

The Hero with the Big Gun: Is it all a Myth?

By Arthur Kanegis

In Hans Christian Anderson's classic fairy tale, almost everyone agrees that the Emperor is wearing the finest regal garb, even though he's buck naked. Were they all lying? Or did they believe it?

Popular beliefs can actually override people's personal visual observations ([Biological Psychiatry 6/22/05](#)). Emory U researchers found that about half of us go along with popular myths even if they contradict what we actually see – and *our MRI brain scans show no physiological evidence of lying!*

Mythological interpreter Joseph Campbell studied cultures from ancient tribal clans to modern industrial nations, and found that the societal behavior of each culture is determined primarily by its underlying mythology. The way we respond to a given situation often has more to do with our myths and stories than reality.

The Myth of the Hero with the Big Gun

We've seen the old story over and over: The "fair damsel" is going about her life until the forces of evil, seeking money and power, place her in distress.

Along comes the "hero," who is reluctant to use violence, but finally has no other choice. Despite overwhelming odds, he finally outguns the bad guys, kills the forces of evil, puts the good guys in back in charge and rides off into the sunset with the girl. Everyone lives happily ever after.

It doesn't matter whether the evil ones are empires, space aliens, terrorists or Saddam Hussein. "Fair damsels" can be hobbits, tribes, nerds or the people of Iraq. "Hero" can be male, female, animal, or Avatar.

The characters are interchangeable – it is the basic story that stays the same.

This *Myth of the Hero with the Big Gun*, also

known as the [Myth of Redemptive Violence](#) is so deeply entrenched in our culture that few even recognize that it is a myth – we just think it's the way things are. Of course killing the "bad guys" solves problems. It's the fundamental assumption of our society and it plays out in the pronouncements of the mass media, pontifications of politicians, and the behavior of America in the world.

Yet, how many people do you know who ever killed the "bad guys" and lived happily ever after?

My organization Future WAVE (Working for Alternatives to Violence through Entertainment) worked with teen gang members and youth in detention centers. We'd ask: "Who has ever seen someone get shot or stabbed?" Perhaps half would raise their hands. "Did it ever solve the problem?" After an uncomfortable silence, they'd realize they'd been sold a myth by movies, TV shows and videogames.

When their girlfriends were "dissed" or they were abused, they told the "bad guys" to knock it off. When that failed, they did what

they'd been taught – they kicked ass, fought fire with fire, blew away the "bad guys". But instead of riding off into the sunset, they found themselves riding off to jail and their friends being carted off to the graveyard.

These young people felt cheated. They'd never been taught any other way of dealing with the bullies and "bad guys". Once our [BULLYPROOF.org](#) program taught them more powerful tools than violence -- through our [rap 'n roll opera](#), they were excited. Some told us, they never would have ended up in jail if they'd had our [bullyproof.org](#) program earlier.



WHO IS MIGHTY?



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It's not just young people who've fallen victim to this myth. It seems that presidents and politicians around the world believe that killing "bad guys" solves problems. And yet there is powerful evidence to the contrary.

When a mighty superpower, with military spending equal to the entire rest of the world combined, can't seem to "win" in Iraq, when it failed to defeat peasants in Vietnam despite years of plummeting that country with superior firepower, maybe we should question the basic notion that power comes from the barrel of a gun.

The Soviet and US Superpowers both tried to defeat gun-toting tribesmen in tiny Afghanistan. Yet all the military might just strengthened the worst of the "bad guys". When a million-to-one military superiority fails, should we wonder whether superior violence actually works? Could "military power" be an oxymoron?

If your objective is to kill and destroy, then armed force is quite effective. But generally the objective of violence is to communicate a motivating message – from the thief saying "give me your money" to the nation trying to win allegiance to its side. If we take a systems approach, we discover that there are many more powerful motivators than violence – which usually breeds its own resistance.

Years ago I produced [War Without Winners](#) with Paul Newman for the Center for Defense Information, founded by Admiral Gene La Rocque. He went so far as to say that in a nuclear age "there is no defense!" Our only defense lies in economic, social and political solutions that take away the reason for war.

Yet the myth of superior violence is so pervasive that even when it fails to work in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and dozens of other places – few think to question the basic premise. Instead they urge surges, more troops, more military power. "Nuke 'em!"

But can any amount of military power truly win? It can kill and destroy, maybe even the whole human race, but can it win? Can it protect us any more than a rabbit's foot?

"The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie -- deliberate, contrived and dishonest -- but the myth -- persistent, persuasive and unrealistic."
- J.F. Kennedy

In the REEL world of movies, violence is clean, effective and solves the problem. But in the REAL world it almost never works.

"Well," you may be saying. "I can certainly think of many glorious wars where the good guys beat the "bad guys", solved the problem and everyone lived happily ever after." Really?

Are thinking about the actual war? Or are you are thinking about the *story* of the war? A story that has been spun and polished to fit it into the myth? When you start digging deeper into the actual documents, you invariably find that violence only begets more hatred, planting the seeds for more violence.

The notable exceptions are not the result of the war, but of a new kind of heroism, like that of General Macarthur, who instead of vanquishing the Japanese after the war, honored, restored, and rebuilt – killing Japan's warrior spirit with kindness – breaking the cycle!

So, what are we to do? Accept oppression? Accept evil? The myth that we have only two choices fight or flight is so strong that we fail to see a most powerful force right before our eyes.

For 40 years it was drummed into the US public that we had to spend billions to prepare for the ultimate battle with the "evil empire."

But then ordinary people tore down the Berlin Wall, the [Solidarity movement](#) toppled the communist dictatorship in Poland and propelled trade-union leader [Lech Walesa](#) from jail cell to presidential palace; a [velvet revolution](#) in Czechoslovakia overthrew the communist government and swept playwright [Václav Havel](#) to the presidency.

In Moscow, in August of 1991, hardliners sought to crush the reformist Gorbachev by arresting him and sending Red Army troops to seize their "White House."

As we in the West watched on TV, we braced for a bloodbath. But instead, tens of thousands of ordinary people took positions around the Russian white house, put flowers in the barrels of the tank guns, and appealed to the soldiers to join the democracy movement. Many did! Noncooperation and defiance helped topple one of the most powerful and oppressive police states on the planet!

Isn't it incredible that with 30,000 nuclear weapons, 5 million soldiers, 50,000 tanks, and the omnipresent KGB, the hard-liners couldn't prevent the collapse of their empire to people-power movements throughout Eastern Europe? The fact that huge military spending actually helped hasten their internal collapse shows that it is not power but weakness that comes from the gun.

"Who is the mightiest of heroes? He who makes an enemy into his friend"
 – Talmud

The role of nonviolence in the 1991 toppling one of the most powerful empires was so outside of the prevailing myth that most commentators didn't even know how to report it. It was like a non-event. There were no movies-of-the-week, no reenactments of the heroic struggle, no commemorative parades for the greatest event of the second half of the Twentieth Century.

"We don't have an adequate word in the English language for the singularly explosive power that Gandhi unleashed when he defeated the mighty British empire with what he called Satyagraha or "soul force," Jonathan Schell told me in an interview.

"The closest we come is "non-violence" – but that sounds like something passive, – a word defined by it's negative, not a word evocative of an incredible power that has brought down one of the most oppressive empires in the world."

We fail to see it, we don't have a word for it, yet it is not something marginal, it is a force at the very heart of true power in our world.

Nonviolent People Power:

- Transformed a nation in which a black person [couldn't sit in a white diner](#) into one in which a black person sits in the White House.
 - Propelled [Nelson Mandela](#) from prison to Presidency in South Africa.
 - Deposed Pakistani [General Musharraf](#).
 - Overturned fraudulent [Ukrainian elections](#).
 - Overthrew Philippine dictator [Marcos](#).
 - [Brought down the Milosevic](#) dictatorship; stopped "ethnic cleansing" in Serbia – which 78 days of NATO bombing failed to do.
 - Forced a bloody civil war to end, [warlord](#)

[Charles Taylor into exile, and women into the leadership of Liberia.](#)

- Fought Nazis, threw off colonial yoke, and toppled dictators around the world.

It has proven itself to indeed be [A Force More Powerful](#), as PBS called it in their extraordinary special on the subject. "Even the American

Revolution," Schell argues "was actually a nonviolent revolution – won in American hearts and minds well before the "shot heard round the world."

Schell's book [The Unconquerable World](#), details the nonviolent struggle waged by the colonies uniting in defiance of the British.

"The Boston Tea Party was a little bit rough," Schell told me, "but no one was killed or injured. It was an inspired symbolic act"

The 2nd US President, John Adams wrote: "What do we mean by the revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760 to 1775...before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington."

"The decisive revolution," Schell continued "was thus the process by which ordinary people withdrew cooperation from the British government and then, well before even the Declaration of Independence, set up their own governments in all the colonies. The war that followed was the military defense of these already existing governments against an attack by what was now a foreign power seeking to force the new country back into its empire."

This history is detailed in the studies of Gene Sharp at the [Einstein Institute](#). But you won't read Sharp's [hidden history](#) in school textbooks. Why not? Is it just too far removed from our prevailing myth of the *Hero With the Big gun*?

Divine Right of Kings vs. We-the-people

If we look at the deeply rooted myths that dominate our political culture, we notice that not only have they given us ineffective means-- violence, but they have also given us ineffective ends-- change rulers. Here's how the story goes: The land is lush until the bad ruler usurps the throne, making the land barren and the people miserable. After a fierce battle the good

king is restored to the throne and there is peace and prosperity throughout the kingdom.

From the Arthurian legends to The Lion King, to the Super Mario Brothers movie, we see the same story, the myth that: "[The land and the king are one.](#)"

In an era of the divine right of kings, can you imagine what a shocking assertion it was when America's founders declared that *we-the-people* are the sovereigns? Born with the inalienable right to make the political choices for our land? That governments rule only because we grant them part of our sovereignty? And that we have the right to take it back if governments fail to serve our needs for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? That must have been as scandalous as calling the emperor naked!

If 1770's quill-penned Committees of Correspondence could precipitate such huge change, imagine how much more we could do with today's email and social networks.

Today, if our planet is to survive, we must recognize that WE and the land are one, and that it is WE who must save us, not the king.

As wars rage on and hopes fade under the even under such an aware President as Obama, it grows ever clearer that changing rulers alone cannot save us. If we are to create a shift in the way we run our world, we-the-people are going to have to do it.

What can spark us to all become change-agents? Entertainment. Movies, TV, video-games – these are the mythmakers of today'. We need to create stories of new kinds of heroines who wield more advanced means than violence – not on behalf of a divine king, but on behalf of the divinity in all of us -- people-powered heroes on transformational journeys into visionary futures.

Plato said that whoever tells the stories shapes society. Arguing facts and figures won't get us very far. If we want to change the world, we have to change the story.

Writer/director Frank Pierson, former president of the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences and of the Writers Guild of America, put it this way in a commencement

address to USC film school graduates:

"Movies are to our civilization what dreams and ideals are to individual lives: they express the mystery and help define the nature of who we are and what we are becoming.... Go and make cinema and TV that expresses our history and our ideas and that foster respect for a civilization in real danger of self destruction. Be decision makers with dreams and hopes instead of raw ambition. Tell stories that illuminate our times and our souls that waken the sleeping angel inside the beast"

Forward-thinking people in Hollywood now have a terrific opportunity -- to brainstorm, sponsor screenplay competitions, have story meetings, develop seminars and run training programs to enable writers, producers and directors to learn how to create new kinds of stories - stories featuring peaceful warriors who use techniques more advanced than violence. We have the opportunity to take audiences on fantastic journeys into the abundant, balanced, dynamic, ecologically-sustainable and friendly "glocalized" (global and local) future we would all love to dream about. If movies are the dreams of our culture, let's give young people dreams that inspire hope in the future, that give them a vision of the way things could be.

When a courageous few start creating such visions, they may find their films breaking box-office records. And then all the imitators will start to follow. And pretty soon we'll have planted the seeds for a new story, a new mythology. And out of our new stories will grow new realities – a safer, more secure, more abundant and prosperous planet for us all.

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