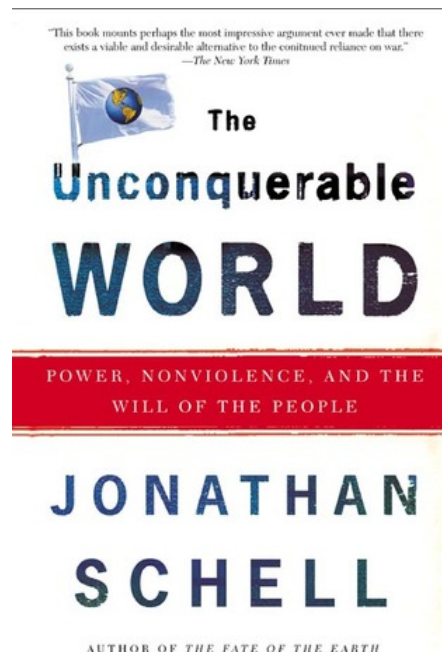




The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People

Jonathan Schell

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"This book mounts perhaps the most impressive argument ever made that there exists a viable and desirable alternative to the continued reliance on war." -The New York Times

At times of global crisis, Jonathan Schell's writings have offered important alternatives to conventional thinking. Now, as conflict escalates around the world, Schell gives us an impassioned, provocative book that points the way out of the unparalleled devastation of the twentieth century toward another, more peaceful path.

Tracing the expansion of violence to its culmination in nuclear stalemate, Schell uncovers a simultaneous but little-noted history of nonviolent action at every level of political life. His investigation ranges from the revolutions of America, France, and Russia, to the people's wars of China and Vietnam, to the great nonviolent events of modern times-including Gandhi's independence movement in India and the explosion of civic activity that brought about the surprising collapse of the Soviet Union.

Suggesting foundations of an entirely new kind on which to construct an enduring peace, *The Unconquerable World* is a bold book of sweeping significance.

The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People Details

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From Reader Review The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People for online ebook

Janice Sheufelt says

Many interesting points, overly academic for the more casual reader such as myself!

Amy says

Good intro into nonviolent reforms. The first bit is a little dry, with all the theories of war, etc. but it does help explain why nonviolence can be effective in today's world. Great pieces of world history included as well.

Larry Bassett says

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, Wis. 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.

Source: http://www.salon.com/2012/03/01/the_u...

This link is to a March 2012 interview with Jonathan Schell.

Jonathan Schell summarizes the war theory of Clausewitz and the nonviolence practiced by Gandhi. He does this in a way that is understandable to the student and still interesting to the more experienced activist. He reviews history and takes lessons from it. The concept of violence is covered in one hundred readable pages. Nonviolence is reviewed for the second hundred.

War cannot be waged without guns, tanks, and planes. Nonviolent resistance cannot be waged without active, steadfast, committed masses of unarmed people. The civil-rights movement led by Martin Luther King in the United States provides an illustration. The courageous campaign of a minority, mostly black, touched the conscience of an inactive majority, mostly white, who provided the political support necessary for the movement's historic judicial, legislative, and social victories.

Schell asserts that the number of democracies in the world increased substantially in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The Washington think tank Freedom House keeps a record of countries it considers to be democracies. In 1971, it counted thirty; in 2001, after a quarter century of the liberal revival, it counted one hundred and twenty-one.

The same source (<http://www.freedomhouse.org>) counts 117 democracies in 2011, down from a high of 123 in 2006.

Schell further asserts that the conversion of many of the countries to democracies happened nonviolently. This seems to contradict the many violent international events that we see in the media but Schell is very thorough with his examples. Schell tells the stories of the nonviolent aspects of revolutions in India, France, Russia, Eastern Europe and South America. International political history is not something I know very much about and I found myself with eyes glazing over during some of those pages.

The claim that nonviolence has played a major role in political changes in recent history was encouraging but not convincing. I would like to say that this section of the book is a page turner, but, for me, that was not the case. Schell tried to cover this information in depth but I found it difficult to follow. The thesis of the entire book is that nonviolence can play an increasing role in the future.

Books that are about topics that are in transition often find that a changing reality leaves the books out of date rather quickly. *The Unconquerable World* is one of those books that does a reasonably good job of outlining the history of world events, but dynamic current events quickly overwhelm a bold effort to outline a trend and make a forecast of continuing progress.

... I have sought to trace, alongside the awful history of modern violence, a less-noticed, parallel history of nonviolent power. The chronicle has been a hopeful one of violence disrupted or in retreat – of great-power war immobilized by the nuclear stalemate, of brutal empires defeated by local peoples fighting for their self-determination, of revolutions succeeding without violence, of democracy supplanting authoritarian or totalitarian repression, of national sovereignty yielding to systems of mixed and balanced powers. These developments, I shall argue, have provided the world with the strongest new foundations for the creation of a durable peace that have ever existed.

I found the first third and the last third of *The Unconquerable World* readable and compelling. (And gets four stars.) Regrettably, the middle third contains the heart of the book and is seriously disappointing. (It gets two

stars.) This is where Schell attempts to prove his point that there are many examples where nonviolence has been successful in recent history and that this can lead to more use of nonviolence over violence in the future. Would it were so! But the decade of violence following the publication of this book does not lead me to be optimistic. Arab Spring and the Occupy movement have given this book some legs.

Averaging out the two and four star segments, the book as a whole deserves three stars and my thanks for an optimistic message.

Taylor says

a quasi-academic reading of the history of social movements in the world. some great perspectives on the role of nonviolence in creating power - generally good, but unnecessarily dense and occasionally unenjoyable.

Emma Sea says

12 years after publication, with an increasingly militarized police force around the world (and, yeah, all those wars), this should be interesting.

Flip Niesten says

Shell geeft veel voorbeelden van min of meer succesvolle geweldloze actie. Hij stelt onder meer dat vele revoluties (Franse, Russische etc) aanvankelijk geweldloos begonnen en pas later gewelddadig werden.

citaat:

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Shell stelt dat de VS als enige wereldmacht moet kiezen tussen imperiale macht (met grote nadelige gevolgen voor de burgerlijke vrijheden binnen de USA en cooperatieve macht.

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In het boek komen een aantal hoopgevende voorbeelden en ontwikkelingen aan de orde en geeft Schell een andere kijk op historische ontwikkelingen. Helaas is het niet makkelijk leesbaar door teveel aan dorre details en gebrek aan duidelijke opbouw waardoor de boodschap voor mij enigszins ondergesneeuwd geraakt is. Misschien nog een keer lezen

Barry says

Illuminating, thought-provoking, and encouraging. Takes a hard-nosed look at history and the realities of power and violence, and persuasively argues that non-violence (or cooperative power, or 'living in truth') is, in the long-run, more powerful than violence and coercive power. Useful analyses and insights to inform activist strategising.

Charlie says

Engaging, serious, hopeful - Schell is an uncommonly skilled writer who winsomely illuminates complex issues. Here he traces the rise of principled systems of nonviolence and makes suggestions for peace triumphing over war in our time.

David Gross says

Jonathan Schell tells the story of the evolution of the logic of war and political power in a way that might just give it a happy ending after all.

When pacifists argue for the *effectiveness* of nonviolent solutions in severe political conflicts, it's easy to be skeptical. Pacifists begin with the belief that violence is always an inappropriate way to settle such conflicts, and so one suspects that they will view the evidence about the effectiveness of nonviolent and violent methods not so much with the goal of comparing the methods objectively, but of justifying the view that the nonviolent methods are wholly sufficient.

So it helps, I think, that Schell is not a pacifist. And he belongs to the modern tradition of nonviolent resistance scholarship that sees it not so much as a moral repudiation of war and conflict, but as an important and underappreciated technology with which to succeed in such conflict.

In particular, Schell sees mass nonviolent action as the latest step in what has been a long and varied evolution of the craft of warfare. His introductory chapters give a history of how the theory and practice of war have changed over the centuries, and what forces — social, technological, and otherwise — have driven these changes.

People frequently look at war as being a constant, death-and-taxes-like fact of life: Sure, war has changed over the years as technology has changed, but this has mostly been quantitative — ultimately it's still just Cain & Abel writ large. Schell challenges this view, pointing out that war has a particular logic to it and that this logic has undergone radical and fundamental changes several times in history in reaction to changes in technology and social organization.

Over the centuries, violent war evolved from armies battling for supremacy as “politics by other means,” to the nuclear balance of terror policy in which display & politics came to the forefront while force was necessarily restrained.

Meanwhile, “people’s war” was emerging and challenging the idea that military superiority was sufficient for victory. You could have superior technology, numbers, and technique; you could hold a nuclear weapons monopoly; you could win every battle; you could conquer all the territory; and still you could lose if the population refused to cave in and submit.

At first “people’s war” was at least in part guerrilla war, and usually culminated in a conventional war battle

that forced the loser to withdraw. So “people’s war” just attached different coefficients to Violence and Politics in the equation in which they both seemed a necessary part. But over time, a form of “people’s war” developed in which violent tactics weren’t necessary — or even useful.

Revolutionaries came to believe that violent insurrection carried too high a risk of strategic failure, and that only through successful nonviolent mass action could worthwhile goals be reliably retained — in Václav Havel’s words, “a future secured by violence might actually be worse than what exists now; in other words, the future would be fatally stigmatized by the very means used to secure it.”

Gandhi was the Clausewitz of this variety of warfare, and Schell spends many pages talking about his theories of nonviolent conflict and how he developed them. He also compares and contrasts them with other, similar forms of nonviolent revolt that emerged in and eventually dismantled the Soviet empire — and with the American revolution, taking to heart John Adams’s contention that the revolution had already succeeded before the first battle of what is called the Revolutionary War.

Schell is at his best when he is writing about this sort of bottom-up people power.

Unfortunately, he ends his book by presenting a program for international reform that almost entirely concerns states and governments remaking the international order in a top-down fashion.

Some of his ideas in this area I found interesting — such as his suggestion that unitary state sovereignty is a model that is on its way out. In its place, he suggests that international and transnational bodies will bear some of the load (he explicitly disavows “Wilsonian” plans for world government, but some of his proposals seem to have the same essence), and he also promotes the idea of the rise of quasi-sovereign nations-without-states, to allow for some sort of self-determination for stateless peoples like the Kurds.

Schell points to the negotiations over the future of Northern Ireland as an example of how the diffusion and distribution of sovereignty gave both sides in the conflict less of an all-or-nothing goal to fight for and enabled them to imagine a future of peaceful coexistence.

Two examples that came to my mind, but that Schell doesn’t discuss, were 1) the transnational enforcement bodies that accompany regional trade agreements, and 2) the sort of experiments like those taking place in parts of Europe where religious/cultural minorities can elect to bypass the civil judiciary and have their cases heard in sharia-law courts.

It is frequently observed that the community of nations is an anarchy — there is no central authority with a monopoly on violence. During the Dubya administration in particular, the U.S. has dreamed of assuming the throne and ending this state of affairs. Certainly many Americans think that the world needs a single sovereign power with the will, ability, and wisdom to remove threats to world peace, and it just so happens they know just the right fellows for the job too. But recent history has made a laughing stock of that variety of hubris. Schell considers the neoconservative imperial international order to have all the drawbacks of the Wilsonian vision, with none of its idealism. Sounds about right.

Larry says

I was disappointed because I had high hopes. As someone who had lots of graduate courses in political theory and has read lots about pacifism and Gandhi, I found parts not very insightful or new. I was also disturbed by his use of 19th century historians rather than more current scholarship when discussing the French Revolution or the Glorious Revolution. Alas, his optimism about the future of Russia is now badly

outdated.

Jeffrey Mcandrew says

This looks like an essential read! Schell is a very sharp author.

Jesse Bacon says

I am almost done and this book is clarifying things I have been pondering for a long time about the nature of nonviolence, activism, and power. A sweeping book that basically taking us through the history of violence and nonviolence, dwelling on well known episodes as well as forgotten ones like the Glorious revolution . Basically it declares that most victories are nonviolent, even ones we think of as violent such as the Russian Revolution. Of course the victorious in that and several other cases immediately began practicing all the violence they could muster. There appears to be a fundamental misunderstanding of states and stateless of how powerful nonviolence is, the lack of necessity for violence, and the importance of institution building. Basically, according to Gandhi and Schell, all you need to do is begin building up your own states far before you get independence ,then one day some critical point is passed and the state you are fighting melts away. Very applicable to our own work here, and I'm not even to the part about Israel/Palestine yet.

Flipniesten says

Shell geeft veel voorbeelden van min of meer succesvolle geweldloze actie. Hij stelt onder meer dat vele revoluties (Franse, Russische etc) aanvankelijk geweldloos begonnen en pas later gewelddadig werden. De geweldloze revolutionair moet een parallele maatschappij organiseren en daarmee de machthebbers uitschakelen. Voorbeelden Ghandi, King, Havel (living in truth) etc.

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unco...

Schell looks for the nonviolent actions that are part of what are often represented as broadly violent revolutions. (p. 143) He defines violence: "Violence is the method by which the ruthless few can subdue the passive many. Non-violence is a means by which the active many can overcome the ruthless few." (p. 144). He discusses The Glorious Revolution of 1689 in England and the American, French and Russian Revolutions. He makes the interesting observation that revolutions are typified as violent and the subsequent establishment of a new regime is assumed to be peaceful, whereas the reverse has "more often been the case". (p. 144) in the French revolution, the American, even the Russian...(p. 175) (p. 178). More people died making Potemkin the film than in the actual storming of the Winter Palace! The Russian Revolution was

more of a victory of a 'mass minority' ... than a real people's revolution as happened in France or America (p. 183).

The English 'Glorious Revolution' of 1689 "London was in fact the first of many modern capitals whose rebellious spirit was to infect and destroy the allegiance of an army of an ancien regime". This was William of Orange versus King James, with defections at the non-battle at Salisbury.

There has been a near universal failure of theorists to predict the non-violent fall of powers. He quotes Thomas Paine: "Tis not in numbers but in unity that our great strength lies". In the American Revolution Committees of Correspondence were formed for "mutually fostering and co-ordinating activity". These were the basic political units.

The setting up of institutions independent from the state or the ruling classes... is the key activity in preparing for a peoples revolution. In Eastern Europe this took the form of civic and cultural activity (p. 195), Shell geeft veel voorbeelden van min of meer succesvolle geweldloze actie. Hij stelt onder meer dat vele revoluties (Franse, Russische etc) aanvankelijk geweldloos begonnen en pas later gewelddadig werden.

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Maura Shanahan says

Had to read this book for a political philosophy class a few years ago. It is one of the few that I held onto after the class was over. Gives an in depth and insightful look into the history of violence and non-violence during war times. Loved many of the ideas presented in the book (at times, long winded), but still trying to decide whether or not some of these ideas have Socialist/Communist agendas...

Jeff says

If this was better edited, this would have warranted 4-stars. There are parts of it, such as the early sections on the history of war ideology, that were phenomenal, and I have already started using anecdotes from Schell's histories when I teach political theory in my classes. But, sadly, the last one hundred pages reads more like musings than well-argued points.

