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# THE IRON LAWS OF REVOLUTION AND THE FAILURE OF THE ARAB SPRING

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*"You cannot make a revolution with silk gloves." -- Joseph Stalin*

*"I'm deeply troubled by the undemocratic turn that Egypt's transition has taken"*

*--Tweet from former president Jimmy Carter, on the failure of the Arab Spring*

In December 1942, the Red Army was finally turning the tables on the Wehrmacht. After a seemingly endless series of debilitating defeats the Soviets brought the German war machine to a halt at Stalingrad, where the Wehrmacht's notorious Sixth Army found itself surrounded, outnumbered and outgunned. Back in the Kremlin, Stalin was planning the offensive that would put an end to the battle in his namesake city and seal the fate of the German army. He decided that General Konstantin Rokossovsky should lead the operation rather than General Andrey Yeremenko, who had been responsible for the defense of Stalingrad until then. The Soviet dictator could tell, however, that Marshall Georgi Zhukov had his reservations. "Why don't you say anything?" he asked, to which Zhukov replied: "Yeremenko will be very hurt." Understandably nonplussed by this sudden display of concern for other people's emotions from a commander who had never had any qualms about using his men as mere cannon fodder, Stalin shot back: "It's not a time for feeling hurt. We're not schoolgirls, we're Bolsheviks!"

It goes without saying that the man's crimes were horrendous. His purges and collectivization drives killed untold people, to say nothing of his criminal failure to prepare an adequate defense against the German invasion that everyone except him knew was coming. Millions died under his rule, and his unwillingness to accept that Hitler was about to invade the Soviet Union made life for his people even more of a living hell.

Nevertheless, there is a deep truth in his characteristically terse retort to Zhukov's strangely mawkish objection: schoolgirls don't make or defend revolutions.

And yet at the height of the Arab Spring, to listen to western journalists (CNN was particularly egregious) hipsters on the internet had invented a new way to rule the world; there was even a trendy slogan bandied about, 'Revolution 2.0'. Shamefully, much of the western press left their analytical credentials at the door, essentially becoming mere cheerleaders for the students in the streets.

In those heady, irrational days, for our sins both of us were forced to attend foreign policy events where we were breathlessly told in no uncertain terms that the political rules of the road had been entirely upended; history no longer mattered. The telecommunications revolution allowed people to organize so quickly, efficiently, and differently--to share information at the speed of the click of a computer key--that the days of tyrants everywhere were surely numbered. Twitter, Face book, You Tube and the rest had definitively changed the world beyond all recognition. Power was out, communicating was in.

Just a few years on, surveying the ruins of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, and especially Syria, these callow utopian claims look more than a little silly. But beneath this colossal analytical failure a far more important point needs making. There *are* iron laws governing revolutionary outcomes, outputs that have been tested and proven by history. The place to start is with Stalin's quotation—people living alone in their basements with their parents are unlikely to be latter day Robespierres, Castros, Lenins, or Maos. But if it is easy (and necessary) to mock the ridiculous pretensions to world-historical change CNN and the others made in the first flush of the Arab Spring, it is far more important to look at what actually makes for successful revolutions, in order to underline the real reasons for the failure of Revolution 2.0.

### ***The First Law: Organize (And not online)***

A gloomy but almost infallible rule of revolutions is that the most organized group almost always wins. The pro-independence American colonists may (just) have amounted to a plurality—and never more than that--but they were far better organized than the pro-English colonists ever were. Likewise, the Bolsheviks in Russia never had anything close to majority popular support, any more than the French Jacobins did. What all three revolutionary groups did possess however was a relatively disciplined, centralized leadership, capable of quickly and decisively taking decisions, that crucially would be followed by their supporters in the field. In other words there was *praxis*, a Greek notion meaning the unity of thought and action. This decisive advantage allowed all three to overcome vast popular opposition to their revolutionary goals, as despite the impressive numbers opposing them, the enemies of all three were ultimately unable to coherently turn numerical superiority to their advantage, given their disorganized nature.

This iron law recently held true in Egypt, where the 'flash mob' inspired, secular, internet-loving students were swiftly and unceremoniously shoved aside by the only two forces in Egyptian life that could claim to be relatively disciplined: The army and the Muslim Brotherhood. Both these groups had coherent, centralized leaderships that had been around for decades, a well rehearsed *modus operandi* for reaching decisions, and a disciplined group of followers prepared to act upon their leadership's orders, swiftly and coherently.

In many cases the youthful, secular twitterati had never met one another before the protests had begun. There was no organized structure of any kind to fall back upon with which protestors could coordinate

their possible revolutionary program, let alone a cultural habit of discipline, of followers acting on such demands from their leadership. Who comprised the secular student leadership was one question, how decisions would be reached another, and whether supporters on the streets would unquestionably obey another still. All this had to be invented on the fly, while both the army and the Muslim Brotherhood knew exactly how to operationalize their supporters in the field. It was hardly a fair fight, and it is little wonder that the climax of the failed Egyptian Revolution boiled down to a contest between the two most organized segments of society, with the students and their computers being effortlessly swept aside.

### ***The Second Law: Have a Winning Narrative***

As is true on other counts for those who think the telecommunications revolution has effortlessly remade the world, cheerleaders for Revolution 2.0 often confused the striking change in the method of communication with content. Revolutions, for all the giddy slogans and millennial promises, are very practical things when it comes to assuming power. You can have all the twitter followers in the world, but if a would-be revolutionary fails to craft (in terms of content) an attractive galvanizing message, having a million people look at intellectual mush online is unlikely to energize potential supporters on the streets.

Crucially, slogans and programs that are thought out ahead of the actual insurrection bind supporters together. All too often for Arab supporters of Revolution 2.0 the punch line was missing from the joke. They had things exactly backwards, as they revolted and only then began to tentatively think about the content of the revolt. For in revolutions it is never enough to state the obvious—that the entrenched leadership is corrupt, incompetent, and unfeeling. Better to have a goal and then revolt, rather than to rise up and then try to figure out the reasons why.

Something better must be offered as a governing program (however unrealistic) that binds revolutionary supporters together as it energizes them, an ultimate reward for the revolutionary risks being taken that is fervently believed in. Glaringly, on content, beyond valuing freedom in some sort of vague way and hating President Mubarak, the Egyptian secularists simply did not have much to say.

This became a crushing blow as their Muslim Brotherhood and military rivals both had much more attractive narratives: For the Brothers it was that ‘Islam is the answer;’ for the military it was ‘we promise a return to normal life,’ both being heady and potent arguments for their respective group’s support.

The best two single revolutionary examples regarding controlling the narrative come from the two extremes of the American and Russian Revolutions. Indeed, the whole point of Jefferson’s magisterial Declaration of Independence was to lay before mankind the reasons for the colonists revolt—what their ill-treatment at the hands of the English Crown amounted to—and then to offer a very attractive way forward, based on the principles of life, liberty, and property, individual freedoms leading to democratic self-governance. Even today, it is hard to think of a more persuasive and seductive document for advertising a cause than Jefferson’s masterpiece.

Ironically, about the only other narrative in contention would have to be Lenin’s invocation of ‘Peace, Bread, and Land’ at the start of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Peace was shorthand for ending the Tsar’s hated and calamitous entry into World War I, a folly the weak Kerensky government perpetuated to its great cost. Bread meant a focus on the internal chaotic conditions within the Russian Empire itself would be the new priority. And Land signified that at last the deeply unpopular nobility would be forced to share the bounties of the country with the vast majority of its citizens. Incredibly timely, the slogan was

startlingly on point as to an articulated revolutionary program, one that secured wide popularity. It is a prime example of the fundamental benefit of working out the reasons for revolution, ahead of having one.

### ***The Third Law: Shoot***

Revolutions may be carried out in the name of hopes, dreams and ideals, but their outcomes are decided by force. In revolutions, much like in love and war, everything is fair, and revolutions are often literally matters of life and death for the parties involved. Consequently, rules, rights and institutional norms mean little to nothing in revolutionary situations. This being the case, it is unsurprising that many successful revolutionary organizations and movements put much effort into building or gaining control over the armed forces.

For instance, even in the days preceding the October Revolution, Leon Trotsky, at the time the Bolsheviks' second in command after Lenin, was already bringing the Russian army under Bolshevik control, aware of the need to protect the revolution against its many enemies. In the same vein, Trotsky later played a major role in the build-up of the Red Army, which was instrumental in saving the Bolshevik regime from being crushed by a group of rogue counter-revolutionary generals from the Imperial Russian Army. Other obvious examples of the importance of military clout for the survival of a revolution include China, Cuba and the US. In Cuba and China, the revolution marked the end of a protracted military struggle, and the American Revolution was only saved from defeat by a military force that was hastily cobbled together to fend off the attempts of the British Crown to restore order in the colonies.

If these examples tell us anything, it's that revolutions are often the beginning (Russia, America) or the end (Cuba, China) of a fierce armed struggle for control. Revolutions are challenges against very powerful groups and institutions, which are highly unlikely to abandon their position without a fight.

Moreover, smelling the weakness of the ruling elite, other revolutionary forces may emerge to make their own bid for the control of the post-revolutionary order. In such a volatile and highly competitive environment, survival is only for those parties that have the ability to control a country or region by force. The protest movements of the Arab Spring, however, ignored this rule, and did so at their peril.

With the Arab world currently consumed by civil war, repression and chaos, it's easy to forget that the uprisings started out as peaceful protests. Such attempts quickly proved futile, as the protest movements that triggered the Arab Spring were easily pushed aside by organizations that were better armed and had more combat experience. For example, protesters in Bahrain excelled at advertising their cause online, but had no response when the royal family decided to simply crush the revolt. In Syria and Libya too, the uprisings were quickly taken over by armed rebels. Both countries were flooded with jihadist groups and militias led by renegade army officers soon after the protests started.

In all, the record clearly shows that the fate of a revolution is not decided on Face book or Twitter, but in the armed conflicts that arise when the tyrant is being threatened or overthrown. The loosely organized, internet-savvy protest movements that made up Revolution 2.0 failed to realize this and didn't stand a chance once the guns were drawn. Sure, Egyptian protesters won control over Tahrir Square in a direct confrontation with the domestic security forces, but successes like these were fleeting. The cheerleaders who hailed them as hallmarks of the new kind of revolution should have known better. Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun, not out of a Face book post.

### ***The Fourth Law: Find Your Useful Idiots***

Another mistake the protesters in the Arab Spring made was their failure to connect with other parties. It is true that revolutionaries are often driven by a fanatical belief in the correctness and righteousness of their own view and display an equally vehement hostility towards the views of others, but that has not kept them from building coalitions to achieve their political goals. Short-lived as such alliances may be they are crucial to the fulfillment of the revolutionary project.

One of the most dramatic demonstrations of the importance of building coalitions in revolutionary campaigns concerns the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao Tse-tung, one of the most cold-blooded, calculating practitioners of *realpolitik* on the radical left. In 1927, the CCP was suddenly attacked by the Guomindang, a nationalist movement that had joined forces with the communists to fight the warlords who ruled China at the time. The Guomindang killed thousands of communists in this surprise attack, but for Mao this was no reason not to restore the alliance a decade later, when he needed more manpower to rid China of the colonial reign of the Japanese emperor. Afterwards, of course, the communists turned against the nationalists again, and defeated them in a guerrilla war that would end with the Chinese revolution of 1949.

Another revolutionary leader who displayed tactical acumen in dealing with other parties in the revolutionary struggle is Fidel Castro, who managed to draw on very different sources of support for his guerrilla campaign against the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. When it served his purposes, Castro explicitly sought to unite the anti-Batista opposition around a common strategy, knowing full well that his guerrilla forces would stand a better chance if they wouldn't have to go it alone. The Bolsheviks and the Shia firebrand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who became Iran's head of state after the toppling of the Persian shah in 1979, found their useful idiots as well, making and breaking all the coalitions they needed to achieve their goals.

But while history is rife with examples of how useful idiots can be assets to revolutionary parties and movements, the protest movements in the Arab world displayed none of the pragmatism that helped Lenin, Mao, Castro and Khomeini seize power. They failed to build coalitions through which they could let others do at least some of the dirty work for them. While they proudly and confidently claimed to speak on behalf of the people, they ignored the other, more powerful interests they had to take into account if they were to have any chance of success at all. As the course of the Arab Spring made clear, they were woefully outgunned, yet they failed to strike up a deal with militarily more capable actors.

One of the explanations for this acquiescence is the protest movements' unwillingness to be unequivocal about what they wanted. Tellingly illustrating this refusal to choose a direction, the Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim later said about the website through which he tried to run the protests: "It was not as if I liked Hosni Mubarak, but I did not want to lose the support of those page members who would find a direct attack on the president to be either inappropriate or very risky, or to create a conflict between the page numbers who held different opinions." In other words, his priority was the number of 'likes' on his website, not in saying anything. With such a blatant lack of commitment to a political agenda, the Arab Spring protestors were highly unclear as to what they actually wanted, and how to get it. It is of course difficult to select a coalition partner with the same short-term goals, if you have no clear agenda. Moreover, the protest movement's anarchic organizational structure did not help either in forging alliances.

In order to be a credible partner to other parties in a conflict, an organization must have someone who can speak on its behalf. One of the main disadvantages of the decentralized, networked organizational structure of the protest movements in the Arab Spring is that they lacked this ability to act as an interlocutor that other parties can count on.

In fairness, it is far from certain that the demonstrators could have entered an alliance with powerful actors anyway. The army in Egypt, for example, had vested interests, especially in the economy, that it would not put at risk to advance the plight of the Egyptian people, and the loyalty of the Libyan elite forces to Gaddafi and his clique was more or less guaranteed by bribes and tribal ties. In Bahrain, the royal family even took care that their security forces were made up of foreign Sunnis, who, so they calculated, would have no problem opening fire on Shia Bahrainis.

Given the fact that the protesters had few military capabilities and little chance that they could rely on those of others, it is all the more naïve that they tried to achieve their goals the way they did. Few revolutionary movements and organizations achieve success entirely on their own, and especially since in the Arab Spring the protest movements found themselves in a situation where other players were holding the guns, they made a grave error by not putting more effort into winning over some useful idiots.

### **Conclusion**

Merely running down the list of the iron laws of revolution makes four basic points very clear. First, the tragic, naïve secularists in Egypt and elsewhere—along with their cheerleaders in the western press—were nowhere near to being successful. The twitterati were not centrally organized, having no disciplined *modus operandi* to further their revolutionary agenda at the ultimate moment of crisis.

Second, this coherent agenda itself was utterly lacking; unlike the American colonists and the Russian Bolsheviks the youthful Egyptian secularists simply could not clearly and cleanly articulate an attractive governing narrative justifying their revolution. In the cheerleading for the transformative powers of the Internet, people had forgotten that yes, content still matters.

Third, the secularists from Libya to Egypt to Syria did not have the guns, nor did they acquire them. Soon more forceful groups with firepower—such as the tribal leaders of Libya, the military in Egypt, and bloodstained IS in Syria—superseded them.

Fourth, the supporters of Revolution 2.0 proved themselves entirely unable to work with useful idiots, building temporary alliances that could have made up for their dearth of firepower; this, and not tweeting, would have amounted to truly building networks. On all these basic counts, Arab secularists fell miles short.

But at the same time there are these fundamental lessons to be learned from successful revolutions, iron laws that apply from Castro's Cuba to Adams's America. Just as they applied in the past, these iron laws can be an invaluable analytical guide for the future, pointing out the likely success of future insurrections.

Beyond the need to assess the reasons for the failure of the Arab Spring to inform future analysis, the vital lesson to be learned is that there are indeed Iron Laws of Revolution that largely determine an insurrection's chances for success or failure. And they do not change because you have learned how to tweet. As Stalin terribly but accurately observed, ruthless men who understand the cold but enduring lessons of power win revolutions, not those involved in a Children's Crusade.