



From 'velvet revolution' to 'velvet *jihad*'?

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The United States election of 2004 was filled with echoes of the American civil war of the 1860s, but in the end the direst predictions of liberal commentators did not materialise: America did not have a nervous breakdown. The economic programmes of both major parties may have left much to be desired, but the evangelical Reds defeated the secular-Enlightenment Blues in a largely free and fair democratic process.

Fifteen years ago, starting with a demonstration of 17 November 1989 in the city of Prague, the people of the then unified state of Czechoslovakia launched themselves on a political journey that came to be known around the world as the “velvet revolution ^[1]” against the country’s communist regime. In the light both of the modern history of revolution and of the subsequent decade and a half of world history, do the tumultuous events in this small central European state contain lessons for current revolutionary movements and impulses around the world?

Revolution and democracy

The political revolutions that made the modern world – from the 18th century American and French revolutions to 20th century transformations in Russia, Germany, China and Iran – have almost all been soaked in blood. They have also suffered from profound democratic deficits.

I consider that the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia is of a comparable moral stature to the non-violent, anti-colonial and civil rights movements in India and the United States – indeed, that it was and remains the first and only attempt at a non-violent revolution in the world. That the Czech “velvet” and the Slovak “public against violence” (the name given to the same November idea and event ^[1] in Slovakia) covered but a small national territory, may raise some doubts about its world-historic nature.

Also by Martin Matušík in openDemocracy: “America’sprayer” ([June 2004](#) ^[2]).

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Yet the complaints of some [Czechs and Slovaks](#) [1], that it was no revolution because nothing fundamentally changed after November 1989; or of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, that it was a “catching-up” and thus regressive revolution – these only testify to the uniqueness of this peaceful modern revolution, one that neither hung its enemies on street lamps (like the Hungarian revolution of 1956) nor practiced cultural war on its past (as in China’s “cultural revolution” of the mid-1960s).

At its core, as a modern project and ideal, the velvet revolution represents a regime change without a democratic political deficit. It was indeed a pure embodiment of the ideal of [democratic revolution](#) [1], even if it never intended to seek economic democracy.

The regime changes

The notion of “regime change” emerged in Washington-speak in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In the beginning the objective was characterised in terms of a crusade for justice against an evil dictator, waged by pre-emptive (or preventive) war. Even if no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, Bush’s clarion-call evidently convinced many of those who re-elected him in 2004 that “regime change” in Iraq provided a legitimate response to the terror of 9/11.

Like most modern revolutions, Bush’s doctrine of pre-emptive war suffers from a democratic deficit. But in distinction to the revolutions of the Enlightenment era that were more or less aware of the contradiction between the means and ends of revolutionary struggle, his doctrine veils itself in moral-religious values, in the language of defending and spreading God-given democratic freedoms. With this linguistic and mental short-circuit, pre-emptive and anti-terror wars are made to resemble “holy wars.”

Garry Wills, in his *New York Times* article ([4 November 2004](#) [1]) accurately depicts the re-election of President Bush as “The Day the Enlightenment Went Out.” In this, the Bush revolution resembles Christian crusades, Islamic *jihad*s, or the construction of Jewish settlements on Palestinian land – all pursue regime change on the basis of moral-religious values which are neither open to democratic evaluation nor yielding to international law.

The bloody experience of modern revolutions yielded the democratisation of nation-states. After religious, inter-state and world wars, the United Nations was created to limit future aggressive wars; war was no longer to serve as the preferred way to change regimes. In this sense, the doctrine of pre-emptive war thus represents a retreat to the era before the 1648 [Peace of Westphalia](#) [1] that ended the thirty years’ war. For if America does not inscribe a divine right to rule in its constitution, it can today claim to have “a man of God” in the White House, supported by a Christian fundamentalist voting bloc that delivered not a democratic revolution, but a conservative one.

A velvet *jihad*?

Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive war and the intolerant strain in his politics mirror aggressive Islamic *jihad*, the very force on which the United States has declared war. There can be nothing "velvet" about *this* November's conservative revolution [3], unlike the Czechoslovakian and central European one of 1989. Yet American democracy remains – just – standing after the election. My limited hope that it will survive Bush's "four more years" is rooted in our societies' capacity for a fragile learning that can replace bloody revolutions with non-violent regime change – even with a "velvet democracy".

We can learn from our failures and change course. In a counterpart of the spirit of the Czech religious dissidents Jan Hus [1] and Jan Amos Comenius, who espoused the notion of a "holy war" waged with truth or with one's own soul, the original definition of *jihad* in Islam was a spiritual struggle with oneself. Aggressive Islamic *jihad* is today the mirror-image of the 11th-century Catholic crusades against the Jews and Muslims of the Holy Land, or those against the 15th century Czech Hussite [1] heretics and "godly warriors". It strives for the secularised, merely external form of regime change. Here, the idea of inner spiritual transformation – what Islamic humanism and the best in the Judeo-Christian tradition share with the Socratic motto "know thyself" – has devolved into a violent territorial and political mission to convert, conquer, or vanquish infidels for the sake of imposing one's own values.

Is radical Islam winning or losing "the war for Muslim minds"? Don't miss Gilles Kepel's fascinating interview in openDemocracy (November 2004 [4]).

In the service both of deep historical affinities and contemporary democratic principles, I would like to propose the concept of "velvet *jihad*" as a sort of companion idea to the equally eccentric-sounding Czech [1] notion of the "velvet revolution" – a model of a movement for regime change that weds democratic with existential revolution, that replaces conservative and crusading conquests with a "public *for* change but *against* violence".

The velvet revolution of 1989 carries in itself the best of the Czech and Slovak traditions – among them Jan Hus's courage to speak truth to power, the non-violent religiosity of Petr Chelcicky [1] and Comenius [1], and Václav Havel's experience of dissent against totalitarianism. Could this rare happening from a small country inspire the aggressive advocates of *jihad* in Islam and of holy wars pursued by Christian or Jewish fundamentalists into a "velvet *jihad*" or existential revolution to transform their struggles into paths of radical but peaceful challenge?

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