

# The Terrible Dance of Power

by Barry Oshry

Power  Systems

P.O. Box 990288 Prudential Station  
Boston, Massachusetts 02199-0288  
tel. 617.437.1640 & Fax. 617.437.6713  
web. [www.powerandsystems.com](http://www.powerandsystems.com)

Copyright © Power + Systems, Boston, 2007

**Download and Distribute**

# **The Terrible Dance of Power**

## ***A Terrible Dance***

There is a dance that takes place with great regularity,  
a terrible dance—  
a dance of death and destruction,  
human beings killing one another –  
always for great and noble causes.  
We have danced this dance throughout our history.

We have danced the dance in years gone by:  
in the great American West  
with the crushing of the American Indian,  
in Turkey  
with the murder of the Armenians,  
in Germany  
with the destruction of the Jews and Gypsies and homosexuals,  
in Cambodia  
with the annihilation of millions,  
in India  
with Hindus and Moslems massacring one another.

We have been dancing it of late  
in Iraq,  
in Sudan,  
in Somalia,  
in the Caucuses,  
in Israel,  
in Indonesia,  
in Northern Ireland,

in Rwanda,  
in the old Soviet Union,  
in South Africa,  
in Peru,  
in Sri Lanka,  
in the Philippines,  
in El Salvador.

Death and destruction  
for great and noble causes.

\*

***The Dance Begins***

There is a system –  
a single nation  
or a collection of nations.

and in that system,  
there are the High-Power people  
and the Low-Power people.

The High-Power people control the system's resources:  
Its food, materials, technology, weapons, opportunities.

And there are the Low-Power people.

The High-Power people see themselves as the bearers  
of some higher mission:  
Manifest Destiny,  
The Master Race,

The One True Religion,  
The Way.

Standing in the way of this mission  
are the Low-Power people;  
they are blocking the vision,  
defiling it.

The High-Power people see themselves as "We"—  
as special,  
noble,  
righteous,  
favored by history  
and by God.

And they see the Low-Power people as "Them"—  
as insignificant  
or dirty  
or dangerous  
or evil.

Seeing "Them" this way,  
the High-Power people can do to "Them"  
things they would never do to one another.  
They establish rules or laws or customs  
that make things better for the "We"  
and worse for the "Them."

They may stop the Low-Power people  
from practicing their ways,  
speaking their language;

they may remove them from their territory  
or confiscate their property  
or enslave them  
or exile them  
or annihilate them.

They can do all of this  
without guilt or shame,  
because the Low-Power people are "Them"—  
lesser,  
insignificant,  
dirty,  
dangerous,  
evil.

*Who wouldn't do this to such people?*

If the Low-Power people are eliminated,  
the dance is ended.  
If not,  
the dance goes on.

\*

***The Low-Power People Respond***

*The Low-Power people respond—*  
gently,  
fearfully,  
rationally,  
even apologetically.

("We' don't want to make 'Them' angry.")

They cast ballots,  
elect representatives,  
debate,  
demonstrate.

### ***The High-Power People React***

To the High-Power people,  
the response of the Low-Power people  
is out of line—  
a complaint,  
a threat,  
an insult to the dignity of the "We."  
("Who are 'They' to complain?")  
And the response of the High-Power people is harsh—  
requests are ignored,  
promises are made  
then broken;  
they delay;  
they ban demonstrations;  
they pass new laws;  
they intensify the oppression.

### ***Enter the Radicals***

A new force develops among the Low-Power people—  
a radical force.  
The Radicals call for more drastic action—  
not accommodation,

but fundamental change;  
overthrow the power structure  
or separate from the nation.

The Radicals become a "We,"  
and all who are not "We"  
are "Them."

The High-Power people are "Them,"  
but so are the Moderates.

And you can do to "Them"  
things you would never do to one another—  
you can hurt "Them,"  
maim "Them,"  
bomb "Them,"  
torture "Them,"  
annihilate "Them."

The Radicals can do all of this  
without guilt or shame  
because they see the High-Power people as "Them,"  
and they see the Moderates as "Them"—  
as lesser,  
insignificant,  
dirty,  
dangerous,  
or evil.

*Who wouldn't do this to such people?*

### ***Enter the Accommodators and the Extremists***

In the High-Power group,  
there are the Liberals  
who want to accommodate the Low-Power people—  
redress their grievances,  
right their wrongs.

But,  
in response to the Radicals' actions,  
a new force emerges among the High-Power people—  
an Extremist force.  
Angered by the Radicals,  
threatened by "Them,"  
the Extremists stand against any accommodation.

The Extremists become a "We,"  
and all who are not "We"  
are "Them."  
The Radicals are "Them";  
the supporters of Radicals are "Them";  
the Accommodators are "Them."  
They are all "Them,"  
and you can do to "Them"  
things you would never do to one another—  
you can hurt "Them,"  
maim "Them,"  
bomb "Them,"  
torture "Them,"  
annihilate "Them."



The Extremists can do all of this  
without guilt or shame  
because they see the Radicals  
and the moderates  
as "Them"—  
as lesser,  
insignificant,  
dirty,  
dangerous,  
or evil.

*Who wouldn't do this to such people?*

### ***Enter the Privileged Radicals***

Among the High-Power people,  
there emerges a Privileged Radical group—  
the privileged sons and daughters of the High-Power people,  
who align themselves with the Low-Power Radical group.  
The Privileged Radical people  
also stand for radical change—  
fundamental change in the power structure,  
redistribution of wealth, power, and privilege,  
or separate homelands  
or nations  
for the Low-Power people.

The Privileged Radicals see themselves  
and the Low-Power Radicals as a "We,"

and all who are not part of the "We"  
are "Them."

The High-Power Accommodators are "Them";

the Low-Power Moderates are "Them";

the High-Power Extremists are "Them."

They are all "Them,"

and you can do to "Them"

things you would never do to one another—

you can humiliate "Them,"

hurt "Them,"

maim "Them,"

bomb "Them,"

torture "Them,"

annihilate "Them."

The Privileged Radicals can do all of this

without guilt or shame

because they see the others as "Them"—

as lesser,

insignificant,

dirty,

dangerous,

or evil.

*Who wouldn't do this to such people?*

### ***Change Partners***

Sometimes the Low-Power people win;

they overthrow the High-Power people

and they become the new High-Power people,  
seeing themselves as the bearers of a new vision—  
a higher vision,  
The New Society,  
Manifest Destiny,  
The New Man,  
The Master Race,  
The One True Religion,  
The Way.  
And standing in the way of this vision  
are the new Low-Power people—  
"Them."

And the terrible dance goes on:

"We" humiliate,  
"We" hurt,  
"We" kill,  
"We" maim,  
"We" bomb,  
"We" hack,  
"We" hang,  
"We" mine,  
"We" strangle,  
"We" starve  
"Them."

Always justified in what "We" do,  
"We" are the right and the righteous.

*Who wouldn't do such things to "Them"?*

***The Dance Goes On***

The terrible dance goes on  
in Iraq,  
in Sudan,  
in Nigeria,  
in Israel,  
in the Congo,  
in Rwanda,  
in South Africa,  
in Peru,  
in Guatemala,  
in Northern Ireland,  
in the Philippines.

**THERE IS NO "WE,"  
THERE IS NO "THEM,"  
THERE IS ONLY YOU  
AND ME  
AND ALL OF US.  
AND THEN THE DANCE BEGINS.**

*"You blacks are not human...you are like monkeys...  
we can do anything we want to you"*  
Janjaweed speaking to Dajo tribeswoman in Darfur

*"Between fanaticism and barbarism there is only one step."*

Diderot

*"Imagine asking people who they are and the only thing they can come up with is 'I'm a Croat' or 'I'm a Serb' or whatever. Imagine, these people were born that way and they haven't made any progress since."*

Bosnian woman

*"Are you sure it was God who gave you permission to kill women and children?"*

---

**The Terrible Dance of Power** is the basest part of our human nature, to see others so different from ourselves that we are able to subjugate, oppress, and even annihilate them with no remorse.

Please feel free to copy this piece, circulate it, translate it, perform it, put music to it, and even dance to it in public places. Do whatever you can to create a dance we can live with.

Barry Oshry