

# Why Nonviolence?

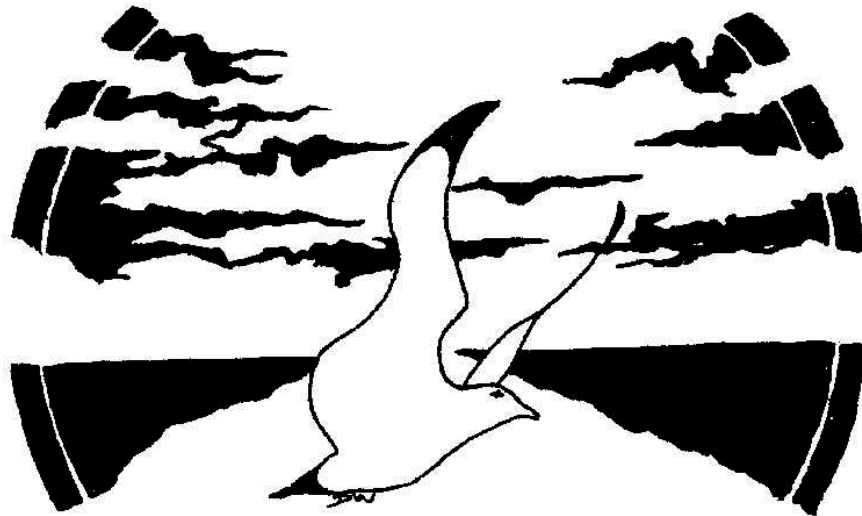
## Introduction to Nonviolence Theory and Strategy

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(Revised December 1983 by Bob Irwin)

(Scanned and adapted in 2001 by Peter Woodrow)

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*2001 Editorial Note: This article was first written in 1978 and revised in 1983. It was written, therefore, before the triumph of the Solidarity movement in Poland, the toppling of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, the fall of numerous communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and the defense of the Yeltsin government in Russia—all through largely nonviolent means.*

## introduction

In 1978, the state of the people's movement against nuclear power and nuclear weapons was already exciting and promising. The nationwide spread of groups using nonviolent direct action had demonstrated how broad and deep was the opposition to the entrenched and deadly pro-nuclear policies of our country's ruling power structure. Since 1978, the continuation of arms buildups has met with vastly expanded public opposition in Europe, the U.S., Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

Public awareness of the theory and practice of nonviolent action has also advanced. Tens of thousands of people have experienced brief training for participation in nonviolent action. Millions, in Poland, Bolivia, and elsewhere, have made gains against or even overthrown oppressive regimes through nonviolent action. The award-winning film "Gandhi" has revived interest in one of the greatest pioneers of nonviolent struggle. Some 110,000 copies of a newsprint tabloid version of this document have been distributed and it has been reprinted in magazine, pamphlet, or book form on at least three continents.

For many people, nonviolence remains mysterious, controversial, or both. This paper provides a short introduction to nonviolent struggle and to some of its contemporary applications, so as to help dispel some of the mystery and clarify the controversies. Although in historical terms nonviolence is still comparatively young, it has already proven to be a significant form of struggle. Its nature and potential deserve to be better understood.

In the first part of this paper we survey the history, methods and varieties of nonviolence. In the second part, we discuss its theory of power and dynamics, some important cases of its use, and its future potential. In the last part we suggest answers to some questions readers may have.

Within our severe limitations of space, we have said relatively little about nonviolent personal philosophies. We have emphasized nonviolence as a technique lest we otherwise seem to imply one must adopt such a philosophy before taking part in nonviolent struggle. Such involvement can raise important questions of motivation and values; we strongly encourage people to explore these further. There is much else this paper has had to omit; please note the bibliography at the end for further reading.

The current renewal of interest in nonviolent tactics and strategies comes out of popular struggles; we write as involved participants to increase the effectiveness of these struggles. We urge all who read this paper to take

part in study, training, and nonviolent action, and to consider carefully how we all can contribute toward shaping a more humane, more just society.

## history, methods, and varieties of nonviolence

Nonviolent action is a means of social struggle which has begun to be developed in a conscious way only in the last several decades. It does not rely on the good will of the opponent but instead is designed to work in the face of determined opposition or violent repression. It is not limited to any race, nationality, social class, or gender and has been used successfully in widely varying political circumstances.

Nonviolent action is not simply any method of action which is not violent. Broadly speaking, it means taking action that goes beyond normal institutionalized political methods (voting, lobbying, letter writing, verbal expression) without injuring opponents. Nonviolent action, like war, is a means of waging conflict. It requires a willingness to take risks and bear suffering without retaliation. On the most fundamental level, it is a means by which people discover their social power.

Nonviolent action takes three main forms: 1) protest and persuasion, 2) noncooperation, and 3) intervention.

The first category includes such activities as speechmaking, picketing, petitions, vigils, street theater, marches, rallies, and teach-ins. When practiced under conditions of governmental tolerance, these methods can be comparatively insignificant; when the views expressed are unpopular or controversial, or go against government policy, even the mildest of them may require great courage and can have a powerful impact.

The second category involves active noncooperation. In the face of institutional injustice, people may refuse to act in ways which are considered "normal"—to work, buy, or obey. This largest category of nonviolent action includes refusal to pay taxes, withholding rent or utility payments, civil disobedience, draft resistance, fasting, and more than fifty different kinds of boycotts and strikes. Noncooperation can effectively halt the normal functioning of society, depending on the type of action employed and how widespread its use becomes.

Finally, there is nonviolent intervention, which can be defined as the active insertion and disruptive presence of people in the usual processes of social institutions. This can include sit-ins, occupations, obstructions of "business as usual" in offices, the streets, or elsewhere, and creation of new social and economic institutions,

including the establishment of parallel governments which compete with the old order for sovereignty. These methods tend both to pose a more direct and immediate challenge than the other methods described earlier and to bring either a quicker success or sharper repression.

These actions, taken from a list of nearly 200 methods compiled by researcher Gene Sharp, are plainly in the mainstream of the contemporary world. Virtually everyone has heard of these kinds of actions, and literally millions of people in the U.S. alone have taken part in one or more of them.

But what is the relation of these diverse actions to “nonviolence”? Most people involved in them do not believe in “nonviolence”—and what does it mean to “believe in nonviolence”? What is the difference between “pacifism” and “nonviolence”? In fact, there are several distinct types of principled nonviolence, and failure to distinguish among them quickly leads to confusion.

Although religious teachers have often envisioned a world without violence or hatred, this ideal has usually seemed to most to be unattainable. The first sizable groups in the modern world who attempted to live their nonviolent ideals were small “non-resistant” Christian sects, such as the Mennonites and Anabaptists, who in times of war refused conscription into the army and bore punishments laid on them without resisting. Otherwise such groups were generally law-abiding, desiring to be left to pursue personal salvation. Where these groups still survive today, they may rarely use the nonviolent methods mentioned above.

A second, more worldly nonviolence, which may be called “active reconciliation,” is subscribed to by many Quakers and individual pacifists. They particularly aim to reconcile parties in conflict, to aid victims of war and poverty, and to persuade by education and example rather than coercion. Many programs of the Quaker American Friends Service Committee exemplify this viewpoint, such as its aid and self-help programs and promotion of dialogue on Middle East issues. Gene Sharp observes that “persons sharing the ‘active reconciliation’ approach often prefer a rather quietist approach to social problems, disliking anything akin to ‘agitation’ or ‘trouble.’ Some of them may thus oppose nonviolent action (including strikes, boycotts, etc.) and even outspoken verbal statements, believing such methods to be violent in spirit...” Such conservative views are less prevalent among pacifists today than formerly; many from this tradition have gone on to make major contributions to nonviolent action.

A third category of adherents of nonviolence can be called advocates of “moral resistance.” Although advocating and engaging in education and projects promoting human cooperation, they frequently lack an overall social analysis or comprehensive program of social change.

Nineteenth century Americans agitating for the abolition of slavery were among the first to articulate “moral resistance.” Many activities of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, such as sit-ins, marches, draft refusal, blockage of ammunition shipments, and obstruction at induction centers, reflected this outlook, shared by many individual pacifists.

These three varieties of nonviolence (or more properly, “pacifism”—the term “nonviolence” did not come into use until the twentieth century) suffer from significant limitations. There has been considerable growth in the methods that we now call nonviolent. These means of struggle were invented in the context of some of the major conflicts of the modern world—struggles for national independence (as in the American colonies) and struggles between labor and capital. The notion of civil disobedience and the value of nonviolent resistance were spread by writers like Thoreau and Tolstoy. But pacifists had abolished neither war nor injustice. They lacked a sufficiently powerful method of actively pursuing their goals, one that could harness human courage, energy, idealism, and solidarity.

### **Gandhi’s Pioneering Contribution**

The career of Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) marked a watershed in the development of nonviolent struggle. In leading the struggle for Indian independence, Gandhi was the first to combine a variety of tactics according to a strategic plan in a campaign of explicitly nonviolent action, and the first to conduct a series of campaigns toward long-term goals. Deeply religious, practical, and experimental in temperament, Gandhi was a shrewd, tireless, and efficient organizer who united cheerfulness with unshakable determination. He was not only a political strategist but a social visionary. Gandhi’s nonviolence had three main elements: 1) self-improvement (the effort to make oneself a better person), 2) “constructive program” (concrete work to create the new social order aimed at), and 3) campaigns of resistance against evils that blocked the way forward, such as the caste system and British colonial exploitation. Gandhi’s success in linking mass action with nonviolent discipline showed the enormous social power this form of struggle could generate. While his contribution was overwhelmingly positive, it is also true that his experimental, unsystematic approach and personal charisma make it difficult to disentangle those aspects of his approach peculiar to Indian society, or which expressed his personal eccentricities, from those aspects of nonviolent action of possible universal application.

It is through nonviolent direct action campaigns in the tradition of Gandhi that most people in the U.S. have become aware of nonviolence and nonviolent methods. In fact, despite the many violent aspects of American history of which we have become increasingly aware in

recent years, the U.S. has its own native tradition of nonviolence. Staughton Lynd has noted that “America has more often been the teacher than the student of the nonviolent ideal” (*Nonviolence in America*).

Nonviolent currents in American history (using “nonviolent” in the specific sense rather than meaning anything “not violent”) include the following:

1) ***The use of methods which in retrospect we recognize as nonviolent.*** The movement for women’s rights during the nineteenth century used civil disobedience, tax refusal, and public demonstrations. Alice Paul’s Woman’s Party used the vigil and hunger strike to exert pressure on behalf of women’s right to vote. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the sit-down strike was used as a way to force recognition of workers’ rights. Less well known, but highly significant, was the plan of struggle called the Continental Association, adopted in October, 1774. Delegates from the thirteen colonies agreed on a program which included both economic boycotts (nonconsumption, nonimportation, and nonexportation) and social boycotts and other sanctions against those reluctant to comply. Their program was the major pre-Gandhian campaign to include planned strategic phasing of the struggle.

2) ***The participation of adherents of nonviolence in important struggles.*** Examples already mentioned include the struggle for the abolition of slavery, for women’s suffrage, for the rights of labor, and for civil liberties. Many organizations and institutions grew out of pacifist commitments, including Brookwood Labor College (the first residential labor college in America), National Conference of Christians and Jews, American Civil Liberties Union, American Committee on Africa, Society for Social Responsibility in Science, and the Congress of Racial Equality. Many fought for racial justice, others for admission of Jewish refugees during the 1930s. Opposition to war and violence logically drew people to work actively against other kinds of injustice. Although frequently undramatic, the work accomplished by such people has contributed substantially to the betterment of society.

3) ***Actions and campaigns undertaken or directed by explicitly nonviolent leadership.*** During World War II and shortly thereafter, militant pacifists succeeded in ending racial segregation in prisons where they themselves were held, and took part in the first “Freedom Rides” to desegregate interstate transportation. The most dramatic nonviolent actions of the 1950s were several voyages into nuclear testing areas by small vessels with pacifist crews. In a time when nuclear war seemed a fate humanity was powerless to overcome, these actions gave expression to the widespread yearning to act against the madness of testing and the arms race. Although in each case the boats were prevented from reaching their destinations, the powerful symbolism of the voyages suc-

ceeded in boosting the morale of the anti-nuclear movement, thus giving a real impetus to the public sentiment which resulted in the 1963 test-ban treaty.

Nonviolent activists also provided inspiration through examples of courage and by taking on personal responsibility for institutional injustice. Historians of the New Left have noted that it consciously adopted issues, tactics, and moral postures from the nonviolent tactics of personal witness and mass civil disobedience. But it was the movement of Black people for civil rights and an end to racial oppression which imprinted the idea of nonviolence on the American consciousness. The bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, which began in December 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat to a white passenger, grew to include an alternative transportation system and ended with the desegregation of the entire bus system. An eloquent young minister, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., attained national prominence as a spokesperson in the struggle, demonstrating that nonviolence could win significant victories not only in India but also in the U.S., despite racial violence and intimidation.

In 1960, a new wave of activity began when the first “sit-in” was undertaken by four Black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina (one of whom had just been reading a comic book about the Montgomery campaign issued by the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation), who decided to fight the refusal of service at a local lunch counter. The action spread rapidly and spurred a wave of related actions in other places of public accommodation. Under the pressure of actions by many small groups of activists whose demands were widely perceived as just, new court decisions began to legitimize the changes for which people were struggling. As campaigns continued in many places, loosely coordinated by such groups as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), resources would be shifted at times of crisis to certain cities that became focal points, such as Birmingham in 1963 and Selma, Alabama, in 1965. King’s important role as a spokesperson and moral symbol of the struggle has frequently led to an underemphasis of the grassroots, decentralized nature of the movement, whose heart was the decision by thousands of people to risk their security and often their lives on behalf of the cause and to grow toward a greater fulfillment of their own potential in pursuit of justice and human community.

The civil rights movement had enormous and lasting impact. It affected both Blacks and whites through the legal and institutional changes it brought, and it also created a body of people with a shared moral and political background from which they could move on to challenge other injustices like the Vietnam War, imperialism, poverty, and sexism. This achievement was often minimized by those who became increasingly radicalized by

their experience when they saw clearly how much more remained to be done—that they were engaged in more than correcting a flaw in an otherwise healthy system. Those entering the movement for social change later sometimes took for granted the gains which had been made at such cost. The death of Dr. King in 1968 during the Poor People's Campaign, which had aimed to unite poor people of all races around economic issues, was a critical blow to a movement beset by other problems as it attempted to move forward. Although the civil rights movement and Dr. King were moving into wider arenas, the experience can still serve as a reminder of the limitations of a nonviolent movement focusing on a single issue, be it war or racism, rather than aiming at the revolutionary transformation of the whole society.

“Pacifism is necessarily revolutionary,” wrote Paul Goodman in 1962. “We will not have peace unless there is a profound change in social structure.” But this conclusion has by no means been obvious to everyone—or, at least, most pacifists have shied away from the size of the task it implies. Perhaps the chief pioneer of revolutionary nonviolence in America was A. J. Muste (1885-1967: pronounced MUS-tee), whose early position can be found in a 1928 article entitled “Pacifism and Class War.” Muste, a minister who had lost his job for opposing World War I, had become an important leader of labor struggles. He demanded of pacifists who were critical of the violence in some labor actions that they recognize “the violence on which the present system is based.... So long as we are not dealing honestly and adequately with this ninety percent of our problem, there is something ludicrous, and perhaps hypocritical, about our concern over the ten percent of violence employed by the rebels against oppression.... In a world built on violence, one must be a revolutionary before one can be a pacifist.” On such grounds, for a time he turned away from pacifism; he and his followers played a major role in organizing the unemployed, and he was for a time a highly regarded ally of the Trotskyist movement. But he became convinced through experience of the inadequacy of Marxism-Leninism and sought a politics which would be *simultaneously* revolutionary and nonviolent.

A concise expression of such a politics, surprisingly contemporary in tone, came in 1945 from the Committee for Non-Violent Revolution: “We favor decentralized, democratic socialism guaranteeing worker-consumer control of industries, utilities, and other economic enterprises. We believe that the workers themselves should take steps to seize control of factories, mines, and shops.... We advocate such methods of group resistance as demonstrations, strikes, organized civil disobedience, and underground organization where necessary. We see nonviolence as a principle as well as a technique. In all action we renounce the methods of punishing, hating or killing any fellow human beings. We believe that nonviolence includes such methods as sit-

down strikes and seizure of plants. We believe that revolutionary changes can only occur through direct action by the rank and file, and not by deals or reformist proposals....”

As a basis for organized political actions, such ideas at that time involved at most a few dozen people. Yet through *Liberation* magazine, founded by Muste in 1956 with the aid of the War Resisters League, and under the creative editorial care of Dave Dellinger, Barbara Deming, Sidney Lens, Staughton Lynd, and others, a new nonviolent, libertarian socialism began to develop. Muste and later Dellinger were able, owing to their trustworthy reputations and principled independent radical stance, to play key roles in the various coalitions of pacifist, left, and other elements coordinating mass actions against the Vietnam war from 1965 onward.

Groups committed to fundamental social change arising from the experience of the 1960s and early 1970s continued many of the emphases of the earlier nonviolent movements. They worked to change basic economic and social systems and strove to change themselves to eliminate ways that personal behavior perpetuates sex, race, class, and other oppressions. They rejected the Western conception of “the good life” based on compulsive consuming in favor of a richer way of life grounded in higher self-awareness, fun, and more social satisfactions—a way of life fully realizable for all only through fundamental change. In addition, they espoused non-hierarchical organization and consensus decision-making and sought better ways to “empower” people through training programs (including group dynamics and peer counseling) and workshops. Such political work included educational efforts to spread an analysis of society, a vision of a better one, a strategy for getting from here to there and the organizing of nonviolent campaigns as part of that strategy.

## **nonviolence: its theory, dynamics, and relevance today**

### **The Spreading of Nonviolent Struggle**

Before discussing the theory and dynamics of nonviolent action, it is useful to consider how the adoption of nonviolent direct action as a method of struggle often occurs. Despite the important role adherents of some type of principled nonviolence often play, most instances of mass nonviolent struggles are not initiated by them. “The major advances in nonviolence have not come from people who have approached nonviolence as an end in itself, but from persons who were passionately striving to free themselves from social injustice” (Dave Dellinger, “The Future of Nonviolence”). The typical structural conditions leading to resort to nonviolent struggle are that

more conventional political and legal channels appear blocked, yet people are unwilling to abandon their goals, as was so clearly the case in the struggle against nuclear power. Out of their own creativity or, more often, through hearing of or remembering events that seem relevant, people discover a way to act.

This process, however, need not be spontaneous; it can be deliberately fostered. In a 1972 speech entitled “De-developing the U.S. Through Nonviolence,” Movement for a New Society co-founder William Moyer proposed a strategy for a nationwide and transnational movement against nuclear power. Rather than starting by forming a national coalition of sponsoring groups (a process with several disadvantages detailed in the article), “the campaign-movement approach encourages groups to organize whatever local socio-dramas they believe to be creative and important. Small groups begin small projects in different places, joining others only when interests coincide. The key here is not the size of initial numbers, but the ability to organize a local campaign with drama, crises, and other socio-dramatic elements. Even when all these ingredients are present, however, there is no guarantee that a project will take off into a full-fledged movement. The strategy of the campaign-movement approach to nationwide efforts is that if enough independent socio-drama projects are begun, there will soon be one which reaches a takeoff point, with much drama, crisis, publicity, and interest.” This, of course, is precisely what happened in the world-wide struggle against nuclear weapons and other social movements.

### The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action

The conventional view of power is that it is something some people have and others don't. Power resides in soldiers, authority, ownership of wealth, and institutions. The nonviolent theory of power is essentially different: rather than seeing power as something possessed, it argues that power is a dynamic social relation. Power depends on continuing obedience. When people refuse to obey rulers, the rulers' power begins to crumble. This basic truth is in a sense obvious, yet it took the dramatic historical episodes of Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns to begin to establish a new model of power. In routine social life this truth is obscured, but events like the overthrow of the former Shah of Iran or the oppressive regime in Bolivia in 1978 cannot be understood without it.

From the standpoint of the conventional view of power, heavily armed rulers hold all the cards. They can arrest protesters or, in more extreme instances, have them shot. But reality is more complex than that. Instead of merely two social actors being involved—rulers and opposition—a whole range of intermediary forces are potentially decisive. What if new protesters keep coming

back? What if influential social groups or individuals begin to condemn acts of brutality? What if troops, or police, or their officers decide to disobey orders? The 1944 overthrows of dictators in both Guatemala and El Salvador (described by George Lakey in *Strategy for a Living Revolution*), and the overthrows of repressive regimes in Iran (1978-1979) and Bolivia (1978) show that such events are historically possible.\*

Sometimes nonviolent action is improvised in the heat of a crisis; other times it is carefully planned. Certain dynamics remain the same in either case. For help in understanding these dynamics, Gene Sharp's later chapter titles in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* provide a convenient outline: laying the groundwork for nonviolent action; challenge brings repression; solidarity and discipline to fight repression; “political jujitsu”; and ways that success may be achieved.

In a planned nonviolent campaign, laying the groundwork is fundamentally important. This means defining goals and objectives, choosing strategy and tactics, making contingency plans, training, etc. Nonviolence is not magic; it is a way of mobilizing the strength we have for maximum effectiveness.

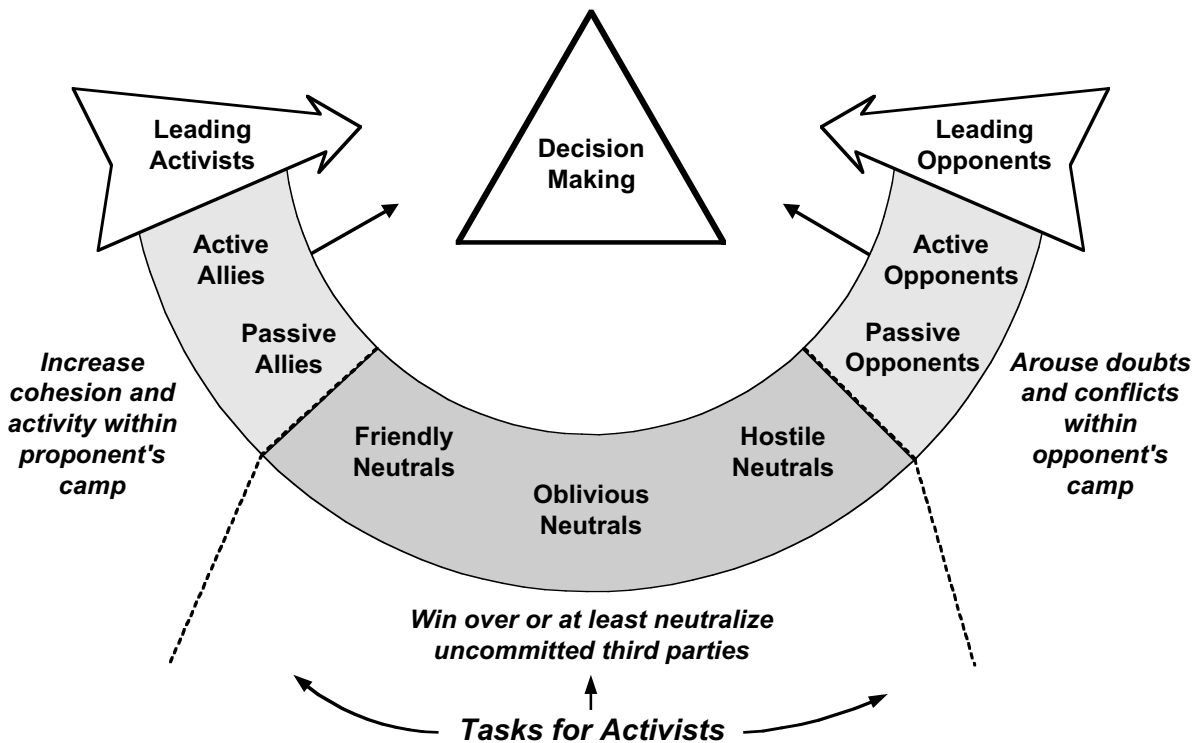
Whether nonviolent action starts as a popular initiative to which authorities then react, or is an improvised public response to an event, the outline above shows that the initial “action and reaction” are only the beginning. Taking the case of a nuclear power plant site occupation as an example, along with the leading actors who clash with each other, there are also anti-nuclear activists who are not committing civil disobedience but playing active support roles; potential participants who didn't feel enough urgency or sense of being needed to take part in the particular action; people who would like to see an end to nuclear power but don't plan to do anything about it; people oblivious to the issue; people hostile to “environmentalists who delay needed progress;” people who say “lawbreakers should be punished,” but will limit themselves to griping; on down to utility executives, the governor's staff, bank presidents, etc. There are also police and perhaps National Guardspeople whose job it is to counter the demonstrators, but whose personal attitudes may lie anywhere on the spectrum. Figure 1 shows how activists seek to influence people with various viewpoints along this spectrum.

The actions of the main social actors potentially affect all these people. The outbreak of conflict draws attention to the issue. In an important respect the two sides are not fighting each other directly, but also com-

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\* Note comments above regarding the successful use of nonviolent action to bring down repressive regimes in Poland, throughout Eastern Europe and the Philippines—all of which occurred subsequent to the original writing of this paper.

**Figure 1**  
**How Nonviolent Action Works**



peting with each other for the allegiance and support of third parties or “the general public.”

To gain their desired result, agents of repression must make the activists lose their solidarity and abandon their goals. If they maintain solidarity and discipline, repression becomes ineffective. But solidarity alone does not bring success. That may come through a kind of “political jujitsu,” in which the repressive efforts themselves tend to shift the balance of power toward the nonviolent activists. People on the side of the activists increase their level of involvement, while those allied with the oppressive power may reduce their support or switch sides. Shifts of attitude are important as well as shifts of behavior, because both sides adjust their actions according to how they gauge their support.

Nonviolent action is not dependent on the opponent’s being repressive or making mistakes. It is not stymied when the opponent is moderate and conciliatory. Most of the methods mobilize political strength regardless of the opponent’s response.

This brings us to the question of how nonviolent action may attain its goals. Three main ways have been identified: conversion, accommodation, and nonviolent coercion. Conversion means that the opponent has a change of heart or mind and comes to agree with and work toward the activists’ goal. At the top of the social

structure, this is fairly unlikely, but significant instances may occur: for example, Daniel Ellsberg, who released the Pentagon Papers after being converted to opposition to the Vietnam War; Bob Aldridge, who left his job as chief missile designer for the Trident submarine in order to speak out against the growing threat of nuclear catastrophe.

At the other extreme is nonviolent coercion, where the activists have it directly in their power to frustrate the opponent’s will. One example is the refusal by all workers to work on a construction project which a union has declared unecological (Australia’s “green bans”); another was the invention of the “search and avoid” missions by GIs in Vietnam who did not want to risk their lives in an unpopular war. Most commonly the outcome is determined by an intermediate process.

Accommodation means that the opponents give in, partly or completely, not because they have changed their minds, and not because they are completely powerless, but because it seems a lesser evil than any other alternative. It may be because continuing the struggle at that point would probably mean further erosion of support. Concessions may also be granted to halt the consciousness-raising process of struggle which would lead people to discover how much power they really have.

### **Nonviolent Struggle Today [December 1983]**

Although successful nonviolent struggle has become familiar in domestic politics, even those with worldwide ramifications such as the struggle against nuclear power, in today's world major political violence (or preparation for using it) occurs internationally.

Can nonviolent action counter international aggression or serve to liberate countries under the control of foreign-backed regimes? We have already mentioned the nonviolent overthrow of U.S.-backed dictatorships in Central America, in Iran, and in Bolivia. What about the Soviet sphere of influence? It is often assumed, despite the significant and increasing evidence to the contrary, that nonviolence won't work against fascist or Communist regimes, or any regime willing to utilize ruthless repression.

A careful look at Eastern Europe since World War II reveals something more than a series of unsuccessful revolts. The nonviolent 1953 East German uprising took one week to suppress. In Hungary in 1956, the general strike outlasted the armed resistance by two months. In 1968-69, the Czechoslovakians, using nonviolent resistance, preserved their reform regime for eight months after the Soviet invasion aimed at replacing it with a more compliant one. And after sixteen months of unprecedented gains that began in August, 1980, even a military coup and martial law have been unable, as of this writing, to suppress Poland's Solidarity movement completely.

Discernible here is the slow but steady historical development—through improvisation, defeats, trial and error—of a new and powerful means of struggle. If, for the first time, the methods and strategies of nonviolent action were systematically developed and diffused throughout the world, is it not conceivable that humankind might within a few decades learn how to put a permanent end to the evils of dictatorship?

Such a possibility must not remain unexplored. No one can be certain of the ultimate limits of nonviolent struggle; what is certain is that they have not yet been reached, or even really been approached.

Besides the relevance of nonviolence in the struggle against dictatorships, growing recognition that the destructiveness of modern warfare makes successful military defense against attack a doubtful proposition has led many countries to explore the application of nonviolent struggle to national defense. "Civilian-based defense"—prepared non-cooperation and defiance by a trained civilian population and its institutions against invasion or internal takeovers—is now part of the platforms of at least seven political parties in the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark. In West Germany, the Greens advocate "social defense," and in Britain an

"Alternative Defense Commission" has won respectful attention for a book focused in part on this policy. It should be clear from all this that the possibilities of nonviolent action in an often violent and dangerous world order are only beginning to become apparent.

## **questions and answers concerning nonviolent action**

**Q: It's oppressive to force people who don't believe in nonviolence to participate in "nonviolence training" before taking part in direct action. Events should be open to anyone who wants to participate. Besides, why all this middle-class preoccupation with violence?**

**A:** To be effective, any approach to social change has requirements. Because most people fear and disapprove of violence, its occurrence undermines the dynamics that win allies and make for success, and organizers have a responsibility to insist on training and a common discipline to minimize its outbreak. Opponents consistently try to "use" any violence to discredit activists and divert attention from the activists' message. Experienced working-class organizers have long recognized this.

**Q: Why do we need to inform our opponents of what we plan to do?**

**A:** Being open about plans may seem odd in a serious struggle. Deception or secrecy may seem to offer advantages. Nevertheless, openness is important for nonviolent action.

"That's the big argument we had in the beginning," recalls United Farmworkers Union leader Cesar Chavez. "People were concerned that spies would come in, but I said, 'If there's nothing to hide, it's easier to work...' It may hurt us initially because the growers know ahead of time, but if it's a good plan, there's no way that they can guard against it."

Secrecy results in inefficiency, authoritarianism, and mistrust simply because of the need to cover up much of what is planned from our allies. Dependence on secrecy opens a movement to disruption by planted provocateurs and informers. Secrecy thus contributes to fears of betrayal; moves toward secrecy often come when a movement is losing self-confidence and weaken it further, reducing its numbers and attracting people of a furtive, conspiratorial disposition.

Equally important are the positive effects of openness. It is consistent with our purpose of educating the public about issues, and with the kind of society we hope to build. Openness creates a positive image in the public



mind by showing that we consider our actions legitimate and that we expect others to think so too (which encourages them to take this view). Openness increases the morale and self-respect of participants: our style contrasts sharply with the secrecy and high-handedness of our opponents.

Whatever the short-term picture, when all the pros and cons are weighed, long-term effectiveness clearly requires openness.

One aspect of this deserves particular attention: relations with police and other authorities. It can be argued that police are not impartial enforcers of justice but rather agents of an unjust system whose authority should therefore not be respected. “Working with” police by informing them of our plans is interpreted as making their job easier, accepting their authority, and thus lending support to the system we should be fighting. The first point is sound, but not the conclusions. Because police violence in tense conflicts often results from fear and ignorance (though often it’s ordered from above), it’s in our interests to have accurate communication. Secondly, although agents of a system may sometimes symbolize and seem to embody it, they must not be confused with the system itself or the real power structure. Police, however brutally some behave, are also pawns who should be challenged to stop acting against their own best interests. “Militant” hostility toward police is misplaced; the truly transformative slogan is “Join us!”

**Q: Isn’t it foolish to try to practice nonviolence before we have replaced all ill will in our hearts with love?**

**A:** Any choice has risks—including the evils of inaction. Gandhi frankly spoke of “experiments.” Because behavior and attitudes influence each other, substituting nonviolent struggle in place of violence or submission is progress toward a loving world too distant to reach in one leap. “When understood as a requirement for nonviolent action (rather than a helpful refinement), the demand for ‘love’ for people who have done cruel things may turn people who are justifiably bitter and unable to love their opponents toward violence as the technique most consistent with bitterness and hatred” (Sharp, p. 635).

**Q: Demanding nonviolent behavior from oppressed people toward their oppressors is senseless and unfair! They need to act out their anger!**

**A:** The logic and function of nonviolent discipline has already been discussed. As for unfairness, if the oppressed could wish it away, they would no longer be oppressed. There is no pain-free road to liberation. Given the inevitability of suffering, it is both ennobling and

pragmatic to present nonviolent discipline and suffering (as did Martin Luther King, Jr.) as imperatives. “Acting out anger” in a way that costs a group allies is a luxury serious movements cannot afford.

For women concerned that nonviolent struggle may set them up to be victims, it is important to stress the assertiveness involved in nonviolent action. Feminist theoretician Barbara Deming has written that “nonviolent actions are by their nature androgynous. In them the two impulses that have long been treated as distinct, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ the impulse of self-assertion and the impulse of sympathy, are clearly joined; the very genius of nonviolence, in fact, is that it demonstrates them to be indivisible, and so restores human community: One asserts one’s rights as a human being, but asserts them precisely with consideration for the other, asserts them, that is, precisely *as* rights belonging to any person – mine and therefore yours, yours and therefore mine.” Through nonviolent action women can mobilize power without reinforcing the power of violent domination prevailing today.

**Q: What about property destruction? Can it be nonviolent?**

**A:** The risk in property destruction is that it moves toward the logic of violence. If we are determined to destroy some piece of property, will we be willing to injure some person who stands in our way? The dangers of property destruction are substantial. It may provide a readier pretext for repression. It can be a way of slipping toward violence, reflecting a loss of confidence in one’s chosen means and an inclination to waffle between two contrary strategic choices. Such ambiguity can encourage violence by other participants and prove fatal to success.

Property destruction can, in certain circumstances, be an effective tactic but must always be evaluated according to whether it will be understood primarily as “a challenge in human terms by human beings to other human beings” (Sharp, p. 610). Effective use of property destruction is therefore only likely where haphazard and undisciplined destruction is avoided and any destruction is completely open and subject to careful and deliberate control.

**Q: We tried nonviolence, but it didn’t work.**

**A:** “We tried nonviolence” often translates into “I’m frustrated and angry, and violence is quicker anyway.” Usually it means that a group tried a few nonviolent tactics without a strategy, or expected the opponent not to use violent repression when challenged nonviolently and thus gave up when repression began.

It is important to separate our feelings of desperation from our best thinking. Unrealistic hopes for a quick “victory” impede the development of any kind of effective strategy.

Nonviolent struggle does not guarantee success any more than violent struggle does. It is crucial to apply similar criteria when evaluating the effectiveness of these struggles, as is not usually done. Failures of violent struggle are usually attributed to poor strategy, insufficient materials, and bad morale. In contrast, the failure of a nonviolent struggle is usually attributed to nonviolence, and not to the way the struggle was conducted. Similarly, the value and importance of nonviolent successes are minimized, while violent successes are exaggerated without their full costs being weighed. Given that nonviolence is in what Dellinger calls the “Edison and Marconi” stage of development, we are impressed by the frequency of “success” and are excited by the possibilities of replacing essentially ad hoc tactics with more systematic and conscious militant nonviolent strategies.

## recommended reading

Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (2000). Companion book to PBS series of the same title.

Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century* (1994). Excellent discussion of the strategic use of nonviolent action.

David Albert, *People Power: Applying Nonviolent Theory* (1985). Useful general introduction to nonviolent action.

Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence* (revised ed. 1965). Gandhian nonviolence.

Robert Cooney and Helen Michalowski, *The Power of the People: Active Nonviolence in the United States* (1977). Inspiring political history with fine text.

Dave Dellinger, *Revolutionary Nonviolence* (1970). Outstanding political essays.

Barbara Deming, *We Are All Part of One Another: A Barbara Deming Reader* (1984). The most important feminist theoretician of nonviolence.

Susanne Gowan, et al., *Moving Toward a New Society* (1976). Analysis, vision, and strategy for a nonviolent revolutionary movement.

Robert A. Irwin, *Building a Peace System* (1989). Exploration of the requirements and attributes of an international peace system.

George Lakey, *Strategy for a Living Revolution* (revised ed. 1985). Nonviolent strategic approach.

Pam McAllister, ed., *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence* (1982).

Gene Sharp, *Social Power and Political Freedom* (1980). Essays in nonviolence theory.

Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973). Indispensable three-volume reference.