

FROM DICTATORSHIP to DEMOCRACY

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Preface

The terror of these systems appeared to me to be especially poignant for these dictatorships were imposed in the name of liberation from oppression and exploitation.

Fighting dictators will, of course, bring casualties. It is my hope, however, that this analysis will spur resistance leaders to consider strategies that may increase their effective power while reducing the relative level of casualties.

1

Facing Dictatorships Realistically

Since 1980 dictatorships have collapsed before the predominantly nonviolent defiance of people in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Slovenia, Madagascar, Mali, Bolivia, and the Philippines.

LB: examples to research

The collapse of dictatorships in the above named countries certainly has not erased all other problems in those societies: poverty, crime, bureaucratic inefficiency, and environmental destruction are often the legacy of brutal regimes. However, the downfall of these dictatorships has minimally lifted much of the suffering of the victims of oppression, and has opened the way for the rebuilding of these societies with greater political democracy, personal liberties, and social justice.

Freedom through violence?

Understandably, reacting to the brutalities, torture, disappearances, and killings, people often have concluded that only violence can end a dictatorship. Angry victims have sometimes organized to fight the brutal dictators with whatever violent and military capacity they could muster, despite the odds being against them. These people have often fought bravely, at great

cost in suffering and lives. Their accomplishments have sometimes been remarkable, but they rarely have won freedom. Violent rebellions can trigger brutal repression that frequently leaves the populace more helpless than before.

Whatever the merits of the violent option, however, one point is clear. *By placing confidence in violent means, one has chosen the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority.* The dictators are equipped to apply violence overwhelmingly. However long or briefly these democrats can continue, eventually the harsh military realities usually become inescapable. The dictators almost always have superiority in military hardware, ammunition, transportation, and the size of military forces. Despite bravery, the democrats are (almost always) no match.

When conventional military rebellion is recognized as unrealistic, some dissidents then favor guerilla warfare. However, guerrilla warfare rarely, if ever, benefits the oppressed population or ushers in a democracy. Guerrilla warfare is no obvious solution, particularly given the very strong tendency toward immense casualties among one's own people.

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Even when successful, guerrilla struggles often have significant long-term negative structural consequences. Immediately, the attacked regime becomes more dictatorial as a result of its countermeasures. If the guerrillas should finally succeed, the resulting new regime is often more dictatorial than its predecessor due to the centralizing impact of the expanded military forces and the weakening or destruction of the society's independent groups and institutions during the struggle -- bodies that are vital in establishing and maintaining a democratic society.

Coups, elections, foreign saviors?

A military coup d'etat against a dictatorship might appear to be relatively one of the easiest and quickest ways to remove a particularly repugnant regime. However, there are very serious problems with that technique. Most importantly, it leaves in place the existing maldistribution of power between the population and the elite in control of the government and its military forces

Dictators are not in the business of allowing elections that could remove them from their thrones.

Many people now suffering under a brutal dictatorship, or who have gone into exile to escape its immediate grasp, do not believe that the oppressed can liberate themselves. They expect that their people can only be saved by the actions of others. These people place their confidence in external forces. They believe that only international help can be strong enough to bring down the dictators.

Dictatorships usually exist primarily because of the internal power distribution in the home country.

Although dictatorships may benefit from or be somewhat weakened by international actions, their continuation is dependent primarily on internal factors.

Facing the hard truth

As the above discussion indicates, liberation from dictatorships ultimately depends on the people's ability to liberate themselves.

2

The Dangers of Negotiations

Merits and limitations of negotiations

In some situations where no fundamental issues are at stake, and therefore a compromise is acceptable, negotiations can be an important means to settle a conflict.

Negotiated surrender?

Democrats should be wary of the traps that may be deliberately built into a negotiations process by the dictators. The call for negotiations when basic issues of political liberties are involved may be an effort by the dictators to induce the democrats to surrender peacefully while the violence of the dictatorship continues. In those types of conflicts the only proper role of negotiations may occur at the end of a decisive struggle in which the power of the dictators has been effectively destroyed and they seek personal safe passage to an international airport.

Power and justice in negotiations

A settlement is not reached in negotiations through an assessment of the rights and wrongs of the issues at stake. While those may be much discussed, the real results in negotiations come from an assessment of the absolute and relative power situations of the contending groups.

Even assuming that all goes well in negotiations, it is necessary to ask: What kind of peace will be the result? Will life then be better or worse than it would be if the democrats began or continued to struggle?

“Agreeable” dictators

If the democrats agree to halt resistance in order to gain a reprieve from repression, they may be very disappointed. A halt to resistance rarely brings reduced repression. Once the restraining force of internal and international opposition has been removed, dictators may even make their oppression and violence more brutal than before.

! “For the tyrant has the power to inflict only that which we lack the strength to resist,” wrote Krishnalal Shridharani.

Resistance, not negotiations, is essential for change in conflicts where fundamental issues are at stake.

What kind of peace?

! If dictators and democrats are to talk about peace at all, extremely clear thinking is needed because of the dangers involved. Not everyone who uses the word “peace” wants peace with freedom and justice. (...) Hitler often called for peace, by which he meant submission to his will. A dictators’ peace is often no more than the peace of the prison or of the grave.

Further, democratic negotiators, or foreign negotiations specialists accepted to assist in the negotiations, may in a single stroke provide the dictators with the domestic and international legitimacy that they had been previously denied because of their seizure of the state, human rights violations, and brutalities. Without that desperately needed legitimacy, the dictators cannot continue to rule indefinitely. Exponents of peace should not provide them legitimacy.

Reasons for hope

Dictatorships are not permanent. People living under dictatorships need not remain weak, and dictators need not be allowed to remain powerful indefinitely. Aristotle noted long ago, “... [O]ligarchy and tyranny are shorter-lived than any other constitution...”

The old preconception that violent means always work quickly and nonviolent means always require vast time is clearly not valid. Although much time may be required for changes in the underlying situation and society, the actual fight against a dictatorship sometimes occurs relatively quickly by nonviolent struggle.

3

Whence Comes the Power?

Achieving a society with both freedom and peace is of course no simple task. It will require great strategic skill, organization, and planning. Above all, it will require power. Democrats cannot hope to bring down a dictatorship and establish political freedom without the ability to apply their own power effectively.

Necessary sources of political power

[Authority, human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors, material resources, sanctions] (p28-29)

! All of these sources, however, depend on acceptance of the regime, on the submission and obedience of the population, and on the cooperation of innumerable people and the many institutions of the society. These are not guaranteed.

Full cooperation, obedience, and support will increase the availability of the needed sources of power and, consequently, expand the power capacity of any government.

On the other hand, withdrawal of popular and institutional cooperation with aggressors and dictators diminishes, and may sever, the availability of the sources of power on which all rulers depend. Without availability of those sources, the rulers' power weakens and finally dissolves. Naturally, dictators are sensitive to actions and ideas that threaten their capacity to do as they like. Dictators are therefore likely to threaten and punish those who disobey, strike, or fail to cooperate.

! The degree of liberty or tyranny in any government is, it follows, in large degree a reflection of the relative determination of the subjects to be free and their willingness and ability to resist efforts to enslave them.

As the political scientist Karl W. Deutsch noted in 1953:

! Totalitarian power is strong only if it does not have to be used too often. If totalitarian power must be used at all times against the entire population, it is unlikely to remain powerful for long. Since totalitarian regimes require more power for dealing with their subjects than do other types of government, such regimes stand in greater need of widespread and dependable compliance habits among their people; more than that they have to be able to count on the active support of at least significant parts of the population in case of need.

Centers of democratic power

The common feature of the cited examples in which dictatorships have been disintegrated or weakened has been the courageous *mass* application of political defiance by the population and its institutions.

As stated, these centers of power provide the institutional bases from which the population can exert pressure or can resist dictatorial controls. In the future, they will be part of the indispensable structural base for a free society.

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Exercising Power

! ...military resistance against dictatorships does not strike them where they are weakest, but rather where they are strongest. By choosing to compete in the areas of military forces, supplies of ammunition, weapons technology, and the like, resistance movements tend to put themselves at a distinct disadvantage. Dictatorships will almost always be able to muster superior resources in these areas.

Nonviolent weapons and discipline

!! The common error of past improvised political defiance campaigns is the reliance on only one or two methods, such as strikes and mass demonstrations.

! Since nonviolent struggle and violence operate in fundamentally different ways, even limited resistance violence during a political defiance campaign will be counterproductive, for it will shift the struggle to one in which the dictators have an overwhelming advantage (military warfare).

! In some cases, however, limited violence against the dictatorship may be inevitable. Frustration and hatred of the regime may explode into violence. Or, certain groups may be unwilling to abandon violent means even though they recognize the important role of nonviolent struggle. In these cases, political defiance does not need to be abandoned. However, it will be necessary to separate the violent action as far as possible from the nonviolent action. This should be done in terms of geography, population groups, timing, and issues. Otherwise the violence could have a disastrous effect on the potentially much more powerful and successful use of political defiance.

Openness, secrecy, and high standards

! In contrast, openness regarding intentions and plans will not only have the opposite effects, but will contribute to any image that the resistance movement is in fact extremely powerful.

Shifting power relationships

Strategists need to remember that the conflict in which political defiance is applied is a constantly changing field of struggle with continuing interplay of moves and countermoves. Nothing is static.

Democratizing effects of political defiance

! In contrast to the centralizing effects of violent sanctions, use of the technique of nonviolent struggle contributes to democratizing the political society in several ways.

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The Need for Strategic Planning

While spontaneity has some positive qualities, it has often had disadvantages. Frequently, the democratic resistors have not anticipated the brutalities of the dictatorship, so that they suffered gravely and the resistance has collapsed. At times the lack of planning by democrats has left crucial decisions to chance, with disastrous results. Even when the oppressive system was brought down, lack of planning on how to handle the transition to a democratic system has contributed to the emergence of a new dictatorship.

Realistic planning

“To plan a strategy” here means to calculate a course of action that will make it more likely to get from the present to the desired future situation.

Note here that the objective is not simply to destroy the current dictatorship but to emplace a democratic system. A grand strategy that limits its objective to merely destroying the incumbent dictatorship runs a great risk of producing another tyrant.

Hurdles to planning

Some individuals and groups, of course, may not see the need for broad long-term planning of a liberation movement. Instead, they may naively think that if they simply espouse their goal strongly, firmly, and long enough, it will somehow come to pass. Others assume that if they simply live and witness according to their principles and ideals in fact of difficulties, they are doing all they can to implement them. The espousal of humane goals and loyalty to ideals are admirable, but are grossly inadequate to end a dictatorship and to achieve freedom.

! Action based on a “bright idea” that someone has had is also limited. What is needed instead is action based on careful calculation of the “next steps” required to topple the dictatorship. Without strategic analysis, resistance leaders will often not know what that “next step” should be, for they have not thought carefully about the successive specific steps required to achieve victory. Creativity and bright ideas are very important, but they need to be utilized in order to advance the strategic situation of the democratic forces.

Acutely aware of the multitude of actions that could be taken against the dictatorship and unable to determine where to begin, some people counsel “Do everything simultaneously.” That might be helpful but, of course, is impossible, especially for relatively weak movements. Furthermore, such an approach provides no guidance on where to begin, on where to concentrate efforts, and how to use often limited resources.

Other persons and groups may see the need for some planning, but are only able to think about it on a short-term or tactical basis. They may not see that longer-term planning is necessary or possible.

It is also just possible that some democratic movements do not plan a comprehensive strategy to bring down the dictatorship, concentrating instead only on immediate issues, for another reason. Inside themselves, they do not really believe that the dictatorship can be ended by their own efforts. Therefore, planning how to do so is considered to be a romantic waste of time or an exercise in futility.

Four important terms in strategic planning

Grand strategy is the conception that serves to coordinate and direct the use of all appropriate and available resources (economic, human, moral, political, organizational, etc.) of a group seeking to attain its objectives in a conflict.

Grand strategy sets the basic framework for the selection of more limited strategies for waging the struggle. Grand strategy also determines the allocation of general tasks to particular groups and the distribution of resources to them for use in the struggle.

Strategy is the conception of how best to achieve particular objectives in a conflict, operating within the scope of the chosen grand strategy.

A strategy has been compared to the artist's concept, while a strategic plan is the architect's blueprint.

Strategy may also include efforts to develop a strategic situation that is so advantageous that the opponents are able to foresee that open conflict is likely to bring their certain defeat, and therefore capitulate without an open struggle.

! Tactics and methods of action are used to implement the strategy. *Tactics* relate to the skillful use of one's forces to the best advantage in a limited situation. A tactic is a limited action, employed to achieve a restricted objective. The choice of tactics is governed by the conception of how best in a restricted phase of a conflict to utilize the available means of fighting to implement the strategy.

! Tactical gains that do not reinforce the attainment of strategic objectives may in the end turn out to be wasted energy.

! A particular tactic can only be understood as part of the overall strategy of a battle or a campaign. Tactics are applied for shorter periods of time than strategies, or in smaller areas (geographical, institutional, etc.), or by a more limited number of people, or for more limited objectives.

Tactical engagements are the tools of the strategist in creating conditions favorable for delivering decisive attacks against an opponent. It is most important, therefore, that those given responsibility for planning and executing tactical operations be skilled in assessing the situation, and selecting the most appropriate methods for it. Those expected to participate must be trained in the use of the chosen technique and the specific methods.

Method refers to the specific weapons or means of action. Within the technique of nonviolent struggle, these include the dozens of particular forms of action (such as the many kinds of strikes, boycotts, political noncooperation, and the like) cited in Chapter Five. (See also Appendix)

7

Planning Strategy

In order to increase the chances of success, resistance leaders will need to formulate a comprehensive plan of action capable of strengthening the suffering people, weakening and then destroying the dictatorship, and building a durable democracy.

!! Strategies can only be developed in the context of the particular struggle and its background.

In making this choice the strategists will need to consider such questions as the following: Is the chosen type of struggle within the capacities of the democrats? Does the chosen technique utilize strengths of the dominated population? Does this technique target the weaknesses of the dictatorship, or does it strike at its strongest points? Do the means help the democrats become more self-reliant, or do they require dependency on third parties or external suppliers? What is the record of the use of the chosen means in bringing down dictatorships? Do they increase or limit the casualties and destruction that may be incurred in the coming conflict? Assuming success in ending the dictatorship, what effect would the selected means have on the type of government that would arise from the struggle?

* Planning for democracy

It should be remembered that against a dictatorship the objective of the grand strategy is not simply to bring down the dictators but to install a democratic system and make the rise of a new dictatorship impossible. To accomplish these objectives, the chosen means of struggle will need to contribute to a change in the distribution of effective power in the society. Under the dictatorship the population and civil institutions of the society have been too weak, and the government too strong. Without a change in this imbalance, a new set of rulers can, if they wish, be just as dictatorial as the old ones.

!! Further, the mobilization of power through political defiance will strengthen the independent institutions of the society. The experience of once exercising effective power is not quickly forgot.

Formulating a grand strategy

Following an assessment of the situation, the choice of means, and a determination of the role of external assistance, planners of the grand strategy will need to sketch in broad strokes how the conflict might best be conducted. This broad plan would stretch from the present to the future liberation and the institution of a democratic system.

When the grand strategy of the struggle has been carefully planned there are sound reasons for making it widely known. The large numbers of people required to participate may be more willing and able to act if they understand the general conception, as well as specific instructions. This knowledge could potentially have a very positive effect on their morale, their willingness to participate, and to act appropriately.

Planning campaign strategies

Just as military officers must understand force structures, tactics, logistics, munitions, the effects of geography, and the like in order to plot military strategy, political defiance planners must understand the nature and strategic principles of nonviolent struggle.

- ... If economic issues are to be prominent in the struggle, care will be needed that the economic grievances can actually be remedied after the dictatorship is ended. Otherwise, disillusionment and disaffection may set in if quick solutions are not provided during the transition period to a democratic society. Such disillusionment could facilitate the rise of dictatorial forces promising an end to economic woes.

! Furthermore, the resistance planners will need to take measures to preserve order and to meet social needs by one's own forces during mass resistance against dictatorial controls. This will not only create alternative independent democratic structures and meet genuine needs, but also will reduce credibility for any claims that ruthless repression is required to halt disorder and lawlessness.

Spreading the idea of noncooperation

For successful political defiance against a dictatorship, it is essential that the population grasp the idea of noncooperation.

Once the general concept of noncooperation is grasped, people will be able to understand the relevance of future calls to practice noncooperation with the dictatorship.

! With the advantage of prior strategic planning, general guidelines for resistance can be prepared and disseminated. These can indicate the issues and circumstances under which the population should protest and withhold cooperation, and how this might be done. Then, even if communications from the democratic leadership are severed, and specific instructions have not been issued or received, the population will know how to act on certain important issues. Such guidelines would also provide a test to identify counterfeit "resistance instructions" issued by the political police designed to provoke discrediting action.

Repression and countermeasures

! Anticipating repression, the strategists will do well to consider in advance the use of tactics and methods that will contribute to achieving the specific goal of a campaign, or liberation, but that will make brutal repression less likely or less possible. For example, street demonstrations and parades against extreme dictatorships may be dramatic, but they may also

risk thousands of dead demonstrators. The high cost to the demonstrators may not, however, actually apply more pressure on the dictatorship than would occur through everyone staying home, a strike, or massive acts of noncooperation from the civil servants.

! Leaders should always be alert for the presence of *agents provocateurs* whose mission will be to incite the demonstrators to violence.

8

Applying Political Defiance

In situations in which the population feels powerless and frightened, it is important that initial tasks for the public be low-risk, confidence-building actions. These types of actions -- such as wearing one's clothes in an unusual way -- may publicly register a dissenting opinion and provide an opportunity for the public to participate significantly in acts of dissent.

! Most of the strategies of campaigns in the long-term struggle should *not* aim for the immediate complete downfall of the dictatorship, but instead for gaining limited objectives. Nor does every campaign require the participation of all sections of the population.

In contemplating a series of specific campaigns to implement the grand strategy, the defiance strategists need to consider how the campaigns at the beginning, the middle, and near the conclusion of the long-term struggle will differ from each other.

Selective resistance

In the initial stages of the struggle, separate campaigns with different specific objectives can be very useful. Such selective campaigns may follow one after the other.

Symbolic challenge

At the beginning of a new campaign to undermine the dictatorship, the first more specifically political actions may be limited in scope. They should be designed in part to test and influence the mood of the population, and to prepare them for continuing struggle through noncooperation and political defiance.

Although having a tremendous moral and psychological impact, such actions by themselves are unlikely to bring down a dictatorship, for they remain largely symbolic and do not alter the power position of the dictatorship.

It usually is not possible to sever the availability of the sources of power to the dictators completely and rapidly at the beginning of a struggle.

Spreading responsibility

! Phasing resistance campaigns by issue and population group will allow certain segments of the population to rest while resistance continues.

! Selective resistance is especially important to *defend* the existence and autonomy of independent social, economic, and political groups and institutions outside the control of the dictatorship, which were briefly discussed earlier. These centers of power provide the institutional bases from which the population can exert pressure or can resist dictatorial controls. In the struggle, they are likely to be among the first targets of the dictatorship.

Aiming at the dictators' power

The dictators' supporters should at least be induced to become "neutral" in their activities ("fence sitters") or preferably to become active supporters of the movement for democracy.

The degree of loyalty of the military forces, both soldiers and officers, to the dictatorship needs to be carefully assessed and a determination should be made as to whether the military is open to influence by the democratic forces. Might many of the ordinary soldiers be unhappy and frightened conscripts? Might many of the soldiers and officers be alienated from the regime for personal, family, or political reasons? What other factors might make soldiers and officers vulnerable to democratic subversion?

! Early in the liberation struggle a special strategy should be developed to communicate with the dictators' troops and functionaries. By words, symbols, and actions, the democratic forces can inform the troops that the liberation struggle will be vigorous, determined, and persistent. Troops should learn that the struggle will be of a special character, designed to undermine the dictatorship but not to threaten their lives.

The attempt to garner sympathy from and, eventually, induce disobedience among the dictators' forces ought not to be interpreted, however, to mean encouragement of the military forces to make a quick end to the current dictatorship through military action. Such a scenario is not likely to install a working democracy, for (as we have discussed) a coup d'etat does little to redress the imbalance of power relations between the populace and the rulers. Therefore, it will be necessary to plan how sympathetic military officers can be brought to understand that neither a military coup nor a civil war against the dictatorship is required or desirable.

! *Defiance strategists should remember that it will be exceptionally difficult, or impossible, to disintegrate the dictatorship if the police, bureaucrats, and military forces remain fully supportive of the dictatorship and obedient in carrying out its commands.* Strategies aimed at

subverting the loyalty of the dictators' forces should therefore be given a high priority by democratic strategists.

! The democratic forces should not ask the soldier and officers that they immediately mutiny. Instead, where communication is possible, it should be made clear that there are a multitude of relatively safe forms of "disguised disobedience" that they can take initially. For example, police and troops can carry out instructions for repression inefficiently, fail to locate wanted persons, warn resisters of impending repression, arrests, or deportations, and fail to report important information to their superior officers.

9

Disintegrating the Dictatorship

! The cumulative effect of well-conducted and successful political defiance campaigns is to strengthen the resistance and to establish and expand areas of the society where the dictatorship faces limits on its effective control.

As was discussed in Chapter Three, obedience, cooperation, and submission are essential if dictators are to be powerful. Without access to the sources of political power, the dictator's power weakens and finally dissolves. Withdrawal of support is therefore the major required action to disintegrate a dictatorship. It may be useful to review how the sources of power can be affected by political defiance.

! Moral disapproval needs to be expressed in action in order to seriously threaten the existence of the dictatorship. Withdrawal of cooperation and obedience are needed to sever the availability of other sources of the regime's power.

Escalating freedom

The Catholic church had been persecuted but never brought under full Communist control. In 1976 certain intellectuals and workers formed small groups such as K.O.R. (Workers Defence Committee) to advance their political ideas.

Disintegrating the dictatorship

Strategists of the democratic forces should contemplate early that there will come a time when the democratic forces can move beyond selective resistance and launch mass defiance. In most

cases, time will be required for creating, building, or expanding resistance capacities, and the development of mass defiance may occur only after several years.

Given determined and disciplined political defiance during this escalation of activities, the internal weaknesses of the dictatorship are likely to become increasingly obvious.

The combination of strong political defiance and the building of independent institutions is likely in time to produce widespread international attention favorable to the democratic forces. It may also produce international diplomatic condemnations, boycotts, and embargoes in support of the democratic forces (as it did for Poland).

During the course of the liberation struggle, victories, even on limited issues, should be celebrated.

Handling success responsibly

The democrats should calculate how the transition from the dictatorship to the interim government shall be handled at the end of the struggle. It is desirable at that time to establish quickly a new functioning government. However, it must not be merely the old one with new personnel. It is necessary to calculate what sections of the old governmental structure (as the political police) are to be completely abolished because of their inherent anti-democratic character and which sections retained to be subjected to later democratization efforts.

Specific plans for the transition to democracy should be ready for application when the dictatorship is weakening or collapses. Such plans will help to prevent another group from seizing state power through a coup d'etat.

10

Groundwork for Durable Democracy

! No one should believe that with the downfall of the dictatorship an ideal society will immediately appear.

Constitution drafting

The new democratic system will require a constitution that establishes the desired framework of the democratic government. The constitution should set the purposes of government, limits on governmental powers, the means and timing of elections by which governmental officials and legislators will be chosen, the inherent rights of the people, and the relation of the national government to other lower levels of government.

! The wording of the constitution should be easily understood by the majority of the population.

A democratic defense policy

! In the interests of maintaining internal democracy, serious consideration should be given to applying the basic principles of political defiance to the needs of national defense. By placing resistance capacity directly in the hands of the citizenry, newly liberated countries could avoid the need to establish a strong military capacity which could itself threaten democracy or require vast economic resources much needed for other purposes.

A meritorious responsibility

! The effect of nonviolent struggle is not only to weaken and remove the dictators but also to empower the oppressed.

! One important long-term beneficial consequence of the use of nonviolent struggle for establishing democratic government is that the society will be more capable of dealing with continuing the future problems. These might include future governmental abuse and corruption, maltreatment of any group, economic injustices, and limitations on the democratic qualities of the political system.

The oft quoted phrase “Freedom is not free” is true. No outside force is coming to give oppressed people the freedom they so much want. People will have to learn how to take that freedom themselves. Easy it cannot be.