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The Nation

## How Empires Fall (Including the American One)

Andy Kroll

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When Jonathan Schell's [The Unconquerable World](#), a meditation on the history and power of nonviolent action, was published in 2003, the timing could not have been worse. Americans were at war — and success was in the air. U.S. troops had invaded Iraq and taken Baghdad ("[mission accomplished](#)") only months earlier, and had already spent more than a year fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. Schell's book earned a handful of glowing reviews, and then vanished from the public debate as the bombs scorched Iraq and the body count began to mount.

Now, *The Unconquerable World's* animating message — that, in the age of nuclear weaponry, nonviolent action is the mightiest of forces, one capable of toppling even the greatest of empires — has undergone a renaissance of sorts. In December 2010, the self-immolation of a [young Tunisian street vendor](#) triggered a wave of popular and, in many cases, nonviolent uprisings across the Middle East, felling such autocrats as Tunisia's Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in mere weeks. Occupations, marches, and protests of all sorts spread like brushfire across Europe, from England to Spain to Greece, and later Moscow, and even as far as [Madison, Wisconsin](#). And then, of course, there were the artists, students, and activists who, last September, heard the call to "occupy Wall Street" and ignited a national movement with little more than tents, signs, and voices on a strip of stone and earth in lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park.

You might say that Schell, a former *New Yorker* staff writer renowned for [his work on nuclear weapons](#) and disarmament (his 1981 book [The Fate of the Earth](#) was a best-seller and instant

classic), prophesied Occupy and the Arab Spring — without even knowing it. He admits to being as surprised as anyone about the wave of nonviolent action that swept the world in 2011, but those who had read [Unconquerable World](#) would have found themselves uncannily well prepared for the birth of a planet of protest whenever it happened.

That book remains the ideal companion volume for the Occupiers and Egyptian revolutionaries, as well as their Spanish, Russian, Chilean, and other counterparts. Schell traces the birth of nonviolent action to Gandhi's sit-in at Johannesburg's Empire Theater in 1906, and continues through the twentieth century, all the while forcing you to rethink everything you thought you knew about what he calls "the war system" and its limits, as well as protests and rebellions of every sort, and the course of empire.

One afternoon in January, I met Schell, now the *Nation's* peace and disarmament correspondent, in his office at the [Nation Institute](#), where he's a fellow, a few blocks from Union Square in Manhattan. It was a bright space, and for a writer, surprisingly clean and uncluttered. A Mac laptop sat opened on his desk, as if I'd walked in mid-sentence. Various editions of Schell's books, including his Vietnam War reportage [The Village of Ben Suc](#), were nestled into the bookshelves among titles popular and obscure. I settled into an empty chair next to Schell, who wore a jacket and khakis, and started my recorder. Soft-spoken and articulate, he described the world as elegantly in person as he does in his writing.

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**Andy Kroll:** You've written a lot before on the nuclear problem, and one feels that throughout the book. But *The Unconquerable World* also stands on its own as something completely original. How did you come to write this book?

**Jonathan Schell:** It was a long time in the making. The initial germ was born toward the end of the 1980s when I began to notice that the great empires of the world were failing. I'd been a reporter in the Vietnam War, so I'd seen the United States unable to have its way in a small, third world country. A similar sort of thing happened in Afghanistan with the Soviet Union. And then of course, there was the big one, the revolutions in Eastern Europe against the Soviet Union.

I began to think about the fortunes of empire more broadly. Of course, the British Empire had already gone under the waves of history, as had all the other European empires. And when you stopped to think about it, you saw that all the empires, with the possible exception of the American one, were disintegrating or had disintegrated. It seemed there was something in this world that did not love an empire. I began to wonder what exactly that was. Specifically, why were nations and empires that wielded overwhelmingly superior force unable to defeat powers that were incomparably weaker in a military sense?

Whatever that something was, it had to do with the superiority of political power over military power. I saw that superiority in action on the ground as a reporter for the *New Yorker* in Vietnam starting way back in 1966, 1967. Actually, the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese understood this, and if you read their documents, they were incessantly saying "politics" was primary, that war was only the continuation of politics.

**AK:** As you say in the book, they sounded eerily like Carl von Clausewitz, the famed Prussian war philosopher of the eighteenth century.

**Schell:** Yes exactly, because they knew that the heart of their strength was their victory in the department of hearts and minds. Eventually, the U.S. military learned that as well. I remember a Marine commandant, "Brute" Krulak, who said the United States could win every battle until kingdom come — and it *was* winning almost every battle — and still lose the war. And it did lose the war. That was what I saw in Vietnam: the United States winning and winning and winning until it lost. It won its way to defeat.

Then there was the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland. I had friends, Irena and Jan Gross, who had been kicked out of Poland in 1968 for being dissidents and for being Jewish (thanks to an anti-Semitic campaign of that moment). Even if there were sparks of rebellion in Poland, it seemed the definition of noble futility: to be up against a government backed by the Polish secret police, and the whole repressive apparatus of the Soviet Union — the Red Army, the KGB, a nuclear arsenal. What did the rebels have to work with? They weren't even using guns. They were just writing fliers and demonstrating in the street and sometimes occupying a factory. It looked like the very definition of a lost cause.

Yet, as the years went by, I began see some of the names of people Irena and Jan had been contacting in the papers. They'd been sending packages of crackers and cheese and contraband literature to someone called Adam Michnik and someone called Jacek Kuroń — who turned out to be kingpins in the precursor movement to Solidarity and then in Solidarity itself.

And when Solidarity bloomed, being entirely nonviolent, it shed new light on the question I'd been asking myself: What was this something that overmatched superior violence?

Solidarity exhibited another version of political power, an entirely nonviolent kind. From there, I was led to see that there were forms of nonviolent action that could unravel and topple the most violent forms of government ever conceived — namely, the totalitarian. This went entirely against the conventional wisdom of political science, which taught that force is the *ultima ratio*, the final arbiter; that if you had superior weaponry and superior military power you were the winner. Really that was the consensus from left to right with very few exceptions.

So I asked myself what exactly is nonviolent action? What is popular protest? How does it work?

### **The Einstein of Nonviolence**

**AK:** You pinpoint the birth of this force at a single event on September 11, 1906.

**Schell:** Precisely, a peaceful protest led by Mohandas Gandhi at the Empire Theater in Johannesburg, South Africa, on September 11, 1906. It's rare that you can date a social invention to a particular day and meeting, but I think you can in this case. Gandhi called himself an experimenter in truth. He's really the Einstein of nonviolence.

Soon enough, I began to ask myself about other nonviolent movements and that, of course, very much involved the civil rights movement in the United States.

**AK:** You point to four key moments in history — the French, American, Glorious, and Bolshevik revolutions — and describe how the real revolution, the nonviolent one, took place in the hearts and minds of the people in those countries. And that the bloody fighting that, in some cases, ensued was not the true revolution, but an extension of it. It's a revelatory part of the book. Did you already have this idea when you began *Unconquerable World*, or was it an *Aha!* moment along the way?

**JS:** It was really the latter. Gandhi's movement landed the most powerful blow against the entire British Empire, and the Solidarity movement and the revolution in Czechoslovakia and other popular activities in those places were in my opinion the real undoing of the Soviet Union. That's not the small change of history. Those were arguably the two greatest empires of their time. So, having seen that there was such power in nonviolence, I began to wonder: How did things work in other revolutions?

I was startled to discover that even in revolutions which, in the end, turned out to be supremely violent, the revolutionaries — some of whom, like the Bolsheviks, didn't even believe at all in nonviolence — nonetheless proceeded largely without violence. Somebody quipped that more people were killed in the filming of Sergey Eisenstein's storming of the Winter Palace [in his *Ten Days That Shook the World*] than were killed in the actual storming. That was true because the Bolsheviks were really unopposed.

How could that be? Well, because they had won over the garrison of Saint Petersburg; they had, that is, won the "hearts and minds" of the military and the police.

**AK:** The Bastille was like that as well.

**JS:** The Bastille was absolutely like that. In that first stage of the French Revolution there was almost no violence at all. Some people were beheaded in the aftermath of the action, but the victory was not won through violence, but through the defection of the government's minions. It didn't mean the revolutionaries loved nonviolence. On the contrary, what followed was the Terror, in the case of the French, and the Red Terror in the case of the Bolsheviks, who went on to shed far more blood as rulers than they had shed on their way to power.

Usually the cliché is that the stage of overthrow is the violent part, and the stage of consolidation or of setting up a new government is post-violent or nonviolent. I discovered it to be just the other way around.

**AK:** On this subject, as your book makes clear, some re-teaching is in order. We're so conditioned to think of overthrow as a physical act: knocking down the gates, storming the castle, killing the king, declaring the country yours.

**JS:** In a certain sense, overthrow is the wrong word. If you overthrow something, you pick it up and smash it down. In these cases, however, the government has lost legitimacy with the people and is spontaneously disintegrating from within.

**AK:** As you note, the Hungarian writer György Konrád used the image of an iceberg melting from the inside to describe the process.

**JS:** He and actually the whole Solidarity movement had already noticed how Franco's cryptofascist regime in Spain sort of melted away from within and finally handed over power in a formal process to democratic forces. That was one of their models.

**AK:** Reading *The Unconquerable World* feels like swimming against the tide of conventional wisdom, of conventional history. Why do you think antiquated ideas about power and its uses still grip us so tightly?

**JS:** There is a conventional assumption that superior violence is always decisive. In other words, whatever you do, at the end of the day whoever has the biggest army is going to win. They're going to cross the border, impose their ideology or religion, they're going to kill the women and children, they're going to get the oil.

And honestly, you have to say that, through most of history, there was overwhelming evidence for the accuracy of that observation. I very much see the birth of nonviolence as something that, although not exactly missing from the pages of history previously, was fundamentally new in 1906. I think of it as a discovery, an invention.

The fundamental critique of it was that it doesn't work. The belief, more an unspoken premise than a conviction, was that if you want to act effectively in defense of your deepest beliefs or worst cravings, you have to pick up the gun, and as Mao Zedong said, power will flow from the barrel of that gun.

It took protracted demonstrations of the kind that we've been talking about to put nonviolence on the map. Now, by the way, states have come to understand this power and its dangers much better. Certainly, those who govern Egypt understand it. And what about the apparatchiks of the Soviet Union? They saw it firsthand — the whole thing going down almost without a shot being fired.

Take, for instance, the government of Iran. They're very worried foreign activists or certain books might show up in their country, because they're afraid that a soft or velvet revolution will take place in Iran. And they're right to worry. They've had two big waves of protest already, most recently the Green Revolution of 2009-2010.

It hasn't succeeded there yet. And to be clear, there's nothing magical about nonviolence. It's a human thing. It's not a magic wand that you wave over empires and totalitarian regimes and they simply melt away, though sometimes it's seemed that way. There can, of course, be failure. Look at what the people in Syria face right now. And look at the staggering raw courage they've

displayed in going out into the streets again and again in the face of so many slaughtered in their country. It's anyone's guess who's going to emerge as the victor there.

**AK:** It can fail.

**JS:** It *does* fail. But the fact that it can succeed suggests something new historically. People, I think, are only beginning to understand this and notice it. Certainly, governments have noticed it. As soon as they see a few people getting out in the streets now, they start to get very nervous. For instance, Russia's Vladimir Putin is obviously feeling this nervousness right now in the wake of the sub-zero activists in the streets of Moscow.

### **The Hidden Sphere of the Human Heart and Mind**

**AK:** *Unconquerable World* was published in the run-up to the Iraq war, when the drum beat of invasion mania reached a deafening roar. How did that affect the book's reception?

**JS:** At the moment it came out, in this country certainly, the believers in violence reigned supreme. Here I was saying all empires are going under the waves, and here under George W. Bush was the U.S. styling itself as the last world-straddling imperial superpower about to administer an unstoppable, shock-and-awe demonstration of its might. So it was a particularly unpropitious moment for a message about the power of nonviolence. There were some favorable reactions, but at that point the book didn't really enter the broader discussion.

I honestly wondered myself whether this history of successful nonviolent movements hadn't... [he hesitates] if not ended, at least come to a pause. Eight years later, I was as surprised as anyone by the Arab Spring. And while I'd certainly hoped for something like the Occupy movement in the United States, I hadn't foreseen that either. I was happily surprised by these movements, which gave new life to the whole tradition of nonviolent action and revolution.

The reason I had wondered whether we weren't at some sort of pause was that so much of the nonviolent action of the twentieth century had been tied to the anti-imperial and anti-colonial movements. Certainly that was true with Gandhi and the Soviet Union. Even the civil rights movement in the United States was, in a certain sense, a response to a crime that had really begun under imperial auspices — namely, the slave raids in Africa, which were distinctly an imperial enterprise. If I was right that a certain kind of territorial imperialism imposed by force had run its course, then maybe so had the movements generated in opposition to it. There were a few examples where that wasn't the case. Myanmar, for example.

There was, however, another aspect to the surprise of 2011. I think it may be the nature of such nonviolent movements that they come as a surprise, because at their very root seems to be a sudden change in the hidden sphere of the human heart and mind that then becomes contagious. It's as though below the visible landscape of politics, whose permanence and strength we characteristically overestimate, there's this other landscape we rather pallidly call the world of opinion.

And somewhere in this landscape of popular will, in these changes in hearts and minds — a phrase that has become a cliché but still expresses a deep truth — lie hidden powers that, when they erupt, can overmatch and bring down existing structures. That's what John Adams said about the American Revolution: the revolution was in the hearts of the people, the minds of the people. It was amazing to find that very Vietnam-era phrase in Adams' eighteenth century writings. What John Adams was saying you find over and over again in the history of revolutions, once you look for it.

## **Occupy and Freedom**

I used to say that, before the Occupy movement here, we Americans were suffering from our own energy crisis, which was so much more important than not being able to drill for crude oil. We didn't know how to drop a bucket into our own hearts and come up with the necessary will to do the things that needed to be done. The real "drill, baby, drill" that we needed was to delve into our own consciousness and come up with the will.

**AK:** How do you see the history of nonviolent action since *Unconquerable World* was published? What were you thinking about the Tunisian uprising, the Egyptian uprising, the Occupy movement, the general global protest movement of the present moment that arose remarkably nonviolently?

**JS:** I was astonished. Even now, I don't feel that I understand what the causes were. I'm not even sure it makes sense to speak of the causes. If you point to a cause — oppression, food prices rising, cronyism, corruption, torture — these things go on for decades and nothing happens. Nobody does anything. Then in a twinkling everything changes. Twenty-three days in Egypt and Mubarak is gone.

How and why a people suddenly develops a will to change the conditions under which it's living is, to me, one of the deep mysteries of all politics. That's why I don't blame myself or anyone else for not expecting or predicting the Arab Spring. How that happens may, in the end, be undiscoverable. And I think the reason for that is connected to freedom. Such changes in opinion and will are somewhere near the root of what we mean when we talk about the exercise of freedom. Almost by definition, freedom refers to something not visibly or obviously caused by anything else. Otherwise it would be compelled, not free.

And yet there is nothing obscure — in the sense of clouded or dark — about freedom. Its exercise is perhaps the most public of all things, as well as the most powerful, as recent history shows. It's a daylight mystery.