiananmen Square, erecting shrines to Hu and writing poetry that very subtly criticized the government for failing to be sufficiently progressive.

Writing poetry, however, can only capture the attention of young and hormonal students for so long, and soon the piecemeal demonstrations congealed into a movement, with leaders, music, chanting, and a set of

seven demands. Today, two and a half decades later, we remember the Tiananmen movement as standing up for democracy and against oppression. The participants' determination was made visually clear in that famous photograph of an anonymous man blocking an advancing column of tanks. But in truth the student movement was never quite so radical, at least not at first. The demands they presented to the government were straightforward and sensible, including increasing funding for education, lifting restrictions on demonstrations in Beijing, and loosening censorship of the press, particularly when it came to covering student affairs. All of these, we can say with certainty, were battles that could have been won.

At first, the government seemed to have little or no interest in acquiescing. On April 26, the party's official newspaper, *People's Daily*, ran a front-page editorial about the protests. Entitled "It Is Necessary to Take a Clear-cut Stand Against Disturbances," it left little room for doubt as to which approach the party bosses were contemplating. Almost immediately, hundreds of thousands more students flooded the square, breaking through police lines and quickly gaining the support of factory workers and other Beijing residents. If you had been a Communist Party big shot, this is when you'd start to get scared. Lots of pillars of power were starting to wobble and realign themselves against you. A revolution, it seemed, was under way.

Realizing that the Communist state was in actual danger, the government quickly announced that it was ready to negotiate. In repeated speeches, Zhao Ziyang, the party's new secretary general, stated that the students were right to point out corruption as a major problem, and he promised to act swiftly to address the issue. Zhao also added that the student movement was patriotic in nature, a pronouncement widely understood to mean that there would be no further prosecutions of

student leaders. In both tone and substance, Zhao's speeches negated the government's previous hard line and signaled that the Communist Party was willing to listen and would act reasonably. By the time May rolled around, most Chinese students felt as if a major victory had been won.

If this were Mike Tyson's Punch-Out, the students would just have demolished Glass Joe. If it were Angry Birds, it would be one of the supersimple early levels. They should have taken a moment to assess their position and realize that they weren't ready to knock out Iron Mike himself. Really, they'd done something amazing. After all, the Chinese government is not one to make concessions to anyone, let alone a bunch of kids. So just by getting the Communist Party to consider some of their concerns, the student activists had already pulled off a big coup. The best move for them to make next would have been to announce their achievements far and wide, proclaiming, with a great degree of truth, that they had just succeeded in subduing the mighty Chinese government. Then level two of the game would have begun almost immediately, with the students using their clout to push the envelope just a little bit further, using the skills they'd acquired during the first round of confrontations to improve their positions. Season two of their dramatic mini-series would surely be even more exciting than the first, they could hint. After all, they had potential and a track record of results.

But the student leaders, for the most part, weren't thinking that way. At the risk of generalizing, they weren't particularly interested in dialogue. They were young and idealistic, and they wanted all or nothing. Rather than negotiate, they announced a round of even more radical tactics designed to regain momentum and reengage the masses in their cause: they would go on a hunger strike.

The strike began on May 13. The timing wasn't incidental, as the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was scheduled to land in Beijing two days later on a visit that was sure to include the city's epicenter, Tiananmen Square. And again, it was soon obvious that the government was deeply interested in compromise: the state-run media continued to hold its nose and cover the hunger strike favorably, censorship restrictions were loosened, and a handful of intellectuals were given permission to express their critical views in a large national newspaper. This was a far cry from the free press we value in the West, but by the standards of Communist parties around the world, it was a major concession. Taking appeasement a step further, a government representative named Yan Mingfu appeared in the square in person and offered himself as a willing hostage. The government, he said, was interested in compromise.

But still the student leaders refused to budge. It was democracy or bust. They were demanding "game over." But that's not how governments or video games operate. When Gorbachev landed the following day—launching the first Sino-Soviet summit in more than three decades—he was greeted in a ceremony held not in the square but at the airport. The movement's fate, to a large extent, was sealed: their goals were pure, but their failure to understand their challenge as a series of small acts rather than one cataclysmic showdown left them with little chance. Even when martial law was declared and various high-ranking army officials risked their careers and their safety to reach out to the student movement in one last-ditch effort to protect the kids, the movement remained obstinate. It didn't know how to play the game. It didn't know when to declare victory, and so it waited too long, only to be crushed.

Even if activists do everything right and have impeccable timing, there's still a chance that their

movements will collapse in on themselves. Plenty of people have started small, won the big victories, declared success at precisely the right moment, and then watched in horror as everything fell apart before their eyes. Usually this happens when people start to feel too confident in their victory, like a runner who is leading the race near the finish line and decides to savor his triumph, only to watch a rival sprint right past him and claim the blue ribbon. This is sort of what happened in Ukraine following its Orange Revolution of 2004.

In the months before that revolution, we Serbs had the honor of working with a number of brave young activists from that country who collectively called themselves Pora, which translates to "It's time" and echoed the urgency of Otpor!'s "He's finished" and "This is the year" campaigns. The leaders of Pora were a fantastic bunch, and they excelled at uniting people behind not just a symbol—the color orange—but also a single candidate for president, Viktor Yuschenko, a good-looking dude who wore symbolic orange sweaters when he spoke to voters. Pora did great stuff in Ukraine, pulling pillars to their side and organizing massive rallies that looked like parties. They made sure to have plenty of pretty girls handing orange flowers to bewildered riot policemen at their protests, played music, and got everyone on board with a promising vision of tomorrow, focusing on a free Ukraine that championed democracy, transparency, and basic rights.

Naturally, the ruling post-Communist regime was having a hard time dealing with all of this. The Ukrainian political elite, which was closely allied to Putin and Russia, needed to do something—anything—to save their own skins. That's because as the electoral showdown against Yuschenko's Kremlin-approved opponent Viktor Yanukovich neared, Pora was making great progress. Yuschenko represented a sunny sort of future, as he was personable and appealed to voters

looking to bring Ukraine out of the post-Soviet cold. Yanukovich, on the other hand, was a convicted criminal who had once spent four years in jail for robbery and assault.

But then something funny happened on the way to the forum. At first, Yuschenko thought he'd caught a stomach bug. He wasn't feeling well, but it really wasn't anything major. Sure, he was inconvenienced on the campaign trail—and, as anyone who's suffered from food poisoning can tell you, it was probably a little embarrassing—but there wasn't anything going on here that rose to the level of national importance. I mean, even the strongest leaders catch colds from time to time. But then it got ugly. Yuschenko's face started to swell up and blister. Then his skin turned a reptilian shade of green. Soon, before the horrified eyes of the world, Yuschenko, the photogenic opposition politician and the darling of the pro-democracy activists, had transformed into something that looked like Godzilla.

Eventually, the lab tests came in: Yuschenko had been poisoned with dioxin. Like the blue meth that Walter White cooks in *Breaking Bad,* the stuff that was used on Pora's candidate was so pure that it could only have been produced by someone with an incredibly specialized knowledge of chemistry. As it turned out, the whole episode had started after Yuschenko broke bread at a dinner with one of the heads of Ukraine's secret service. Ordinary Ukrainians started to wonder whether they were living in some bad spy movie, with the same KGB villains they remembered from their Soviet days. The activists from Pora were livid, and people were hoping that they'd still have a living candidate and not just a blessed martyr by the time the elections rolled around.

No need to worry, said Pora's political opponents. The problem, they claimed with sly smiles, was that Yuschenko had dined on trendy capitalist sushi and

cognac instead of more patriotic stuff like pork fat and vodka. Really, the thuggish Yanukovich supporters said, Yuschenko had only himself to blame. At that point, Pora saw the window of opportunity and pounced. This was cut-and-dried oppression, and they made it backfire spectacularly. Yuschenko's disfigured face became a new symbol of their movement, and Pora's energy and enthusiasm, combined with the whole range of nonviolent techniques they'd already employed to bring attention to the cause of Ukrainian democracy, ensured that there were constant marches, rallies, and protests in support of Yuschenko. Despite Yanukovich's best efforts to rig the election, Yuschenko, permanently scarred but on the mend, was eventually sworn in as Ukraine's new president.

It appeared to all observers that Pora had helped to bring democracy to Ukraine, and it was clear that the movement had achieved a major victory by keeping all of the pillars of power united behind a single, bankable candidate. It all made for a great story, and I wish I could tell you that today Ukraine is well on its way to ensuring that freedom and human rights are celebrated in the region. Sadly, I can't. While Pora's activists were so talented at getting people to work together during the tumultuous presidential election, they neglected to put those same skills to work once Yuschenko was in power. After Yuschenko had been inaugurated as president and the fun was over, everyone simply went home. The Pora activists didn't keep working to maintain political unity once all their revolutionary fervor died down, and it only took a few months after Yuschenko's election for his ruling coalition to develop major fissures. Almost immediately, Yuschenko squabbled with his prime minister, an equally charismatic figure by the name of Yulia Tymoshenko. The two of them could hardly agree on anything, their political allies all took different sides, and soon the bottom fell out from under the pro-democracy forces.

It continued to fall. It fell when Yuschenko's shattered coalition finally broke, paving the way for the very same Viktor Yanukovich to seize power once more. It fell when the emboldened Yanukovich set himself up as a miniature Putin, and then again when Tymoshenko found herself imprisoned for alleged corruption charges. If you looked at the Ukraine around 2011 or 2012, you could be forgiven for thinking that Pora had failed dramatically and that freedom was impossible.

But people power is like a genie—once you let it out of the bottle, it's never going back in. Ukraine is a case in point. After Yanukovich's reascension, the country went into a political funk, and few people had the energy or the wherewithal to do anything. Ukrainians remained apathetic even when Yanukovich presided over a massive system of cronyism and corruption. They sighed as the dictator suppressed civil liberties, and cursed as he—a public servant earning the equivalent of $2,000 a month for most of his life—built himself a $75 million estate with chandeliers that cost $100,000 each and installed a fully stocked private zoo on his property. All of that was certainly bad. But when Yanukovich signaled that he was breaking away from the European Union and toward Moscow's pull, the genie roared once again. Corruption, Ukrainians were willing to live with. Extravagance they could forgive, however begrudgingly. But for the dictator to take away their dream of joining up with the West, of being a normal nation engaged with the free world, or doing well, of living well, of having hope, all of the things that Pora had described a decade earlier that had gone into the "vision of tomorrow," all of that was a step too far. So, once again, the people took to the streets.

This movement, known as Euromaidan, is truly impressive. Its members struggled and were murdered in the streets of Kiev for that vision of tomorrow. Who could have imagined that the first people in history to

die for proudly waving the flag of the European Union would be Ukrainians, citizens of a country that isn't even a member of the EU? That's the power of a vision, and that's why the Euromaidan movement was so inspiring. No matter how much force the government used, no matter how many decrees it issued to keep the people down, no matter how much chatter Moscow produced on its official propaganda channels at home and on the television sets across the world—accusing protestors of all sorts of sinister motives—the people persevered. There's a simple reason for that, and it has a lot to do with Pora's so-called failure: when ordinary people get a taste of their own power, they aren't usually willing to return to a life of complacent docility for very long. They want to move up. They want to be free. Whether the activists in Kiev have learned from their past mistakes and will now be able to unite people for the long run, however, remains to be seen.

Hopefully, they will learn from history that it's critical to maintain unity in your movement even after you win what appears to be the big victory. Following Milošević's downfall in Serbia, Otpor! kept up the pressure on the system despite the fact that we'd won what many considered to be our big objective. Sure, Milošević had been knocked out of power, but his faction—though diminished—was still very much alive and kicking. And we also knew that there was a chance that Serbia's new leadership might find Milošević's old throne very comfortable and try to take some dictatorial powers for themselves. But we in Otpor! had prepared for that. We knew our goose egg was democracy, and that we still had a long way to go before we got there. So we plastered signs all over the country, informing the newly elected democratic government that the same people who had brought down Milošević were now keeping an eye on the new rulers, and that any attempt to bring back the old system would mean unleashing the same people power that had claimed the scalps of the

former regime. Otpor!'s old banners and graffiti were replaced by wheatpaste posters featuring bulldozers—which had become a symbol of the Serbian Revolution—with the words "There are 20,000 bulldozers in Serbia, and about 2 million potential drivers," while others simply read, "We are watching you!" The point of all this was to remind the newly installed post-Milošević government that Otpor!'s campaign was far from over. In other words, our work didn't end with Milošević's downfall. We were fighting for democracy, and we were planning to finish the fight that we'd started.

Whether planning a nonviolent movement or swinging a golf club, few things are as important as follow-through. Naturally, preventing counterrevolutionary coups, installing a democratic government, hosting free and fair elections, and building durable institutions are much less sexy than confronting a rabid dictator or easily lampooned mayor with a rollicking protest in the streets of a big city. Yet successful movements must have the patience to keep working hard even when the lights and cameras have moved on to the next big story.

Halfway into Serbia's second decade without Milošević, my country is hardly a Disneyland. But it is still a decently functioning democracy, and still very much the country that we were fighting for during the Otpor! days. That's because we knew what we wanted very early in the process of our movement, and we had a vision of tomorrow that defined our goose egg pretty clearly. We were asking for a democracy, for a country that was at peace with its neighbors, and for membership in the European Union. And today we're pretty much there. Nobody censors our media or beats protesters in the streets of Belgrade, we have cordial relationships with our former sworn enemies, and our politicians are committed, on paper, to getting us into the EU.

That's because even after Milošević was finished, Serbian activists never stopped fighting the small battles they could win. My close friend and personal mentor Zoran Djindjic became prime minister and committed himself to overturning oppressive laws from Milošević's time, bit by bit. Djindjic moved incrementally to introduce one small reform after another, as he knew that any fresh post-revolutionary government is, by its nature, a delicate flower. He didn't want to give anyone an opening to pluck it while it was still blooming. So although he moved decisively, he also moved slowly. As in Egypt, there were plenty of old regime loyalists out there waiting for him to overreach and do something stupid, and while obviously we didn't have a Muslim Brotherhood to contend with in Serbia, there were plenty of large criminal enterprises just looking to take advantage of the power vacuum that our victory against Milošević had created. In the end, Djindjic paid the supreme price for his efforts and was assassinated in a suspected mafia hit. That day—March 12, 2003—was the darkest of my life. But even though the country lost a great man, our democracy and the institutions Djindjic helped to strengthen endured. We Serbs had created something strong enough to survive even the catastrophe that befell us, and this, to me, is the real achievement of our revolution.

If you recall Gandhi's salt march, you'll remember that he worked in incremental steps and declared all his little victories along the way. That's because he understood the game of nonviolence instinctively. When his attempts to curry favor with the British Raj by highlighting India's loyalty to the crown soured, he needed a different entry point. Announcing a revolution, he knew, would most likely invite a major crackdown and produce nothing more substantial than a flare-up of patriotic enthusiasm followed by even stricter oppression—which is exactly the fate that befell the activists of Tiananmen Square. What Gandhi needed was

an easy opportunity to allow his followers to slowly and comfortably learn the rules of civil disobedience, hone their skills, and bolster their courage. He found all of that in salt.

The successful salt march, of course, didn't bring Gandhi's quest for Indian independence to fruition, and seventeen more years of civil disobedience would be necessary before His Majesty's servants handed over control of their most lucrative colony to its inhabitants. But those years were progressively easier for Gandhi. That's because he'd already been marked by the salt march as a leader who could finish what he started and who delivered results. For those reasons, he enjoyed unprecedented prestige among Indians. He wasn't just a moral authority. He wasn't just an advocate of good ideas and a giver of great speeches. He was—and you will pardon the highly technical terms here—a dude who knew how to get shit done.

And once you've gotten down all the basics, like defining your cause, coming up with your symbols, identifying the pillars of power, and making oppression backfire, knowing how to get shit done at the higher levels of nonviolent action means knowing when to declare victory and move on.

This is an art form at which Anna Hazare excels. Hazare is a spiritual disciple of Gandhi, an Indian activist who has had a highly unusual career. Born poor, he was taken by a relative to Mumbai, where he got a few years of education but had to drop out of school in the seventh grade once his relative ran out of money. Returning to his village, he found work as a pharmacist, organized a vigilante group to protect local farmers from their cruel and often violent landlords, and eventually joined the army. But through it all, he believed in nonviolence, and after coming home to his village once more he began crusading tirelessly to improve his and his neighbors' lives. He fought to ban alcohol—I know, I

know, I wouldn't be happy with that one either, but we must remember that the only people who can really know what will work for their societies and what won't are the ones who live there—as the effects of drinking were causing big problems in his village. Hazare also put together a grain bank to ensure that needy farmers would never go hungry. He helped form a charitable trust to empower others, and his efforts vastly improved education in the region, spurred the building of new schools, and, more incredibly, helped to successfully campaign for the abolition of the caste system, dramatically improving the fates of those deemed "untouchable." These victories taught Hazare an important lesson: like in Mike Tyson's Punch-Out, Angry Birds, or any other video game, the small and winnable early contests with clearly defined objectives will help you prepare for the next, and bigger, challenges to come.

By 2011, Hazare, now an elderly man, was ready for the biggest fight of his life: he would take on corruption, a vast and sprawling problem eternally paralyzing India's economy and society. In 2005, for example, a study conducted by Transparency International discovered that more than 62 percent of Indians admitted to paying bribes in order to ensure they received basic public services. Hazare wanted to stop all that, and his plan called for tougher punitive measures against officials found guilty of corruption as well as a system of powerful local and national ombudsmen authorized to act swiftly on citizens' behalf.

(illustration credit 10.2)

The government rejected Hazare's plan—it would be too politically complicated to carry out—and so on April 5, 2011, he began his hunger strike. "I will fast," he told a press conference, "until the [anti-corruption] bill is passed."

Hundreds joined Hazare in his fast, and hundreds of thousands tweeted and posted messages in his support on Facebook. Soon India's celebrities, from Bollywood stars to cricket players, joined the struggle. Hazare's message was simple enough—he didn't call for an immediate end to corruption, but just insisted that the legislature pass a bill. He was disciplined and concrete. And, like Gandhi, he was an admirable older gentleman who was supremely committed to his cause and who people knew could get results because he'd been victorious before. Soon, tens of thousands of supporters were demonstrating everywhere in India's largest cities. Five days later, the government surrendered, vowing to pass the bill.

Hazare was quick to declare victory, which was smart, but he did one more crucial thing. He realized that winning the battle didn't mean winning the war, and that, given some time, the decadent political system could easily slide back into chaos. Aware of this danger, Hazare kept up the pressure even after this big win. "The real fight begins now," he told his supporters. "We

have a lot of struggle ahead of us in drafting the new legislation. We have shown the world in just five days that we are united for the cause of the nation. The youth power in this movement is a sign of hope."

He was true to his word, and the government was true to its nature. When, a few months later, the government introduced a watered-down version of the bill, Hazare decried it as "a cruel joke." He promised another hunger strike, this time to the death, if necessary. Within hours, tens of thousands of people sent faxes to the government in support of Hazare's call. In Mumbai, the taxis all went on a day-long strike in solidarity with his demands. Before he could even begin his hunger strike, though, Hazare was arrested as a result of the illegal gatherings and sent to jail.

Beginning his hunger strike from his cell, Hazare soon inspired massive support, and within hours the government agreed to release him from prison. Oppression had backfired. Ever the master tactician, however, Hazare refused to leave his cell unless he was permitted to practice his strike in the public grounds he had previously selected for the occasion. Several days and outpours of affirmation later, Hazare won again, and was escorted to his chosen location to continue his fast. As he wasted away, the thousands who came to support Hazare during this time couldn't help but notice the contradiction between his weakened body and resolute spirit. Again and again, he declared that he would die if necessary but that he and his followers would never give up the struggle.

All over India, young men took to wearing the *topi*, the traditional white cap that was Hazare's signature look. Hazare's supporters also came up with a short chant, declaring, "I am Anna," which they promised to sing loudly and publicly anytime a policeman or other official brazenly asked them for a bribe.

Finally, twelve days after he had begun, having lost nearly seventeen pounds, dehydrated and frail, Hazare received the news that the government was once again capitulating to his demands and would revise the bill accordingly. Sitting on a chair, an enormous banner featuring Gandhi's face behind him, Hazare declared his final victory. "I feel this is the country's victory," he said. It was, but only because Hazare knew to call his victories at the right moments and kept up the pressure until he'd finished the fight that he started.

Social changes like the ones Hazare won in India and what we achieved in Serbia aren't easy to pull off. Causes like democracy, human rights, and transparency are slow-growing crops that require hard work, clear strategies, and strong civil institutions in order to blossom and survive. It's your responsibility as an activist to finish what you start, because, as we see all around the world, revolutions without proper resolutions can be just as bad as what came before them. You must ensure that whatever changes you bring about are going to be durable and stable. There are some obvious things you should be cautious of, like proclaiming "game over" too early, not recognizing victories when they are handed to you, or frittering away your hard-won unity on "family" squabbles and political posturing. And although it can be tempting, be careful not to fall in love too easily with the new elites and heroes your movement may bring to prominence. Corruption and the abuse of newfound power can mar the positive achievements of even the best-run nonviolent revolutions, and many times a dictator's old shoes will seem very comfortable to the new inhabitants of his palace. Ten years after the Georgian activists of Kmara adopted the clenched-fist logo of Otpor! and ushered in their country's Rose Revolution in 2003, Mikheil Saakashvili—the promising young leader who came to power determined to set the former Soviet state onto the path of human rights and democracy—was

defeated in presidential elections after being accused of using the same sorts of authoritarian tactics that his dictatorial predecessors had relied on.

But as someone who has been part of a movement that did succeed in bringing real change to my country, I promise you that it is possible to make a lasting difference in this world. Is Serbia the best place in the world to live today? Definitely not: we have a struggling economy, an ancient and dysfunctional education system, and environmental habits that are absolutely medieval, and we will be burdened with an awful reputation in the international community for a long time to come thanks to Milošević's crimes against humanity. In Belgrade and elsewhere, there's high unemployment and lots of corruption. But we do have hope for the future, a relatively open media, and democratic institutions that allow us to elect our leaders and hold them accountable for whatever they do and do not deliver. And, most of all, we have the self-confidence that comes from having achieved a successful nonviolent revolution. There's a great sense of empowerment that arises from being able to improve the lives of everyone in your society, and that's a feeling that all good activists share. It's also one that stems from a simple, serendipitous thought, one that at some time or another has inspired plenty of people to take a stand for something they believe in: the realization that it was up to them to make a difference. They knew, as I hope you do as well, that it has to be you.

(illustration credit 10.3)

(illustration credit 11.1)

CHAPTER XI

It Had to Be You

As anyone who has ever enjoyed a good thriller or who as a child munched quickly through a plate of soggy broccoli and rubbery chicken just to get to dessert already knows, it's a good idea to save the best for last. And so, having told you about Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., having talked a bit about the uprisings in Egypt and Burma and the Maldives, and having shared with you some of my own experiences in helping to bring down the murderous Slobodan Milošević, I want to tell you about another type of hero, humble but no less inspirational. Let's call our hypothetical protagonist Kathy. To be candid, there's nothing so special about our Kathy. You can imagine her existing in any town in the United States, and I'm piecing together her story from anecdotes and examples that have been shared with me by plenty of part-time suburban American activists.

Now, Kathy is a perfectly nice, perfectly ordinary person with a good job and three kids and a split-level house, the kind of person who is lovely but not particularly noticeable. She tries to live a normal, happy, and well-balanced life, and until recently she had never considered—let alone participated in—any sort of activism in her life. Too young to be a part of the 1960s generation, she grew up believing that politics were dirty, that systems were corrupt, and that people were more or less helpless and under the thumb of big government and big corporations. Therefore the best thing to do was to mind her own business and focus on the things she could control. Kathy had always tried to

avoid, as plenty of us do, those pesky people handing out pamphlets outside the supermarket, campaigning for some cause or candidate or another. She applauded their passion but wanted nothing to do with them. She just wanted to be left alone.

And then came the rezoning.

As usually happens with most matters pertaining to local government, most of Kathy's neighbors didn't pay any attention to this particular resolution when it was endorsed by the city council. Actually, neither did Kathy. But within a few weeks, it was being talked about everywhere—she heard about it at the gas station, her husband's co-workers were debating it, and signs opposing it were popping up everywhere. The large, empty lot down the road from her children's middle school would soon be taken over, courtesy of some creative rezoning, by a gigantic shopping mall. It's the type of thing that happens in communities all across America. And you don't need to be an urban planner to know that having a mall next door to a school means more traffic, more potential accidents, and all sorts of detrimental influences and distractions that are usually kept far away from schools, for good reasons. The city council, however, with the enthusiastic encouragement of a few local developers, ignored all that and cleared the way for construction to begin.

Concerned, Kathy did everything she thought she was supposed to do. She called a few city council members and left messages with their secretaries; of course she never heard back. She wrote a letter to the local newspaper; it ran, but nothing happened. She spoke to her friends on the local school board, and together they wrote a sternly worded letter to the mayor; they received a polite answer promising he'd look into the matter, but he never did. If you've ever been involved in any sort of neighborhood activism, I'm sure this all sounds very familiar.

Soon the mall became all Kathy and her friends could talk about. It wasn't just the safety issue; having heavy traffic nearby presented some challenges, true, but nothing that a few well-placed speed bumps or traffic lights couldn't solve. The real issue was this terrible feeling that people with a lot of money and friends in city hall could just waltz in, call the shots, and leave ordinary citizens like her—the parents who carpooled their kids to school every morning, ran bake sales to keep the school well maintained, and saw the school community as an integral part of their lives—out of the picture. Quietly at first, and more angrily as the weeks went by, Kathy and her friends agreed that it was time to take more serious action. Like all battles worth fighting, this one would take time and require a host of tactics. Kathy and her friends, for example, realized that the town administration wasn't interested in listening to the parents whose kids went to the school. They just weren't important enough, she figured, and could easily be dismissed by the mayor as typical NIMBY types—a creature as common to the suburbs as pigeons in the city. But Kathy was smart. She knew how to identify the pillars of power.

She and her friends recognized that theirs was a God-fearing town, filled with good churchgoing folk who took their religion seriously; in fact, the town's churches served as centers of civic life. Kathy and her allies had already resigned themselves to the fact that the mayor wasn't interested in what the small folks had to say. And the developers weren't going to budge as long as there was money for them to make. But there are some forces that not even the most resolute town government can ignore, and so Kathy enlisted the local clergy to get the wrath of God on her side. She convinced a local priest to write a strongly worded letter to the mayor. The mayor wasn't stupid, and once he began to sense a divine coalition building against him, he responded to the protests and promised to look into the rezoning. Because

it signaled a shift in one of the most critical pillars of the mayor's power, this letter proved more effective than all the watercooler gossip, the lawn signs, and the angry emails from concerned parents put together.

It was now three months after the mayor first ignored Kathy, but he finally started to backpedal and promised to hold another public hearing to reconsider the plan. Because Kathy appeared to be getting results, everyone soon wanted to be part of her crew of suburban activists, and even the town's most apathetic residents couldn't help but feel that they were the cool underdogs fighting the good fight. The evening of the public hearing, the hall was overflowing. Most people in attendance had come simply because they didn't want to feel as if they were missing the moment. Kathy and her friends didn't disappoint: their speeches weren't the stuff of great oration—Kathy, for all her virtues, was no Churchill—but they were heartfelt, genuine, and deeply touching. By the end of the meeting, it was clear that the rezoning had to be rolled back. A few weeks later, it was. Aware of the importance of declaring their victory, Kathy and her co-conspirators wrote a very gracious public letter to the mayor, thanked him for doing the right thing, and invited him to visit the school. Of course, he came. She had won real influence in her small town, and managed to win big for her community.

I've met plenty of Kathy-type people in my travels through the States, and without fail their stories are the ones that bring the widest smiles to my face. True, toppling Mubarak or Milošević is an amazing achievement, but you don't have to be groaning under a dictatorship to apply the principles of people power; they are universal, and they apply no matter who you are and what your problem may be.

If you still have doubts about the power of ordinary hobbits like our good friend Kathy, consider the residents of Kibera. The biggest slum in Nairobi, Kenya

—and by some accounts the largest slum in the world, with as many as five million people huddling together in squalor—Kibera presented its residents with all the threats you'd expect to find in one of the world's worst hellholes. The landscape was terrifying. There was Jamhuri Park, where the bushes were thick and the trees cast a perpetual shadow, making it a favorite spot for local rapists. Then you had the Nairobi dam, which served as a Holiday Inn for bandits, and if you walked down the central Karanja Road on payday, you were almost certain to be robbed. And then there were the flying toilets. Since there wasn't a widespread or efficient sewer system in the Kibera slum, many residents were forced to do their business in ditches along the streets. But at night, when it was too dangerous for people to dart out of their homes even for a minute in order to relieve themselves, Kiberans simply went to the bathroom in a plastic bag, tied it up, and tossed it out the window: a flying toilet. Needless to say, there were plastic bags everywhere. Kibera, as you could imagine, was not an easy place to live in. In order to survive, you needed to really know your way around.

Sadly, the NGOs who set out to help the slum's residents did not. They had the best intentions in the world, but they comprised mainly foreigners or more fortunate Kenyans. The help these outsiders provided was well received, but it didn't solve any real problems. Sure, they could set up some latrines and reduce the number of flying toilets. But the fundamentals of the slum weren't effectively addressed. Things started to change only when the community decided to work together. Kibera's residents united themselves and began with simple tasks. The first was to map out their neighborhoods. A map of the slum, after all, could serve as a useful tool to allow people to share their knowledge and alert each other to the perils and opportunities that surrounded them. It was a way for people to pool their street smarts. And it wasn't too difficult to do. Because

mapping these days is made easy by technology, and because technology is much more accessible to the young, a group of teenagers armed with GPS devices went out to collect data, walking around the neighborhood and registering everything they saw under four categories: safety/vulnerability, health services, informal education, and water/sanitation. When they were finished, they printed their map on cheap paper and handed it out to their neighbors, along with pencils and tracing paper. To their delight, many people began adding their own spots to the maps, and soon their database grew to five hundred data points and then to hundreds and hundreds more. Taking note of the project, the United Nation Children's Fund got involved and doled out some cash. Soon every resident of Kibera could receive map-related alerts via text messages sent directly to their cell phones, a service that helped people stay clear of everyday crime and outbreaks of violence in the neighborhood. Block by block, district by district, the Kiberans were reclaiming their community.

The young men and women in Kibera are prime examples of people power harnessed to great use. Unlike many of the other examples in this book, these guys didn't seek out corrupt enemies to overthrow or freedoms to win. They simply worked with one another to bring a sense of safety to their friends and families. That's always a strong vision of tomorrow.

Although the residents of the Kibera slum were disappointed in their government and disillusioned by their institutions, they still believed that they had the ability to make positive changes on their own. They promoted their vision and picked the battles they could win. They created enthusiasm and used creativity to build numbers. Making a map isn't something momentous like toppling a dictatorship, and it's probably not something that will make the evening news. But by engaging with their neighbors, the

Kiberans improved the daily lives of everybody who lived in the area, and if activists in an impoverished African slum could make a difference, so can you.

As you set out on your quest, you need to accept the fact that most often there won't be any cavalry riding to the rescue. There won't be somebody else who is bigger, braver, or better-looking than you descending from Mount Olympus to solve your problems. This is yet another lesson I learned from Tolkien: it has to be you. When your movement is just beginning to form, the wizards, strongmen, stubborn dwarfs, and beautiful elves of this world will usually not be willing to help you. You're going to be alone. In Serbia, a country of notoriously slow learners, it took us the better part of ten years to understand that lesson and realize that Otpor! needed to start taking on Milošević by itself. The politicians had failed us, the international community was clueless, and the opposition was a mess. Neither Gandalf nor E.T. was going to put an end to the dictatorship for us, and our problem wasn't going to solve itself. It was up to us to figure out how to forge our own holy trinity of unity, planning, and nonviolent discipline in order to confront the dictator.

More than that, though, Otpor! succeeded because it had an abundance of enthusiasm and creativity—two characteristics that must be in the hearts and minds of you and all those who are working with you. At CANVAS, we respond to activists who approach us looking for concrete advice or specific steps to take by telling them that there is nothing we can do for them. While we can teach the basic principles and share some nonviolent techniques that have worked in the past, the creative solutions to whatever problems people are facing in any society must come from within that society. We tell our activists to listen to their own "rebel hearts" and learn to rely on themselves. Foreign consultants—and I occasionally count myself in this

bunch—have a reputation for acting, in the immortal words of Colonel Bob, “like sons of bitches with fancy suitcases from out of town.” When it comes down to it, ordinary people like the hypothetical Kathy and the very real Kiberans have far better records at changing the world than any consultant or outside advisor will ever have.

And so, as this book comes to a close, let me spoil the ending a little bit: there’s a right way and a wrong way to read it. The wrong way is to skim it like some adventure story, enjoying the tales of inspiring and brave people in remote corners of the world and imagining being some heroic leader yourself instead of just a regular person with no great cause to champion. The right way to read it is to take the principles I’ve written about as perennial advice for life, and seek to apply them in all of life’s circumstances. While you were reading this book, I hope you thought about issues in the world that interest you. Whether these are really big and matter to everybody, like social injustice, or something that only affects a few people in your neighborhood, like too much dog shit on the streets, I hope you are already beginning to imagine how your society can be improved through committed nonviolent activism.

If you walk away from this book with nothing else, please remember this: life is much more meaningful—and also much more fun—when you take charge and act. It’s sad to realize how much of modern life is designed to lull us into being comfortably numb; we’re expected to go about doing what we’re told because it’s easy. But if you’re anything like Duda, Ana, Mohammed Adel, Sandra, Cecilia, Slobo, Sinisa, Misko, Breza, Rasko, Imran Zahir, Harvey Milk, Itzik Alrov, Andy Bichlbaum, Rachel Hope, Chris Nahum, Manal al-Sharif, our young friends from Kibera, or our Georgian comrades Nini or Georgi, you’ll find sitting still to be a difficult thing to

do. And while today we're fortunate enough to have at our disposal amazing technologies that make it easy for anyone to hop right into the activist lifestyle—things like cellular phones, social networks, and omnipresent cameras—it's important to remember that plenty of movements existed before those tools were even dreamed of, and plenty of causes that relied too heavily on technology have failed miserably.

If you Google "Facebook and Twitter revolutions" you will see how the media have covered the last few years of protests—ranging from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street—as if contemporary activism is just some new feature on a smartphone or a cool app to be downloaded. That's why people like Turkey's prime minister feel comfortable going on television and telling his people that the marches in the streets of Istanbul are little more than a flash mob organized through Twitter. It's a false narrative but a commonly repeated one. Unfortunately, this unhealthy obsession with technology leads some to believe that all that's needed to change the world is a Facebook group and a freewheeling leaderless protest. Unfortunately, as we've seen, that's not the way to win. Despite the millions of hits that the "Kony 2012" video scored on YouTube, Joseph Kony is still rampaging through the jungles of Africa. Nothing there has changed.

The important thing for activists to realize is that everything comes down to community. It's always about people. The ideas in this book are just a practical framework; they're useless without a mind determined to make a difference and a heart that believes that making that difference is possible. Speaking from personal experience, and on behalf of all the nobodies who followed this sensible path to spectacular resuits, I swear that there is no more fulfilling or happier way to live than to take a stand for something you think is

right. Even the smallest creatures have the power to change the world.

There are only a few pages left, and I hope you'll indulge me and let me share one last story. When I was a just a goofy adolescent in the 1980s, way before I ever thought about politics, pillars, or Gene Sharp's theories of nonviolent activism, I spent my days strumming my guitar and idolizing my older brother Igor. And it's not hard to see why. When I was just a munchkin, Igor was cool, he had a band, and his taste in music was respected in all the right circles. He is eleven years older than me, and with his looks and attitude my brother played the role of a sort of local Jim Kerr from Simple Minds. Needless to say, all the girls in the hip Belgrade scene loved him, and I desperately wanted to follow his example. Igor correctly assumed that the reason I had been aping his music and style was simply to be as adored as he was, and one day he sat me down and taught me a lesson about the real reason music is so important in the world. Actually, it wasn't much of a lesson. He just handed me a Peter Gabriel record and told me to listen to "Biko," the song about the murdered black South African activist who gave his life to fight against apartheid. This, Igor explained, was why I should be making music. Not for the girls, not for the crowds, but for the chance to make a positive impact. When I played that record and heard Peter Gabriel draw out each syllable of Biko's name like some sort of plaintive wail, I knew that Igor was right. This was more important than all that other stuff. This was what I wanted to be a part of. I wanted to make things better for people.

On October, 5, 2013, more than three decades after the release of "Biko" and on the anniversary of Serbia's revolution against Slobodan Milošević, Peter Gabriel came to Belgrade to perform as part of his European tour. My brother Igor now lives abroad, so he couldn't

be there, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world, and neither would my wife, Masha, or Duda, or the rest of my CANVAS crew. The concert was amazing. We were among a crowd of five thousand people who hung on every note and listened spellbound to every lyric. In the course of my work and travels, I've been fortunate enough to meet a few of my heroes and have always prided myself on my ability to keep cool around the big shots of the world. Some of the people I've worked with have gone on to be the democratically elected leaders of their newly free countries, and I've got plenty of photos of myself with people I've long admired pinned to my wall. But nothing in my life prepared me for what happened at the end of Peter Gabriel's concert in Belgrade that night.

After he finished his set and took his bow, he returned to the stage as an ethereal red light bathed the arena. At this point, all of his supporting musicians had left except for Manu Katché, the lone drummer, who had stayed put and was now slowly beating his instrument. Nobody really knew what was happening, but then Peter Gabriel, the man whose music had made me decide to do something with my life, made his way to the microphone and addressed the crowd.

"Thirteen years ago to this day," he began, "you had young people in this country that had the courage to stand up for the rights of the people, and since then, they've been teaching people around the world what they learned and their techniques with CANVAS. But there are young people in many countries now around the world who still have to find the courage to stand up for what they believe in, to fight what they know is wrong, and to defend the rights of their people. One such young person did exactly this in South Africa, and it cost him his life. His name is Steven Biko."

And with that, his band came back and they played the song. I was dumbstruck—completely at a loss for

words. My knees started to shake. Masha clutched me close to her, probably because she knew that I was about to collapse into a puddle on the floor. She knew more than anyone how much what Peter Gabriel had just said and that song meant to me. Finally, when Peter Gabriel got to the line “And the eyes of the world are watching now,” he raised his clenched fist as high as he could and gave the crowd the old Otpor! salute. People went crazy, raising their fists in return and singing along with the chorus. When it was all over, and just before he left the stage for the last time, Gabriel had one final message to share with the audience.

(illustration credit 11.2)

“Whatever happens from here,” he said, “is up to you.”

And then he turned the microphone toward the crowd and walked away.

Before We Say Goodbye

If you have read this book all the way through, I see only two possibilities. The first is that you are my wife, in which case, Masha, I love you very much and am very grateful for your support and for putting up with all my antics. The second is that you are interested in bringing about positive changes in your community, and if that's the case, then I think a few last words are necessary.

Traditionally, at the end of a book like this one, you will find some burst of optimism, some encouraging words to send you on your way into your own movement, your own cause, your own challenge. But I'm a Serb. We don't do optimism, and encouraging words don't come easily to a people whose history is divided into long stretches of war separated by shorter periods of waiting for war. Instead, then, I'll leave you with a few bits of hard-earned wisdom.

The first is that luck matters. The principles detailed in this book, from the grand strategies to the minute tactics, are tried and true, but we are all human beings, and being human means that something completely random and crazy and unpredictable can come along and either catapult you to glory or make all of your well-laid plans obsolete. I've seen this happen plenty of times: the perfectly organized march that drew only five activists because it coincided with an important soccer match, say, or the movement no one expected would go very far until its messages or its personalities, for some reason, captured the public imagination. If you are itching to get busy putting the principles detailed in this

book into practice, remember that the greatest thinker of them all, a guy named Murphy, got it exactly right when he observed that everything that can go wrong will go wrong. To make sure you're not a victim of Murphy's Law, do these two simple things. First, do your homework and be as meticulous as you can: make mental lists and charts and avoid leaving anything to chance whenever possible. Second, be serene and learn to accept setbacks as nothing more than a part of the back-and-forth of making a difference.

But whereas you can't control luck, you can certainly control—or at the very least try to reshape—community. And people are really what this game is all about. Whether you're standing in front of a roomful of strangers and passionately arguing your point, distributing cheap leaflets on your campus, or marching in the streets while policemen look menacingly on—whenever you are taking risks, opposing oppression, and entering the fray not as an observer but as a participant—at some point or another you are going to be very, very scared. You can be the toughest dude alive, and yet you can be sure that there will come a time when you too will feel frightened, sad, or overwhelmed. It's the nature of the beast: when you take big, audacious risks and try to implement big, sweeping changes, you meet big, determined opposition. If you try to confront it alone, if you never share your frustrations and your joys with your friends, you will never achieve much. I've spent more than a decade meeting troublemakers and revolutionaries, and these guys are among the toughest people on the planet. Yet I've seen them break when they tried to do everything by themselves. People power is a team sport.

And a team, any team, needs all sorts of players. It would be a shame to end this book without turning again to my beloved *Lord of the Rings*. At the core of that story is a bunch of committed characters sallying forth

on an unlikely and dangerous quest, and part of what's so interesting about them is that they are all different. If I had written the book, it would probably be filled with a bunch of tall, ridiculously good-looking swordsmen, a kind of fantasy-world G.I. Joe team going out there into Middle Earth and kicking some orc butt. But Tolkien was smarter than I am; his gang includes both strong and weak people, and creatures who aren't even people at all, including elves and dwarves. His band was made up of the tiny and the tall, the stubborn and the loyal. He understood that very complex tasks—like fighting a powerful evil wizard or a Serbian dictator—require many skills and talents, and that those varied attributes rarely reside in one person. With people power, then, just like with a stock portfolio, the key is to diversify. Rather than seeking out just the people who are like you, or the people you think are cool, or the people who answer any sort of narrow description, try to anticipate your needs and staff your movement accordingly. If you have in mind a string of street performances to raise awareness, for example, it may be time to befriend a bunch of jugglers, mimes, and puppeteers. If you are thinking of some sort of online action, grab a few bottles of Mountain Dew Code Red and suck up to some programmers. If you want to become media darlings, recruit a few friends with experience in writing and journalism. Find talented graphic designers like my friend Duda and listen to their ideas. The bigger and more colorful your coalition, the stronger your chances of success.

It is my hope that this book will be not just a simple guide for nonviolent activists but also proof that the smallest creatures, the simple hobbits, can stand face-to-face with powerful forces and, relying on their creativity, dedication, and courage, change the world for the better. In real life, as opposed to Middle Earth, the journey never ends. Years of working with activists around the world have taught me that change always

comes on a scale. You organized a prank and got some people to pay attention? You still need to build a movement. You built a massive popular movement? You still have a dictator to contend with. You toppled the dictator? It's time to roll up your sleeves and get to work on securing democracy.

The ideas in this book, then, are best understood not as the blueprint for a limited, one-time campaign but as the guideposts for a life of ongoing civic and social engagement. They are meant to give you not only the tools but also, and more important, the confidence to approach life a different way and the understanding that the greatest changes, the ones that are most far-reaching and long-lasting, are never achieved by armies and tanks and cruise missiles or by well-paid consultants with their sharp suits and leather briefcases. Rather, lasting change comes from the tired woman who refuses to give up her seat on the bus, a canny camera store owner who finds his way to the city council, or a scrawny bald little Indian dude who goes hungry for his cause and wears simple clothes that he makes himself. These heroes—Rosa Parks, Harvey Milk, Gandhi, and others—are revered not because they are so special but because they are utterly ordinary. They did nothing that any of us can't do. The only reason they're enshrined in history is because, unlike so many of us, they had the courage to act up and the smarts to do it right.

There is a false notion that only the elites in our societies matter and that all change, progress, or setbacks emanate magically from within their dark or greedy souls. You can sense this awe and respect for the powerful any time you walk past a magazine stand. Who are on all those covers? It's always the richest businessmen, the most famous actors, the fastest cars, and the girls with the biggest boobs. Don't even get me started on those muscle magazines! This world we live in worships and respects the strong and the mighty. It's

an unfortunate fact of life that nobody gives enough credit to the weak and the humble. But, as we have learned, even the smallest creature can change the world.

In your travels you will meet plenty of people who will doubt that one person can make a difference. There are those who would rather put their faith in strong armies, charismatic leaders, and large corporations. There are others—including most dictators and plenty of people on the far left—who will choose to see conspiracies at every turn. To these ladies and gentlemen, it's always the CIA, the NSA, the WTO, or the Illuminati that are behind everything that happens on the planet. These types have called CANVAS and yours truly an American stooge, a tool of George Soros and the Bilderberg Group, a Serbian agent, and much worse. Whether you're catching flak from people on Twitter or from the state-run media outlets of the world's autocracies—channels like the Kremlin's Russia Today or the Saudi, Iranian, and Venezuelan news agencies—just try to be patient and realize that it's all part of the game.

The problem is that plenty of people, no matter their political position, suffer from a pervasive sense that only big governments or institutions matter in this world. In your career as an activist, people will either doubt your ability to achieve anything as an individual or, if they see you succeeding, insist that you must be a puppet for larger, more-sinister forces. In both cases they'll really just be telling you that they don't believe in their own ability to make a difference. Do them a favor and prove them wrong.

I hope this little book has taken care of conveying some of the best principles and examples those of us engaged in nonviolent action have been sharing for decades. The courage part, however, is all you. I can't tell you how to be brave, but I can tell you that you're

never alone. My email address—my personal one that I check regularly myself—is psrdja@gmail.com, and anytime you want to drop me a note, ask me a question, seek a piece of CANVAS wisdom, or even just say hello, I'm here for you.

So take care and take charge, and know that even if you fail, at least you'll be among those few and fortunate who, like Tolkien's brave hobbits, emerged from the Shire and tried to do the right thing. Somebody needs to take that ring to Mordor, after all. It might as well be you.

Be safe, dream big, and please keep in touch.

This book is dedicated to my friends, who trusted and supported my crazy mission working with trouble makers across the globe, and to my little son, Moma, for whom I selfishly hope we can leave a better world.

Acknowledgments

With any big project, it's both hard and humbling to give proper credit to the people who have taken the time to lend a helping hand or a thoughtful ear. With that said, I owe a big thank-you to my friends and colleagues around the world, people with whom I've shared challenges, risks, and all sorts of good times. My love and gratefulness go to our CANVAS team in Belgrade—Boka, Breza, Marcella, Natasa, Slobo, Jelena, Sandra, Misko, Rasko, and Sinisa—and also to my dear friends Ana, Duda, Imran, K2, Giorgi, Nini, Cecilia, Sara, Maxim, Husam, and all the others whose names I can't mention who are working every day to make the world a better place for themselves and their neighbors.

The number of people and organizations who have helped to share the message of nonviolent struggle and who have inspired me would probably fill this entire book, so forgive me for the relative brevity of this list. A million thanks to Master Gene, Colonel Bob, Zoran Djindic, Jamilla, Ricken, Tina Rosenberg, Jannine Di Giovanni, Will Dobson, Luiza Otriz, Dough and Charlie, Lorraine and Jared, Thor and Alex, Andrew and Emma, the Riahi brothers, John Jackson, Liel, John Gould and Muneer. Having you all in my life is such a blessing. And to Paz, for putting up with Matt during this process, muchas gracias. In all his journeys he has never seen a stranger animal, nor encountered such a lovely pumpkin.

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From the beginning of this literary journey, my agent, Anne Edelstein, was a tireless advocate and guide, and these pages wouldn't make nearly as much sense as they do if it wasn't for my editor, Cindy Spiegel, whose careful eye and uncommon common sense helped to shape this book. Thank you both for your indulgence and most important, your faith in this project.

Last, I proudly stand in the long shadow cast by the brave people who are engaged in nonviolent struggles, large or small, in every corner of the world. My thoughts are with Mohammed Adel, the leader of Egypt's April 6th movement who has been imprisoned since organizing pro-democracy protests in the winter of 2013.

Martin Luther King, Jr., reminded us of the words of an earlier American thinker when he said that the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. May that ever be so.

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