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SMALL ACTS RESISTANCE

How Courage, Tenacity, and Ingenuity Can Change the World



STEVE CRAWSHAW AND **JOHN JACKSON**

FOREWORD BY **VÁCLAV HAVEL**

Small Acts of Resistance

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A person with inner freedom, memory, and fear is that reed, that twig that changes the direction of a rushing river.

—NADEZHDA MANDELSTAM

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Preface by Václav Havel

In 1978, I wrote an essay that explored the untapped “power of the powerless.” I described the incalculable benefits that might follow, even in the context of a highly repressive government, if each one of us decided to confront the lies surrounding us, and made a personal decision to live in truth.

Many argued that those ideas were the work of a deluded Czech Don Quixote, tilting at unassailable windmills.

In many ways, that skepticism seemed justified. Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader who just ten years earlier had sent tanks into Czechoslovakia to end political reform, was still in power in the Kremlin. The Solidarity movement—whose remarkable victories in neighboring Poland against unwanted rulers would give comfort to other eastern Europeans and millions of others seeking to live in truth in the years to come—did not yet exist. I myself, like many of my friends, had spent time in jail and would do so again in the years to come.

And yet, just eleven years after I wrote about what ordinary people can achieve by living in truth, I saw and lived through a series of extraordinary victories all across the region, including in my own country. In what came to be known as the velvet revolution, Czechs and Slovaks defied official violence to ensure the speedy collapse of the seemingly impregnable bastion of lies in November 1989. It was all over in barely a week. After the revolution, I was privileged to become the president of my country as it moved into a democratic era.

Today, millions around the world live in circumstances where it might seem that nothing will ever change. But they must remember that the rebellions that took place all across eastern Europe in 1989 were the result of a series of individual actions by ordinary people which together made change inevitable. *Small Acts of Resistance* pays tribute to those who have sought to live in truth, and to the impact that can have.

In my lifetime, I have repeatedly seen that small acts of resistance have had incomparably greater impact than anybody could have predicted at the time. Small acts of resistance are not just about the present and the past. I believe they are about the future, too.

Prague
March 2001

Introduction

We have all seen images on our television screens of a political drama unraveling in some distant country. A dictator has fallen, crowds dance in the streets, statues are pulled down, a new flag hoisted. The camera zooms in, trying to find ways to convey the elation and the exhaustion.

Such moments, however compelling in that instant, often feel like walking into a movie a few minutes before the end. What led to this dramatic moment? How did these people keep going through the long, difficult years? What kept their spirit of defiance alive?

Here we pay tribute to those backstories. Collecting tales from around the world, *Small Acts of Resistance* tells stories—some well-known but many underreported and little recognized in the history books—in which people have found innovative and inspiring ways to challenge violent regimes and confront abuses of power.

We offer accounts of those who refuse to be silenced, showing in the process that it is possible to bring down dictators, change unjust laws, or simply give individuals a renewed sense of their own humanity in the face of those who deny it. Each represents the universal desire to live in dignity and freedom.

The title of this book is in some ways an obvious misnomer. Many of the stories chronicled here are not small acts at all. They involve extraordinary courage, though few of the participants most closely involved saw things that way. At the risk of being beaten, jailed, or even killed in retribution for speaking out, the people in these pages would say they were merely standing up for basic principles. They would claim they were merely doing what anyone else would do. To the rest of us, they stand as powerful reminders that a defiant spirit can make the invincible crack, the unchangeable change.

The people in these stories treat the impossible as the possible that just hasn't happened yet. Some have achieved the change they were struggling for. For others, the biggest change is yet to come.

Steve Crawshaw
John Jackson
New York
March 2011

The Power of Many

*Said the boy: "He learnt how quite soft water, by attrition
Over the years will grind strong rocks away.
In other words that hardness must lose the day."*

—Bertolt Brecht

*Brian: You're all individuals!
Crowd: Yes, we're all individuals! . . .
Man in crowd: I'm not.*

—Monty Python's *Life of Brian*

Strollers Defeat Tanks

The rise of Solidarity, a popular movement created in August 1980 by striking workers in the shipyards of Gdańsk and across Poland, caused panic in the regime that had ruled the country since the Second World War. On December 13, 1981, the Communist authorities put tanks on the streets to stop Solidarity once and for all. Hundreds were arrested; dozens were killed.

Despite the tanks and arrests, Poles organized protests against the ban on Solidarity, including a boycott of the fiction-filled television news. But a boycott of the TV news could not by itself embarrass the government. After all, who could tell how many were obeying the boycott call?

In one small town, they found a way. Every evening, beginning on February 5, 1982, the inhabitants of Świdnik in eastern Poland went on a walkabout. As the half-hour evening news began, the streets would fill with Świdnikians, who chatted, walked, and loafed. Before going out, some placed the switched-off television set in the window, facing uselessly onto the street. Others went a step further. They placed their disconnected set in a stroller or a builder's wheelbarrow, and took the television itself for a nightly outing.

"If resistance is done by underground activists, it's not you or me," one Solidarity supporter later noted. "But if you see your neighbors taking their TV for a walk, it makes you feel part of something. An aim of dictatorship is to make you feel isolated. Świdnik broke the isolation and built confidence."

The TV-goes-for-a-walk tactics, which spread to other towns and cities, infuriated the government. But the authorities felt powerless to retaliate. Going for a walk was not, after all, an official crime under the criminal code.

Eventually, the curfew was brought forward from 10 p.m. to 7 p.m., thus forcing Świdnikians to stay at home during the 7:30 news, or risk being arrested or shot.

The citizens of Świdnik responded by going for a walk during the earlier edition of the news at 5 p.m. instead.



Just as it was difficult (unless everybody went for a walk) to be sure that Poles were *not* watching the television news, it was hard to know how many people *were* listening to programs that criticized the government. Solidarity found a way around that problem, too.

Radio Solidarity broadcast illegal news bulletins that countered official propaganda. But nobody could be sure how many people were listening to those underground reports. Opinion polls were, under the circumstances, unthinkable. So the Solidarity broadcasters devised an experiment. They asked people to switch the lights on and off in their apartment at a certain point in the program.

There was an obvious risk. If you were the only one on your block with your lights blinking, that would advertise to police officers in the vicinity: “Look, a lawbreaker lives here!”

Dissident Konstanty Gebert was walking down a street in the Polish capital, Warsaw, during the broadcast. As he walked, he noticed the lights in a ground-floor apartment starting to flash on and off. As he stepped back, he realized that the whole building was flashing. He turned to look behind him and saw block after block lit up like Christmas trees, all the way down the street. Reports that night said that buildings flashed on and off throughout the city. Gebert said: “You can’t imagine the feeling of elation.”

As for the authorities: Short of arresting all the inhabitants of Warsaw, there was little they could do.



Even on the most solemn occasions, Solidarity supporters found ways of undermining Poland’s detested rulers. In 1984, Soviet leader Yuri Andropov died. Scheduled programming was interrupted for live coverage of the funeral, including a speech by Andropov’s aged successor, Konstantin Chernenko, speaking from the top of Lenin’s mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow.

The official broadcast was soon interrupted, as seen in Grzegorz Linkowski’s 2006 documentary *Stroll with the Television News*. Instead of Chernenko’s loyal mumblings (“Yuri Andropov, a glorious son of the Communist Party, has departed this life . . .”), Polish viewers suddenly heard a different announcer break in: “Here is the TV version of Radio Solidarity. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen . . .” whereupon a list of arrested activists and a series of opposition demands followed.

Polish viewers were delighted. The authorities were not. The secret police couldn’t identify the culprits. The embarrassment for the government—and the delight of everybody else—remained.

The TV-filled strollers, the flashing lights, and the interrupted funeral kept the flame of Polish hope alive—with dramatic implications in the years to come. The immovable regime crumbled within just a few years.

The Great One-Liner

The military junta that ruled Uruguay from 1973 was intolerant in the extreme. Hundreds of thousands fled into exile. Political opponents were jailed. Torture was the order of the day. On occasion, even concerts of classical music were seen as subversive threats. A performance of Ravel’s *Piano Concerto for Left Hand* was canceled because the title sounded leftishly dangerous. Meanwhile, however, a remarkable small protest took place at soccer games throughout the twelve long years of military rule.

Whenever the band struck up the national anthem before major games, thousands of Uruguayans in the stadium joined in unenthusiastically. This stubborn failure to sing loudly was rebellion enough. But, from the generals’ point of view, there was worse to come. At one point, the anthem declared

Tiranos temblad!—“May tyrants tremble!” Those words served as the cue for the crowds in the stadium suddenly to bellow in unison: “*Tiranos temblad!*” as they waved their flags. After that brief, excited roar, they continued to mumble their way through to the end of the long anthem.

The authorities could not arrest everyone in the stadium. Nor could they cancel games or drop the singing of the national anthem. The junta toyed with the idea of removing the *tiranos temblad!* line from public performances of the anthem, but that proved too embarrassing. Why, after all, would the generals remove words from a beloved nineteenth-century hymn, unless they believed that *they* might be the tyrants in question?

The military rulers were thus obliged to suffer the embarrassment until 1985, when they and their friends lost power. Democracy won.

Today, the national anthem can be sung at Uruguayan soccer games in full and without fear. Leaders of the junta have been jailed for the crimes committed during their years in power. The former tyrants tremble.

Turnips and Revolution

Boycott is a widely understood form of social, economic, and political action. Everybody now takes the word for granted. But it was not plucked out of thin air. Once upon a time there was Captain Charles Cunningham Boycott. Captain Boycott was a much-disliked land agent for Lord Erne, an absentee landlord in County Mayo in the west of British-ruled Ireland.

On September 23, 1880, “as if by one sudden impulse” (in the words of the *Connaught Telegraph*) Boycott’s servants walked out on him, in protest against unjust rents and evictions. Boycott and his family found themselves obliged to milk their own cows, shoe their own horses, and till their own fields. Shopkeepers refused to serve Boycott and his family. The post office stopped delivering mail to him. Boycott was isolated and powerless to retaliate, to the dismay of his supporters. In London, an editorial in the *Times* complained: “A more frightful picture of triumphant anarchy has never been presented in any community pretending to be civilized and subjected to law.”

One of the organizers of the action, James Redpath, realized that no single word existed to describe this successful form of ostracism. To bolster the political impact of these actions, he decided that the word needed to change. As Redpath recounts in his 1881 memoir *Talks About Ireland*, he asked the sympathetic priest, Father John O’Malley, for advice: “[O’Malley] looked down, tapped his brow with his forehead, and said: ‘How would it be to call it to Boycott him?’”

In *Captain Boycott and the Irish*, Joyce Marlow describes how a pro-English volunteer force came to help the beleaguered Boycott, guarded by a detachment of a thousand soldiers. Their supplies included fourteen gallons of whiskey, thirty pounds of tobacco, and four foghorns. After a few weeks of digging vegetables in the rain, however, they abandoned Boycott once more. Boycott fled to England. He never returned. In due course, Ireland gained its independence.

Meanwhile, the name of an obscure land agent in the west of Ireland has gone global in the dictionaries. General Augusto Pinochet’s regime suffered from those who were ready to *boicotear* Chilean apples and wine in protest against repression by the military junta in Chile in the 1970s. Poland protesting against the Communist imposition of martial law in 1981 declared a *bojkot* of the television news (including with televisions in wheelbarrows, as described above). Russians talk of *boikotirovat* and the French declare *un boycott*. And all because of some local difficulties involving the Irish turnip harvest of 1880.

And Then They All Fall Down

There is a familiar pattern of censorship in authoritarian countries. An author publishes a piece of work that the government dislikes. Publishers and authors are threatened, fined, or jailed. The publisher goes out of business, other brave authors or publishers are deterred, and the regime lives happily ever after (for a time, at least).

And then there's the Turkish way: togetherness as a defiant criminal act.

The principle is simple. It is grounded in the knowledge that while prosecuting one or two people is easy, prosecuting a hundred or a thousand people for the same crime eventually becomes more of a pain for the government than for the would-be defendants.

In 1995, the distinguished writer Yaşar Kemal was charged under antiterrorism laws in connection with an article he published in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* about brutality against Kurds in southeast Turkey. So far, so bad for Kemal. Fellow writers provided Kemal with much-needed solidarity, however. As Kemal himself publicly declared at the time, "Time will tell that it is more the prosecutors who are on trial."

He was proved right. Authors published a joint book with ten banned articles—including Kemal's. More than a thousand people were named as collective publishers. The prosecutor opened a trial against 185 prominent intellectuals. But it all became too cumbersome and politically embarrassing. After two years of the authorities looking foolish, the trial was dropped.

The would-be defendants were dissatisfied, however, with the authorities' failure to prosecute Şanar Yurdatapan, the composer and author who coordinated the campaign, compared the tactics with a children's tug-of-war. "Some children hold one end of a thick rope and others hold the other end. They start pulling at the same time to see which group is stronger. But what happens if one group simply lets go of the rope?" he asked. "The others fall down altogether and everybody laughs at them."

The accused demanded that the prosecutor take action. In Yurdatapan's words, "The rabbit was following the hound."

From 2001 onwards, a volume titled *Freedom of Thought* was published annually—bringing together those with very different views, left and right, secular and Islamist. The lawbreakers cut a birthday cake, sent pieces to the judges and the prosecutors, and handed a copy of the offending volume to the prosecutor.

From the government's point of view, this rabbit-chases-hound business—turning upside down the familiar world, where defendants want to walk free and prosecutors try to ensure that they don't—was most annoying, especially when it continued to spread. Tens of thousands of people have become "copublishers" of banned writings in recent years.

Dirty Linen in Public

It might not seem that an act of public laundry could unsettle a president with a well-deserved reputation for inflexibility, corruption, and brutality. But mass washing ceremonies were a key element in getting rid of Peru's unpopular president, Alberto Fujimori, after more than a decade in power.

In May 2000, thousands started gathering every Friday, from noon until three, on Plaza Mayor in the Peruvian capital, Lima. The main focus: washing the red-white-red-striped flag. The crowd wanted to show that Peru, and its flag, had become badly soiled.

The authorities reacted with intimidation and threats. Vladimiro Lenin Montesinos, head of the security services, complained about this "cancer," and suggested that the flag washers were terrorists. But still the *lava la bandera*—wash-the-flag—protests continued. As actor and protester Miguel Iz

declared: “I just want a clean country.”

The protests spread across the country. Hundreds of thousands took part. Eventually, the *lava bandera* action achieved its aim. Five months after the protests began, Fujimori stepped down. (He resigned by fax while on a visit to Japan.) Washing the flag, said the Peruvian daily *La República* in its end-of-millennium roundup, was “a ritual that we Peruvians will never forget.”

In 2009, Fujimori (extradited from Chile two years earlier) was jailed for twenty-five years for the killings committed under his rule. Peruvian flags are now clean.

Mischief with a Purpose

The human race has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter . . . Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.

—Mark Twain

Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward.

—Kurt Vonnegut

High-Fidelity Fast Food

One of the extraordinary things about human events is that the unthinkable becomes thinkable.

—SALMAN RUSHDIE

Police in a one-party state have a more or less simple task. If people criticize the government, they are either harassed or arrested. The system is clear-cut and well understood by arresters and arrested alike.

Things get more complicated when citizens become implausibly loyal.

In Poland in the 1980s, after the banning of the independent Solidarity movement (as described in [Chapter 1](#)), there were countless demonstrations against the Communist regime. Then there was the Orange Alternative—which demonstrated *in support* of Communism, carrying banners demanding a shorter eight-hour workday for the secret police and showering police cars with flowers.

Everybody knew that such spontaneous support was unthinkable, and understood the pro-Communist sentiment as an unkind joke. It was, however, embarrassing for the government to admit that aloud.

A “pro-Communist” demonstration on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 1987 began with the rousing call, “It is time to break the passivity of the popular masses!” All demonstrators were asked to wear something Communist red: red shoes, red scarf, or at least red lipstick. Those who had nothing red to wear queued up for ketchup-smearred pizza sticks from a nearby fast-food stall, later holding the color-coded food aloft. The police closed the stall down on a customer who asked for ketchup only, never mind the pizza stick, was arrested.

The Orange Alternative also mocked the regime by addressing people’s basic needs. At a 1987 event called “Who’s Afraid of Toilet Paper?” single sheets of toilet paper (which, like so much else, was unavailable in Polish shops at that time) were distributed free to passersby, thus mocking the official shortages. Another event involved the free distribution of sanitary napkins (also unavailable in stores) on International Women’s Day. Again, arrests were made.

That same year, the government finally agreed to talks with Solidarity. Those talks led to contested elections, which had previously seemed unthinkable. Solidarity’s victory in the elections of June 1988

was so overwhelming that the Communists were forced to hand over power. In August, Poland gained the first popularly elected prime minister in the Soviet bloc.

Three months later, not least as a consequence of the defeat of Communism in Poland, the Berlin Wall fell. Illegal ketchup and free toilet paper had each played a part.

Which Side Are You On?

In Oxford and other British university cities, an unusual set of graffiti appeared above pairs of Barclays Bank cash dispensers in 1984. Above one ATM was spray-painted the word **BLACKS**. Above the other: **WHITES ONLY**.

The graffiti changed nothing, of course, in terms of who could use which cash machine. Customers were free to choose whichever ATM they preferred. Black customers could line up at the **WHITES ONLY** machine if they wished to. Whites could take cash from the **BLACKS** machine.

The black-and-white labeling left people faintly unsettled, however. And unsettled was all that was needed. The graffiti made many of those lining up at the black-vs.-white machines feel uncomfortable about Barclays' well-publicized involvement in the South African system of apartheid, where signs proclaiming **NET BLANKES—Whites Only**—were at that time the order of the day.

Fewer graduates applied to work at Barclays, so as not to be tainted by the black-white division that the bank seemed to represent. Barclays' once lucrative share of UK student accounts plummeted from 27 percent to 15 percent of the market. In 1986, the banking giant admitted defeat at the hands of the graffiti sprayers and their allies. The Barclays pullout became one of the most high-profile and punishing acts of divestment suffered by the South African regime.

Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for life because of his rejection of the government's racist policies, was released after twenty-seven years in 1990. Democratic elections were held in 1994. The Barclays graffiti were scrubbed away. Barclays returned to South Africa in 2005.

All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go

In Iran, being a mullah isn't easy. The men of God may have ruled the country for decades, following the revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979, but they can't seem to catch a cab.

Taxi drivers in Tehran regularly refuse to stop if they see turbaned men of God standing by the side of the road. Any other passenger, yes—but not a mullah. The mullahs can stand and wave for as long as they like. Somehow, the taxis are always just too busy to stop.

To the delight of Iranian audiences, that small act of cab-driving defiance was immortalized in Kamal Tabrizi's popular 2004 film *Lizard*, which tells the story of the petty criminal Reza the Lizard (so called because he can climb vertical walls), who escapes from jail disguised in a mullah's (stolen) clothes. Taxis refuse to stop for Reza, the mullah look-alike, in a scene familiar to Iranians from daily life.

Iranians lined up around the block to see *Lizard*, roaring with laughter at the disrespectful film whose story line suggested that this petty criminal behaved with more moral decency than the supposedly pious mullahs. *Lizard* became the biggest box office hit in Iranian history.

The authorities banned the smash hit after just a few weeks, but by then it was too late. Those who hadn't already seen it during its brief run in the movie theaters watched it at home on pirated DVDs.

And the real-life taxis still don't stop when the mullahs want them to.



Women are banned from attending soccer games in Iran—a rule allegedly intended to shield them from bad language and possible violence on the part of the male sporting fans. In defiance of the ban, women still sometimes try to gain admission to the games, despite the risk of arrest. Public questioning of the ban is prohibited. But Jafar Panahi, an award-winning filmmaker who has more than once been arrested for daring to speak out, was determined to find a way to address the issue.

Panahi envisioned making a comedy about six defiant young female fans arrested for trying to get into a big game between Iran and Bahrain in 2005. He knew, however, the film proposal would never make it past the censors. So he offered authorities a bland, acceptable script, which gained him the official approval he needed. And then he went ahead and made a different film, the one he had always planned to make.

In *Offside*, a group of women are arrested after attempting to sneak into a soccer game. They are imprisoned in an improvised cattle pen tantalizingly close to the game, and are able to hear the sound of the crowd. But they are forbidden to move just a few yards to watch the game. The guards explain that the women cannot enter the stadium because of the obscene language they might hear. “We promise we won’t listen,” the women reply.

One woman urgently needs to relieve herself. But there are only men’s toilets in the stadium (Women, after all, are not supposed to be there in the first place.) As the woman skips with increasingly frantic desperation from one foot to the other, one of the guards finally offers a solution: to disguise herself as a man.

The woman does so, covering her face with a poster of an Iranian soccer star. Thus masked, she is allowed to walk to the toilet. The men are all thrown out, so that the disguised woman has the guard’s bathroom all to herself. She promptly escapes.

With its sly disrespect for the official rules, *Offside* was predicted to break box office records. Panahi can hardly have been surprised when the film—so different from the script that the censors had approved—was banned from public release in 2006.

Like *Lizard*, the subversive *Offside* quickly gained popularity when distributed on unauthorized DVDs. The characters inspired real-life imitations, too. Women stood outside the national soccer stadium and chanted, “We don’t want to be *Offside!*”

Of Dogs and Dictators

In September 2007, tens of thousands took to the streets to protest against the lawlessness of the military regime in Burma (officially known as Myanmar). (See the photo on [pages 24 and 25](#).) The protests were triggered by a sudden sharp increase in the cost of fuel, but quickly broadened to call for basic rights and freedoms. The military beat, arrested, and killed protesters. According to the UN, at least thirty-one people died. It became too dangerous to venture onto the streets, which were patrolled by the military. But the imaginative Burmese found a way around that problem: In Rangoon and other cities, they promoted the legions of stray urban dogs to the ranks of protesters.

Dogs are regarded as lowly creatures in Burmese culture. Being reborn as a dog suggests that you were up to no good in a previous life. To hurl a hefty insult in Burmese, throw the word *dog* or *dog mother* in somewhere, and you won’t go wrong.

Perhaps in an attempt to improve their chances in the next life, stray dogs began to be seen roaming around Rangoon with pictures of the military leader, Than Shwe, and images of other senior leaders tied around their necks. Throughout the city and to the delight of its residents, troops were seen chasing the protesting mutts down, in a vain attempt to rescue the generals’ irretrievably low esteem.

The Irrawaddy, published in neighboring Thailand, quoted a resident as saying with approval

“They seem quite good at avoiding arrest.”



“Dress conservatively” was the instruction from Burma’s military junta to those celebrating the country’s traditional annual water festival. This was the result.

Credit: Khin Maung Win/

A Sporting Chance

Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I can assure you it is much more important than that.

—Bill Shankly, manager of the Liverpool soccer team

Team Dream

West Africa's Ivory Coast has long been known as the world's largest producer of cocoa. In recent years, however, it has been better known for its dangerous instability and for a brutal conflict. Following a 2002 coup, the country was divided between the South, which remained loyal to the government, and the rebel-held North. Political and ethnic divisions ran deep. As is so often the case in such conflicts, civilians suffered most—enduring mutilation, rape, and murder in the violent clashes of the civil war. Even as the war wound down, suspicion between the two sides seemed impossible to overcome.

One man helped change that.

For several years, the conflict made it impossible to travel from one end of the country to the other. Didier Drogba, Ivorian-born international soccer star, was determined that his splintered nation should be reunited. And he wanted soccer to play a role.

In addition to playing for the Chelsea team in London, Drogba was captain of the Ivorian national team, the Elephants. He insisted that the team should be ethnically mixed, and achieved that goal. When the integrated Ivory Coast team qualified for the 2006 World Cup, Ivorians from all over the country united in cheering the win.

Then, in 2007, Drogba went a step further with a simple, revolutionary move: He declared that the qualifying game for the African Nations Cup would be held in Bouaké, the rebel capital in the North, which had remained off-limits for government forces, even after a March 2007 peace treaty. Drogba was categorical: "3 June will be a memorable day. It will be the victory for Ivory Coast football, the victory of the Ivory Coast people and quite simply there will be peace."

People who had been unable to reconcile their differences for five years came together in Bouaké for a soccer game. Twenty-five thousand Ivorians watched together as Ivory Coast defeated Madagascar 5–0. The game was capped off by a goal in the final minute by Drogba himself. An explosion of celebrations followed.

The national victory wasn't just about the goals scored. Austin Merrill, present in the stadium that day, later wrote: "You didn't have to look hard to see that there was much more at stake than just a soccer match. On this day, the Beautiful Game had reunited a country."

Christophe Diecket, an official with the National Football Federation, described his reaction to the game: "I got goose bumps. My wife cried. The people on TV cried," he said. "We Ivorians, we had this abscess, a sickness, but we had no way to lance it to get better. It couldn't have been done by anyone else. Only Drogba." As one front-page Ivorian headline declared after the game: "Five goals erase five years of war."

Humbling an Empire

In the 2001 Bollywood film *Lagaan* (“Land Tax”), an Indian village takes on the might of the nineteenth-century British Empire through a game of cricket. The wager of the game? The village will pay extra taxes if they lose, and none if they win. The Oscar-nominated film is full of suspense, the future of the village hangs in the balance, but the story is fiction. (In the end, of course, the village wins.)

Ninety years earlier, a different—and this time very real—sporting story gripped India. In 1911 the Mohun Bagan (“Sweet Group”) soccer team won victory after victory against English teams. Increasingly, the victories fired the passions of India’s independence movement against the British Raj. When Mohun Bagan reached the final against the East Yorkshire Regiment (which had, until then, dominated the Indian Football League), tens of thousands traveled from all over the country to see the historic game on July 29, 1911.

There were no proper stands. Spectators at the back of the crowd could barely see what was happening on the field. Those with privileged positions at the front communicated the score to those farther back by flying kites. In a riveting game, the Mohun Bagan players competed barefoot against the booted British team.

The Indian team came from a goal down to score twice in the last five minutes. The historic 2-1 victory by the colonized over the colonizers triggered massive celebrations, on and off the field. When the final whistle sounded, shirts, hats, handkerchiefs, sticks, and umbrellas flew through the air. There were whoops, screams, and dances.

This was not just a sporting victory. The *Nayak*, a Calcutta newspaper, exulted: “It fills every Indian with joy and pride to know that rice-eating, malaria-ridden, barefooted Bengalis have got the better of beef-eating, Herculean, booted John Bull in the peculiarly English sport.”

The British decision later the same year to move the imperial capital from Calcutta to Delhi was partly to preempt further humiliation in Bengal, where soccer and proindependence sentiment had become so intertwined.

The poet Achintya Kumar Sengupta wrote, “Mohun Bagan is not a football team. It is an oppressed country, rolling in the dust, which has just started to raise its head.”

A soccer game had unsettled an empire.

A Fighter’s Peace

“Ain’t no Viet Cong ever called me nigger.”

That single sentence, uttered by boxer Muhammad Ali in 1966, is packed with all the qualities of the man as a fighter: the speed at which it is understood, its razor-sharp accuracy, the courage of saying it, the power of its impact.

Even as America was embroiled in a war in distant Vietnam, protesters at home were waging a nonviolent struggle in which the civil rights movement tried to dismantle the racist institutions that comprised America’s own version of apartheid. Ali’s single sentence exposed the contradiction of fighting in the name of freedom on the other side of the world when people were being brutalized and beaten for trying to win basic rights on the streets at home.

The twenty-five-year-old world heavyweight champion was provocative. He was eloquent and forceful, and he knew that the world listened to what he had to say. And so, as one of the most famous men on the planet and at the height of his boxing prowess, he made a remarkable sacrifice.

In the spring of 1967, Ali was drafted into the U.S. armed forces. He likely could have avoided

direct combat by fighting in exhibition matches to serve out his term in the military. For Ali, however, the principle mattered. With reference to his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, Ali asked: “Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam, while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? No, I am not going ten thousand miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation, simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the dark people of the world.”

On April 28, 1967, Ali refused to take the traditional step forward at the military induction center when his name was called. He knew he was risking jail and his career, but he also knew he was setting an example. Supporters outside the induction center chanted: “If he won’t go, we won’t go!” Other black athletes followed his lead.

Ali was arrested, stripped of his championship title, and banned from boxing. He was convicted of refusing induction into the armed forces and received the maximum sentence—five years in prison (overturned on appeal) and a \$10,000 fine. His enforced exile from boxing lasted three years—a time that might well have given him the best years of his boxing career.

The image of the Ali we know now has been partly sanitized with the passage of time. But the power of his personality and provocative statements and the controversial decisions he made as a young man challenged American society. Actor Richard Harris made a simple contrast: “Every single boxer in the world would sell their soul to become the heavyweight champion of the world. What did Ali do? He regained his soul by giving the title up.”



Johannesburg, South Africa. Dawn on election day, April 27, 1994.

Credit: Tom Stoddart/Getty Images

Kicking Back

I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all people live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realized. But my lord, if it needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

—NELSON MANDELA AT HIS TRIAL IN 1964, BEFORE RECEIVING A LIFE SENTENCE AND BEING SENT TO ROBBER

Robben Island, a windswept piece of rock a few miles off Cape Town, has become an international notorious symbol of the white South African system of apartheid. Nelson Mandela—apartheid’s best known opponent, who described the system as “moral genocide”—spent twenty-seven years behind bars, mostly on Robben Island, for his part in confronting the regime. He was joined at the prison by many of his comrades in the struggle. The prisoners, black and white, shared a common belief that the racist system was wrong. They were also united in their determination that their spirits would not be broken by their incarceration.

One obvious form of resistance was through the power of education. “Robben Island was known as ‘the University’ because of what we learned from each other,” Mandela later wrote in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. But the prisoners found an additional weapon for defying attempts to break them: organized games of soccer.

The authorities were initially contemptuous when inmates demanded the right to play soccer in 1964—the same year that a forty-six-year-old Mandela arrived on the island. As described in Chuma Korr and Marvin Close’s *More Than Just a Game*, the warden repeatedly punished those who asked to play soccer by canceling their food rations. Still, the prisoners refused to back down from the demand.

This tiny struggle to be allowed to play a game became a microcosm of much larger battles for dignity and human rights on the South African mainland. The unifying influence of the struggle to be allowed to play soccer, which brought together competing political factions, served as a reminder that the potential benefits of the game went well beyond the playing field.

Even as the authorities continued to refuse, the prisoners continued to insist. Week after week, they discussed how they would organize the game, if permission were ever granted. In 1966, a window of opportunity finally opened in the form of a visit by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Prisoners complained to the foreign visitors. After three years of rebuffs and reprisals, the authorities made the apparently minimal concession in December 1967. From now on, prisoners would be allowed to play a single weekly game.

Because of the prisoners’ poor rations and hard labor in the island’s stone quarries, many barely had the strength to play. They played barefoot. But what they lacked in resources they made up for with energy and organizational skills.

Eight clubs were formed, under the umbrella name of the Makana Football Association—named after a warrior the British had banished to Robben Island 150 years earlier, in 1819. The Makana Football Association elected its officials. Members of the association drafted a constitution. A Protest and Misconduct Committee was created, granting full rights of appeal with all due process. Organizing soccer became a kind of dry run for the apparently unthinkable option—the eventual formation of a government in a democratic South Africa. The contrast to the lawless apartheid system, which had put the men behind bars, was conscious and striking.

Preserving a sense of identity was important, too. Wardens on Robben Island addressed prisoners by numbers or with abusive epithets. The Robben Island soccer records, by contrast, used the form *Mr.* Communications on soccer-related matters included a full postal address, with cell and cell-block number. The letters always ended “Yours in sports.”

As Robben Island prisoner Anthony Suze noted later: “It is amazing to think that a game that people take for granted all around the world was the very same game that gave a group of prisoners sanity—and in a way gave us the resolve to carry on the struggle.”

Nelson Mandela, the world's most famous political prisoner, was finally released in February 1990. Four years later, on April 27, 1994, millions of voters queued patiently to vote, as South Africa held historic elections in which the black majority was allowed to vote for the first time. The former banned African National Congress won an overwhelming victory, and Mandela became the country's president. April 27 became a national holiday, known as Freedom Day.

And yet, even after the 1994 elections, South Africa remained unstable. White extremists—including those within the still unreformed security forces—refused to accept that the apartheid era was over. They were prepared to use violence to reverse history. Mandela was convinced that sport could defuse the brewing violence. Sport (including a series of sporting boycotts) had helped end apartheid. Now Mandela wanted sport to help bring peace, too.

Most South African blacks saw rugby, overwhelmingly played and watched by whites, as the sport of the oppressor—"apartheid in a tracksuit." Mandela was determined to change that perception.

He had a twofold strategy. In advance of the 1995 Rugby World Cup, which South Africa was hosting for the first time, Mandela wooed the South African rugby team, the Springboks—and the white supporters—in one of the most remarkable charm offensives the world has ever seen. "Sport has the power to change the world," he said. "It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers."

Mandela wanted the white resisters of change to lose their fear of black-majority rule. And, at the same time, he sought to persuade blacks to see the team as an integral part of the new South Africa deserving of black support. Most of Mandela's own supporters were initially unconvinced, and were dismayed by the president's overtures to the former oppressors. Mandela talked later of the hostile response from his own supporters when he dared to put on a Springbok cap early in the World Cup tournament: "They booed me! They booed me down!"

Justice Bekebeke, a former inmate of apartheid jails, was one of many who could not bring themselves to support the long-loathed team. He later told John Carlin, author of *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation*, "I was an admirer of Mandela. But the Springboks, that Springbok emblem those people took such pride in: I hated it. It remained for me a potent and loathsome symbol of apartheid." (Carlin's book became the basis for Clint Eastwood's 2009 film *Invictus*.)

Still, Mandela refused to give up. And, with each new South African victory in the championship, popular support for the once-hated team continued to grow. On June 24, 1995 came the final—South Africa's Springboks against New Zealand's All Blacks. Mandela walked out on to the field wearing the Springboks' green jersey and cap.

The mostly white crowd—many of whom had until now refused to acknowledge Mandela as the democratically elected leader—cheered his name as never before. The white rugby team sang the South African liberation anthem, *Nkosi sikelele Afrika*—"God Bless Africa"—whose Xhosa-language phrases they had been practicing to get their tongues around for weeks.

On both sides, millions were won over—in the stadium, in the townships, and around the country. Even Justice Bekebeke was swayed by Mandela's strategy. "In my township, among my people, there was not a single rugby lover. Yet on that day, we were celebrating as South Africans, as one nation," Bekebeke said. "And we knew, deep down, that the Springboks had won because we had willed them to win. It was a phenomenal day."

Cheating the Censor

You can cage the singer, but not the song.

—Harry Belafonte



In Burma, even to be seen holding Aung San Suu Kyi's image is an act of resistance.

Credit: Tom Pilston/*The Independent*

Hidden Messages

Among the basic freedoms to which men aspire that their lives might be full and uncramped, freedom from fear stands out as both a means and an end.

—AUNG SAN SUU KYI

The brutality of the Burmese military junta made international headlines following the massacre of hundreds of peaceful prodemocracy protesters in 1988. When, in 1990, the party of opposition politician Aung San Suu Kyi won an overwhelming election victory, the generals ignored the results—jailing, torturing, and even killing those who dared to speak out.

Aung San Suu Kyi was kept under house arrest. Pinning her picture up, in public or in private, became grounds for arrest. All the more startling, then, was the design of a modest banknote that the government commissioned and published at that time.

Unfortunately for the regime, the designer of the new one-kyat note was a political supporter of Aung San Suu Kyi's. He saw an opportunity for subversion in his task. He knew the note must include an image of Aung San Suu Kyi's late father—General Aung San. The general was the founder of the Burmese army, and was revered by the Burmese for his pivotal role in securing his country's independence from British colonial rule.

The designer engraved the image of the general in the watermark. As he drew, however, he subtly softened the sharp line of the soldier's jawline. He also used a light hand when drawing the general's eyes, nose, and mouth. From these slight, almost imperceptible changes emerged a powerful form of subversion: The face of the father was gently transformed into the face of the daughter.

The censors approved the design—failing to notice that the watermark resembled the daughter more than the father. With the subversive image in place, the banknote was printed, distributed, and put into mass circulation.

In tea shops and pagodas across the country in the weeks and months to come, people whispered to each other as they studied the new note with its hidden portrait of “The Lady,” as Aung San Suu Kyi was known to her compatriots.

The act of subversion wasn't limited to the main portrait. The floral design consists of four circles of eight petals—eight around eight around eight around eight, echoing the date of Burma's democratic “four-eights” uprising that began on 8/8/88. Some observers believe there are as many as eleven hidden messages in the design of the banknote.

Everyone agreed on one thing: The most powerful image was the watermark, showing the face of Aung San Suu Kyi—whose name translates as Bright Collection of Small Victories. People held the banknote up with disbelief and pride.

The generals did not feel pride. The subtly defiant one-kyat note was withdrawn from circulation, and possession of the banknote became illegal. Those who kept their note still treasure it. It is known as the “democracy note.”



The unwillingness of the Burmese people to submit to the brutality of the ruling generals has not diminished over the years. That became clear with the so-called “saffron revolution” of 2007, a series of mass demonstrations led by monks. As described in [Chapter 2](#), at least thirty-one protesters were killed, and thousands more were beaten and jailed. Honest discussion of the protests in the official media was unthinkable. But brave Burmese found ways of getting messages through, even in the most repressive of times.

The caption to a photograph published in the progovernment *New Light of Myanmar* newspaper on October 10, 2007 claimed that the picture showed a demonstration in London against the war in Iraq. The Burmese censors liked the sound of that. But they neglected to check the photograph itself—which showed nothing of the kind. Instead, it showed a peaceful protest in support of the monks and the huge protests for Burmese democracy which had been so harshly repressed in previous weeks. The logo of the Burma Campaign UK, which the government loves to loathe, was clearly visible in the photograph. There was no mention of Iraq.

The courageous placement of the subversive photograph gave Burmese readers a signal

international solidarity, which only infuriated the ruling generals—and gave comfort to ordinary Burmese.

Quantum of Solace

A popular science article, published in the Iranian daily *Jam e Jam* on April 12, 2007, explained Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. The article seemed innocuous enough. But the accompanying photograph of Einstein at the blackboard also included a digital tweak: a message to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself, who famously defied international calls to halt his nuclear program for many years. The Persian message scrawled on Einstein's blackboard read, "What a mistake I made when I started this whole atomic business. Dear Mahmoud, I beg you to give it up!"

The president and his officials—who have jailed journalists for less—were unamused that such a message had slipped through unnoticed until it was too late. But the Photoshop rebel covered his tracks well. The authorities never identified who was responsible for such public impertinence against the Iranian leader.

Laughable News

In Nepal in 2005, all freedoms were seemingly crushed overnight. King Gyanendra (who became king by default after his nephew went on a drunken shootout, killing the king, queen, and a clutch of other royals) dismissed the parliament and declared a state of emergency. Elected politicians were arrested and telephone lines were cut to prevent communication with the outside world. Nepal became one of the most strictly censored countries in the world. The country's journalists remained uncowed, however, despite threats and arrests.

The journalists of Radio Sagarmatha, for example, fought to get the news out by calling something else—essentially, "not news." The standard Nepali word for news is *samachar*. But there was also a less formal word, *haalchal*, meaning a casual conversation. So Mohan Bista, station director of Radio Sagarmatha, had an idea. As he told an interviewer later, "We started calling our new broadcasts *haalchal* instead."

The authorities soon caught on to the "It's not news, just chitchat!" ploy, threatening to close down Radio Sagarmatha unless it ended its news-as-*haalchal* programming. So the journalists came up with another way of keeping Nepalis informed. Since comedy counted as entertainment, and was thus permitted, they asked a well-known comedian to sing the news—in a comedy style, naturally.

As the authorities became increasingly frustrated with the journalists' defiance, they shut down some of the most popular radio stations entirely. Still, however, Nepalis found ways of ensuring that the news got out. In the eastern town of Biratnagar, crowds gathered to hear the news read out by megaphone. When one megaphone broadcaster was arrested, another would pop up in his place.

The determination of ordinary Nepalis to stand up for truth led to a historic retreat by the country's lawless rulers. In 2006, hundreds of thousands swarmed onto the streets of the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu, despite warnings that those trying to enter the city would be shot. Faced with such defiance, the despotic monarch finally agreed to back down. Elections took place in 2008.

The radio stations of Nepal continue to speak out—even, and especially, when the politicians don't like it.

Hot Gossip

When war began in Darfur in western Sudan in 2003, the world's politicians refused to take serious

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