

[The Truth About Nonviolent Movements](#)

Journalists Carl Gibson and Steve Horn have done an important service with their article [outlining](#) Serbian activist Srdja Popovic's inexcusable collaboration with the global intelligence company STRATFOR, and his role in disclosing the activities of movements and activists with whom he has worked. Unfortunately, the article falls into a rather simplistic and reductionist analysis of Popovic's motivations and, more critically, misrepresents the nature of the popular uprisings in Serbia and other countries. The article also contains a number of factual errors and misleading statements.

Even prior to the recent revelations, Popovic's activities were being increasingly recognized as problematic within the network of proponents of strategic nonviolent action, including many of us who had worked with him in the past. (Between 2006 and 2008, Popovic and I collaborated on a number of workshops together and he hosted me when I served as guest lecturer for the Political Science faculty at the University of Belgrade.) Among other things, Popovic has received criticism for grossly overstating the role he and CANVAS have played in supporting various popular struggles, which many in the Western media were eager to exaggerate as well. This, unfortunately, fell right into the hands of autocratic regimes and their apologists which have tried to deny that popular protests against them were based on legitimate grievances, instead labeling them the work of "outside agitators." Meanwhile, in an apparent effort to distract attention from their support for various dictatorships and occupation armies, some Western governments would also exaggerate the significance of their limited support for some of CANVAS's work and other opposition activities against autocratic regimes they didn't like. Ironically, Gibson and Horn's article naïvely bought into this very narrative of exaggerating the impact of Popovic and CANVAS.

A more serious problem with Gibson and Horn's article, however, is its misleading and inaccurate portrayal of nonviolent movements — both Otpor! and other democratic movements worldwide. Ironically, Gibson and Horn take a page from STRATFOR in overestimating the power of outside forces and underestimating the power of popular domestic uprisings, the only real lever for democratic change.

Otpor! and the uprising against Milosevic

Gibson and Horn err in depicting Otpor! — the student-led pro-democracy group in Serbia that emerged in the late 1990s to challenge the militaristic and semi-autocratic regime of Slobodan Milosevic — as some kind of Western conspiracy. The people of Serbia, particularly those on the Left, had serious problems with Milosevic's role in provoking and prosecuting the Balkan wars of that decade (which resulted in the deaths of nearly a quarter million people), as well as his dismantling of Tito's socialist legacy for a corrupt crony capitalism, his alliance with far-right ethnic chauvinists and his suppression of legitimate dissent. In their description of the 2000 popular uprising against Milosevic and similar popular uprisings during that period, Gibson and Horn effectively deny the domestic roots of these rebellions and grossly exaggerate the role of the United States. Not content to leave well enough alone in their important and valuable exposure of Popovic's misdeeds, they unfortunately distract attention from these revelations and raise questions about their own credibility by effectively rewriting history with a series of questionable and sometimes demonstrably false claims.

For example, Gibson and Horn describe Otpor! simply as "the U.S.-funded Serbian activist group" and imply that Otpor!'s existence was part of a U.S. conspiracy to bring down an anti-American regime. It was hardly that simple, however. As [one Otpor! veteran](#) described the decision to accept money from foreign sources, "It was

a tough choice, but important choices are never easy. *These countries bombed us* – talking to the representatives of their governments and heads of their foundations was not without discomfort. But the decision to look for support abroad was informed by the understanding that the only people who had money in Serbia at that time were war profiteers and war criminals. All money in the country was bloody. Confronted by that reality, foreign support seemed the lesser evil.”

Gibson and Horn’s analysis of the uprisings in Serbia and Ukraine essentially denies human agency, coming across as a left-wing equivalent of Ronald Reagan’s insistence that Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala experienced leftist revolutions because they were on a “Soviet hit list” and not because of the oppression and injustice of U.S.-backed military dictatorships. In reality, receiving some funding from the NED or other U.S.-funded agencies doesn’t make a revolution a creation of Washington any more than receiving Soviet bloc arms made a revolution a creation of Moscow.

To defend their downplaying of the Serbian uprising’s indigenous roots, Gibson and Horn quote Australian-based Trotskyist Michael Barker’s assertion that the stridently anti-American Serbian political leader Vojislav Kostunica — who won the 2000 election against Milosevic that the incumbent unsuccessfully tried to steal — was actually Washington’s “favored candidate” chosen to “promote a neoliberal vision for Serbia.” In reality, the U.S. had actually been cultivating other opposition leaders who were far more sympathetic to U.S. political and economic interests to replace Milosevic. Kostunica, by contrast, was an outspoken nationalist who opposed NATO, the United States and the European Union. Furthermore, Milosevic was responsible for far more privatization during his time in office than was Kostunica during his presidency. Barker, who has never been to Serbia and has little background in the Balkans, is notorious for his conspiracy-mongering and has a long history of falsely accusing a number of prominent leftists (myself included) who don’t follow his line of having CIA ties. It is disappointing, therefore, that Gibson and Horn decided to cite him instead of people who are actually familiar with the region. (In addition, Barker’s article from which they quote was not in Z Magazine, as they claim, but on the ZNet bloggers’ space on which virtually anyone can write without input from Z editors.)

STRATFOR doesn’t get it

The fact is STRATFOR, like almost everyone else involved in U.S. military, intelligence and diplomatic operations, has little understanding of popular struggles. Their view of power is top-down and state-centric, with little respect for the power of ordinary people to create change. Indeed, it’s rather odd that Gibson and Horn appropriately depict STRATFOR as being duplicitous, then rely on statements by the group’s officials to make the case against Popovic and CANVAS. Like most members of the military/intelligence complex, the analysts at STRATFOR just don’t understand strategic nonviolent action or how it works. For example, the leaks reveal their simplistic understanding in their description of CANVAS: “They just go and set up shop in a country and try to bring the government down.” In reality, CANVAS never has had more than one office, which has always been based in Belgrade and employs less than a half dozen people. More importantly, it is the oppressed people of the country in question that are responsible for bringing down a dictatorship, not a handful of outsiders.

STRATFOR’s ignorance is further revealed in another quote Gibson and Horn cite, in which they claim that the CANVAS trainers “basically go around the world trying to topple dictators and autocratic governments (ones that U.S. does not like.)” First of all, outside trainers have never been responsible for toppling governments. Governments that fall to civil insurrections do so because of a combination of their lack of popular support and the much stronger support of opposition movements. Good strategic thinking is important in any struggle, and the CANVAS workshops may have been helpful in enabling some activists to think better along these lines, but it is not CANVAS that tries to topple governments; it is popular social movements. Secondly, neither Popovic nor CANVAS cares if a dictatorship is liked or not liked by the U.S.

government. They have worked with activists opposing both pro- and anti-American regimes, including Palestinians, Western Saharans, Egyptians, Azerbaijanis and others.

My studies of unarmed insurrections indicate that outsiders really don't make much of a difference in the success or failure of a movement. For example, the dozen or so Egyptian activists who attended CANVAS workshops were not significant figures in the uprising against Mubarak and a number of the other activists I interviewed found their contributions unhelpful in terms of the situation in Egypt. Despite this, there are those who want to credit (or blame) Popovic and CANVAS for the January 25 revolution.

Similarly, I've come across two websites which, citing a seminar which I helped lead in Cairo in 2007, have claimed I was personally responsible for the Egyptian revolution! Like those who exaggerate the influence of Popovic and CANVAS in Egypt and other countries in the Global South, such claims appear to be based on a racist mentality people of color are incapable of organizing or strategizing for their own liberation and it is only through the influence of white people - intellectuals like Gene Sharp, trainers like Popovic or hybrids like me - can they suddenly become agents of change.

And, while I am certainly bothered by the fact that CANVAS has worked with some of the right-wing oppositionists in Venezuela, I'm not particularly worried by it. The kind of nonviolent uprisings that CANVAS advocates can only succeed if the movement has a sizable majority of people on their side. Whatever legitimate complaints some Venezuelans may have of Hugo Chavez and his successor, few want to return to the rule of the old oligarchs. Doing a weekend workshop for 20 or so young bourgeois Venezuelans is no threat to the Bolivarian Revolution. In any case, in Venezuela or anywhere else, information on strategic nonviolent action is available in plenty online, without relying on Popovic or CANVAS.

Inaccurate and misleading statements

It is not just the analysis in the Gibson and Horn article that is disappointing and distracts from their important exposé of Popovic's interactions with STRATFOR, it's the demonstrably false and misleading assertions that appear in the latter part of the article.

For example, let's look at their claim that "Otpor! was so successful that it was ushered into Ukraine to help manufacture regime change there in 2004, using the template applied originally in Serbia with \$65 million in cash from the U.S. government."

First of all, it was not Otpor! — which had been dissolved by that time — that was invited to Ukraine, but a small and now defunct Serbian group called the Center for Nonviolent Resistance (CNR). Secondly, CNR was invited to Ukraine by some elements of the Ukrainian opposition; it were not ushered in by the U.S. government. Thirdly, the \$65 million was the total given to all opposition activities in Ukraine, not what was provided to the Serbian trainers, which was no more than a few thousand dollars. More importantly, the December 2004 uprising in Ukraine was not a case of "regime change;" it was a successful demand to have a new election after evidence emerged that the previous election had been stolen. Finally, it was not "manufactured"; it was a popular uprising in which millions of Ukrainians took to the streets and braved sub-zero temperatures to demand that their votes be fairly counted.

Making change

In light of a spate of bizarre conspiracy theories regarding nonviolent action theorist Gene Sharp some years ago, a number of prominent anti-imperialist scholars and activists — including the late Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg, Frida Berrigan, Elizabeth McAllister, Paul Ortiz and Stephen Shalom, among scores of others — signed [a letter](#) in his defense. The signatories, while calling on progressives to "continue to struggle against U.S. imperialism in all its manifestations," noted how "those who attempt to dismiss recent popular nonviolent struggles against autocratic regimes as somehow being instigated and controlled by Western powers invalidate the ability of the millions of people who have placed their bodies on the line for freedom and justice to think for themselves or play a decisive role in determining their own nations' future" and no "foreign individual, organization or government deserves the credit or the blame for their victories."

It is unfortunate, therefore, that the important revelations in Gibson and Horn's article regarding Srdja Popovic's dealings with STRATFOR were so compromised by their lack of understanding of this phenomenon.