

Human will can move mountains

By Michael Colson

The tempest of change in Eastern Europe is a fascinating example of the exercise of that enigmatic thing called the human will.

When the collective human will is mobilized, things hap-

Commentary

pen. Consider Czechoslovakia. The communist government in that nation could deal with a few, or a few hundred, dissidents, and did so — harshly and efficiently — throughout the 1970s and '80s.

But this year, when the national will was energized and millions of people turned out in the streets to demand democracy, the Communist party, which had ruled with an iron fist for two generations, quickly lost its grip.

Not a shot was fired. Once the Czech national will was mobilized against it, the fate of the ruling class (the Communist party) was sealed. Nothing, perhaps short of a Soviet nuclear strike against Czechoslovakia, could have frustrated the will of several million angry, animated people who were all thinking basically the same thought.

Will — the failure of it — was also in evidence on the other side and it was amazing. When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov made it clear that the Russians would not intervene to prop up East European communist regimes, the ruling class throughout the region suffered a nearly simultaneous loss of will, and the whole show collapsed. The dominoes fell: Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria.

The communist parties suddenly decided they weren't all that interested in survival, and they lapsed into a coma.

The human will awakened — or subdued — can alter civilization and the course of history in profound ways.

Consider the case of France at the outset of World War II. The French had what was believed to be the most powerful army in Europe. If the French — the government, the French armed forces and the French people — had possessed the will to fight, they still might not have subdued the Nazis; but they could have made the Germans pay dearly in blood and treasure for every inch of French soil the Nazis captured.

Instead, in one of the monumental failures of human will in this century, the Nazis bowled down France in six weeks, subjugating a mighty world power without really even working up a sweat.

Contrast this with the experiences of the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. A few thousand armed Jews, possessed of a ferocious will to survive and resist the Nazis, held their own against a mechanized German army for nearly as long as the entire French nation. The Jews battled tanks with Molotov cocktails, and faced down machine guns with pistols.

As for the French, some carried on the fight from exile, and others went to fight in the Resistance, but the great mass of the French people, and certainly a decrepit French leadership, simply lost the will to resist. They thus became soft targets for the Nazis, who at that stage in the war possessed a

virulent, overpowering will to prevail which was difficult for any nation to resist.

I hesitate to compare the American experience in Vietnam with that of the Russians in Afghanistan, except to say that both demonstrated the deleterious effects of a failure of the will on the part of the superpowers.

The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army were no match for the overpowering might of the American superpower. Yet, the Vietnamese prevailed, as they had earlier against another great power, the French.

Surely, the fierce, potent Red Army could have smashed the ragtag mountain guerrillas of Afghanistan, yet the Soviet people and the Soviet government lacked the will to prevail. The Mujaheddin didn't.

A failure of will is not a dysfunction of intellect, courage or nerve. It is something deeper, something spiritual and collective that animates and energizes these other human traits.

A people possessed of a collective will to prevail are capable of incredible acts of courage, cunning and bravery. As had been demonstrated in Romania, the energized will of a people can be resisted by force, but it cannot be easily broken.

Michael Colson is a political science major.

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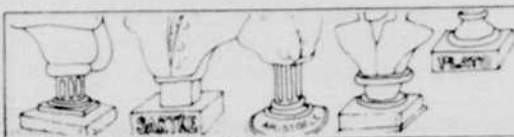
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