

The return of people power

Here in the west, we have much to learn from resistance movements in dangerous places and their tactics of informed direct action. In researching a new film, I have been watching documentary archive from the 1980s, the era of Ronald Reagan and his “secret war” against Central America. What is striking is the relentless lying. A department of lying was set up under Reagan with the coy name, “office of public diplomacy”. Its purpose was to dispense “white” and “black” propaganda – lies – and to smear journalists who told the truth. Almost everything Reagan himself said on the subject was false. Time and again, he warned Americans of an “imminent threat” from the tiny impoverished nations that occupy the isthmus between the two continents of the western hemisphere. “Central America is too close and its strategic stakes are too high for us to ignore the danger of governments seizing power with military ties to the Soviet Union,” he said. Nicaragua was “a Soviet base” and “communism is about to take over the Caribbean”. The United States, said the president, “is engaged in a war on terrorism, a war for freedom”.

How familiar it all sounds. Merely replace Soviet Union and communism with al-Qaeda, and you are up to date. And it was all a fantasy. The Soviet Union had no bases in or designs on Central America; on the contrary, the Soviets were adamant in turning down appeals for their aid. The comic strips of “missile storage depots” that American officials presented to the United Nations were precursors to the lies told by Colin Powell in his infamous promotion of Iraq’s non-existent weapons of mass destruction at the Security Council in 2003.

Whereas Powell’s lies paved the way for the invasion of Iraq and the violent death of at least 100,000 people, Reagan’s lies disguised his onslaught on Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. By the end of his two terms, 300,000 people were dead. In Guatemala, his proxies – armed and tutored in torture by the CIA – were described by the UN as perpetrators of genocide. There is one

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major difference today. That is the level of awareness among people everywhere of the true purpose of Bush and Blair's "war on terror" and the scale and diversity of the popular resistance to it. In Reagan's day, the notion that presidents and prime ministers lied as deliberate, calculated acts was considered exotic; Nixon's Watergate lies were said to be shocking because presidents did not lie outright.

Almost no one believes that any more. In Britain, thanks to Blair, a sea-change in public attitudes has taken place. No less than 80 per cent regard him as a liar; 82 per cent believe his warmongering was a principal cause of the London bombings; 72 per cent believe he has made this country a target. No modern prime minister has been the object of such informed opprobrium. In addition, a majority remain sceptical about the veracity of a "plot" to blow up aircraft flying from Heathrow. The recent, thuggish self-promotion of the Home Secretary (Interior Minister) John Reid is rejected by a clear majority, along with the media-promotion of Treasurer Gordon Brown as the man who brought economic prosperity to Britain while acting as paymaster for various imperial adventures. More than three-quarters of the population believe Brown and Blair have merely made the rich richer (YouGov and Guardian/ICM).

In my experience, this critical public intelligence and moral sense have always been ahead of those who claim to speak for the public. What Vandana Shiva calls an "insurrection of subjugated knowledge" is on the rise in Britain and across the world, perhaps as never before, thanks to a revived internationalism aided by new technologies. Whereas Reagan could get away with many of his lies, Bush and Blair cannot. People know too much. And there is the presence of history; no imperial power has been able to sustain three simultaneous colonial wars indefinitely. That is already true of the United States and Britain in Afghanistan, where the "democratic" puppet regime is in predictable trouble and the besieged British army is having to call in American bombers, which, on 26 August, killed 13 fleeing civilians, including nine children, a common atrocity.

In Iraq, in contrast to the embedded lie that the killings are now almost entirely sectarian, 70 per cent of the 1,666 bombs exploded by the resistance in July were directed against the American occupiers and 20 per cent against the puppet police force. Civilian casualties amounted to 10 per cent. In other words, unlike the collective punishment meted out by the US, such as the killing of several thousand people in Fallujah, the resistance is fighting basically a military war and it is winning. That truth is suppressed, as it was in Vietnam.

In Lebanon, the pattern continues. An armed resistance a few thousand strong

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has humbled the fifth-most powerful army in the world, which is supplied and backed by the superpower. That much we know. What is not known is the extraordinary and decisive part played by the unarmed people of southern Lebanon. Reported as a trail of victims, the spectacle of people heading back to their homes was an epic act of defiance and resistance. On 13 August, as the Israeli army advanced in southern Lebanon, they warned people not to return to their homes. This was defied almost to a man, woman and child, who abandoned the refugee centres and headed south, jamming the roads and flashing victory signs.

An eyewitness, Simon Assaf, described “gangs of local men along the route clear[ing] paths by dragging away the piles of electrical cable, rubble and twisted metal that littered the highway. A new stream of cars would rapidly form through every breach in the rubble. There were no army or police... it was the locals who directed traffic, guided cars past dangerous craters and pushed buses up dirt tracks around collapsed bridges. As they neared their homes, the refugees would form great processions. Town after town, village after village was reclaimed. Powerless to confront this human wave, the Israelis abandoned their positions and began fleeing to the border. This flood of people emerged out of an unprecedented mass movement that grew up across the country as the bombs rained down.”

The Lebanese resistance, armed and unarmed, is from the same wellspring as other movements throughout the world. Each has learned to put aside its sectarian differences in the face of a common enemy – rampant empire and its proxies. In Bolivia, Latin America’s poorest country, the first government of indigenous people since their enslavement by Spain was elected by a landslide this year, after hundreds of thousands of unarmed campesinos and former miners faced the guns of an army sent by the oligarchic dictator, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. Marching on

La Paz, the capital, they forced him to flee to the United States, where he had sent his millions. This followed a mass resistance to the privatising of the water supply of Cochabamba, Bolivia’s second city, and its takeover by a consortium dominated by the mighty Bechtel company. Now Bechtel, too, has been forced to flee.

Throughout Latin America, mass resistance movements have grown so fast that they now overshadow traditional parties. In Venezuela, they provide the popular support for the reforms of Hugo Chávez. Having emerged spontaneously in 1989 during the Caracazo, an eruption of political rage against Venezuela’s

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subservience to the free-market demands of the IMF and World Bank, they have provided the imagination and dynamism with which the Chávez government is attacking the scourge of poverty.

Here in the west, as people abandon the political parties they once thought were theirs, there is much to learn from resistance movements in dangerous places and their tactics of informed direct action. We have our own examples in Britain, such as the achievements of the growing resistance to Blair and Brown's privatising of the National Health Service by stealth. An American giant, United Health Europe, has been prevented from taking control of GP (local medical) services in Derbyshire, after the community was not consulted and fought back. Pat Smith, a pensioner, took the case to court and won. "This shows what people power can do," she said, as if speaking for millions.

There is no difference in principle between Pat Smith's campaign of resistance and that of the people of Cochabamba who refused to pay almost half their income to an American company for their water. There is no difference in principle between the people's movement that saw off the Israeli invaders and the stirring of people everywhere as they become aware of the real meaning of the ambitions and hypocrisy of Bush and his vassal, who want us to be ever fearful of and cowed by "terrorism" when, in truth, the greatest terrorists of all are them.