

CHAPTER 21

Nonviolence



Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi, stick in hand, walking with followers during the famous "salt satyagraha" in 1930.

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No army can withstand the force of an idea whose time has come.

—Victor Hugo

Nonviolence is intimately associated with certain ethical and religious traditions, notably Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christian pacifism. However, it has achieved such stature, both as a goal and as a practical strategy in the struggle for both negative and positive peace, that it deserves its own chapter.

Gandhi

Gandhi is revered by most Indians as the founder of their nation, and also by millions of others as the leading exponent and practitioner of nonviolence, and as nearly a modern-day saint. He pioneered the modern use of nonviolent resistance as both a spiritual/philosophical approach to life and an intensely practical technique of achieving political and social change. Gandhi was widely known among Indians as “Mahatma” (Great Soul), for his courage, simplicity, penetrating insight, and the extraordinary impact of his teachings and his life.

Central to Gandhi’s worldview was the search for truth, and, indeed, he titled his autobiography *My Experiments With Truth*. Gandhi considered that nonviolent love (*ahimsa*, in Sanskrit) was achievable only through compassion and tolerance for other people; moreover, it required continual testing, experimentation, and constant, unstinting effort. His teachings emphasized not just nonviolence but also courage, directness, civility, and honesty. Perhaps the most important Gandhian concept is *satyagraha*, literally translated as “soul-force” or “soul-truth.” It requires a clearheaded adherence to love and mutual respect and demands a willingness to suffer, if need be, to achieve these goals.

Early Years

Gandhi was born in India, in 1869, to merchant-caste Hindu parents. He remained a devout Hindu throughout his life, although he made room for numerous other religious and ethical traditions and was strongly influenced by pacifist Christianity, as well as the writings of Thoreau and Tolstoy on the rights and duties of individuals to practice civil disobedience when governments intrude on human rights. He married very young (he and his wife were both 13) and studied law in London. After a brief time in India, the young barrister went to South Africa, where he was outraged by that country’s system of racial discrimination (there was, and still is, a large Asian—especially Indian—population in South Africa). He remained there for 21 years, leading numerous campaigns for Indian rights, editing a newspaper, and developing his philosophy of nonviolent action as well as specific techniques for implementing it. He was physically abused and arrested many times by British authorities but also served courageously on the British side when he agreed with their positions; for example, Gandhi organized an Indian Ambulance Corps during the Boer War (1899–1902) and the Zulu Rebellion (1906), for which he was decorated by the government.

Gandhi's Return to India

After achieving some reforms in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and quickly became leader of the Indian nationalist movement, seeking independence from colonial Britain. When the British government made it illegal to organize political opposition, Gandhi led a successful *satyagraha* campaign against these laws.

In 1919, British troops fired into a crowd of unarmed Indian men, women, and children, who had been demonstrating peacefully; nearly 400 were killed in what became known as the Amritsar Massacre. This served to highlight the difference between the steadfast nonviolence of Gandhi's followers and the relative brutality of the colonial government; it also moved Gandhi to refine his techniques of *satyagraha*. In particular, he took the great Sanskrit epic, the *Bhagavad Gita*, to be an allegory not about war but about the human soul and the need for all people to devote themselves, unselfishly, to the attainment of their goals. He urged that for real success, it is necessary to "reduce yourself to zero"—that is, to remove the self-will and striving for personal aggrandizement that so often leads to arrogance or even tyranny.

Gandhi was a small, slight man with indomitable moral certitude and remarkable physical stamina. He frequently underwent fasts to emphasize the importance of personal self-denial and to protest the violence that periodically broke out as less disciplined Indian nationalists rioted against British rule. Following these painful experiences, Gandhi temporarily called off his struggle for Indian independence. During the 1920s, Gandhi continued to fight for the rights of the lowest Hindu caste, the Untouchables—which he renamed the *Harijan*, children of God—and for miners, factory workers, and poor peasants. He urged Indians to develop cottage industries, notably spinning and weaving, so as to deprive Britain of its major economic advantage in occupying India: markets for English textile products. In addition, hand weaving contributed to the potential of national self-sufficiency (*swaraj*) in India, while also emphasizing the dignity of labor.

When the British occupying power introduced the Salt Acts, requiring that all salt in India be purchased from the government, Gandhi led a massive march, 320 kilometers to the sea, where he and his followers made salt from seawater, in defiance of the law. In all, Gandhi spent about 7 years in various jails for his numerous acts of nonviolent resistance, making it respectable—indeed, honorable—for protesters to be imprisoned for their beliefs.

Gandhi was ascetic and intensely frugal, possessing a biting sense of humor: Once, when he visited the British king in London, the half-naked Gandhi was asked whether he felt a bit underdressed for the occasion, to which he replied, "His Majesty wore enough for the two of us." Another time, when asked what he thought of Western civilization, he replied, "I think it would be a good idea."

Gandhi was deeply grieved by the intense periodic violence between Hindus and Muslims, and he opposed the partition of British colonial India into an independent Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India. He was assassinated by a fanatical Hindu who resented his insistence on religious tolerance, in 1948, a year after India won its independence from Britain. However, Gandhi had accomplished what many thought impossible: gaining independence for a country of 400 million people,

without firing a shot. He also showed that a highly spiritual concept—nonviolence—can be an intensely practical tool in the quest for peace, even in the 20th-century world of *realpolitik*, power, and violence.

Nonviolence in Theory

Unfortunately, Gandhian *satyagraha* has often been translated into English as “passive resistance,” which is like translating *light* as “nondarkness” or defining *good* as “absence of evil.” It omits the positive, creative component of its subject. *Satyagraha* is passive only insofar as it espouses self-restraint rather than the active injuring of others. In all other respects, it is active and assertive, requiring great energy and outright courage.

Nonviolent Love and Suffering

A key to understanding Gandhian nonviolence is the concept of nonviolent love, *ahimsa*, the bedrock of *satyagraha*. As Gandhi expressed it, “ahimsa is the means; truth is the end.” As with the term *passive resistance*, however, defining *ahimsa* as nonviolence does a disservice to the concept, which instead implies active love. It is closer to Albert Schweitzer’s principle of “reverence for life,” which is not only negative (determination not to destroy living things unnecessarily) but also positive (a commitment in favor of life, especially the life of other human beings). *Ahimsa* requires deep respect for the other’s humanity, an insistence upon sympathy and kindness—but also absolute, unwavering firmness. *Ahimsa* is not meek, mild, or retiring. It implies nothing less than the willingness of each individual to take unto herself or himself the responsibility for reforming the planet and, necessarily, to suffer in the process. Gandhi emphasized that

ahimsa in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means pitting of one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honor, his religion, his soul, and lay the foundation for that empire’s fall or its regeneration.¹

And again,

Suffering is the law of human beings; war is the law of the jungle. But suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason. . . . Suffering, not the sword, is the badge of the human race.²

The basis for this suffering (which Gandhi termed *tapasya*) is several-fold. For one thing, unless one is prepared to suffer, the depth of one’s commitment can be questioned. Moreover, since any serious conflict must lead to suffering, the

nonviolent resister's devotion to justice will almost certainly precipitate suffering. *Tapasya* therefore indicates willingness to undergo this suffering oneself and not to shift its burden onto anyone else—including the opponent.

Gandhi's emphasis on suffering is especially difficult for many people to understand or accept. It tends—probably more than any other aspect of his thought and practice—to make Gandhian nonviolence relatively inaccessible to many Westerners. Yet *tapasya* should not be altogether foreign, especially to Christian tradition, given the central importance attributed to Christ's redeeming agony on the cross. In addition, it is not stretching Gandhi's concept too greatly to substitute "courage" for "willingness to suffer." This has the added benefit of helping dispel the frequent misunderstanding that practitioners of nonviolence are cowards, seeking an easy way out of conflict.

Nonviolence as Active Force

Gandhi strongly emphasized that *satyagraha* must be distinguished from passive acquiescence or the desire to avoid conflict at any price. The middle class in particular has often been scorned as having an excessive fear of conflict and a corresponding desire to be comfortable at all costs. "The inability of the bourgeois to dream great dreams and ambition noble deeds," according to a biographer of Martin Luther King, Jr.,

is revealed in their timidity in the face of violence and conflict. . . . This cowardice also shows itself in what may be called the mercenary impulse, the impulse to hire others to fight one's own battles. This impulse has such concrete manifestations as hiring additional police to suppress domestic unrest or in spending money for a so-called all volunteer army, rather than personally accepting the obligations of citizenship. . . . [T]hey represent what Gandhi called the nonviolence of the weak. Such nonviolence he took to be counterfeit, a cloak for passivity and cowardice.³

Gandhian nonviolence, by contrast, is the nonviolence of the strong, the courageous, and the outraged—not merely passive acquiescence by the weak, the cowardly, or the comfortable. "My creed of nonviolence is an extremely active force," wrote Gandhi. "It has no room for cowardice or even weakness. There is hope for a violent man to be some day nonviolent, but there is none for a coward."⁴

The *satyagrahi* (practitioner of *satyagraha*) must be prepared to accept beatings, imprisonment, or even death. Because of the clarity it evokes in the *satyagrahi*, as well as the confusion, self-doubt, and empathy it evokes in the opponent, nonviolence unleashes a remarkable kind of power, a "force" with which most people are unaccustomed.

Satyagraha, the means whereby *ahimsa* is expressed and nonviolent victory attained, also requires respect for the opponent and perseverance in weaning the other from error, rather than trying to injure or annihilate him or her. It must be conducted without hate and aimed at policies, not persons. It must be based on absolute truthfulness. It must take the opponent seriously and seek to engage him

or her in dialogue and self-examination. It must respect the opponents and permit them to change direction without loss of face.

Traditionally, when conflicts are resolved by violence, they simply involve the triumph of one protagonist over the other. Such a “resolution” may occur via threat or naked force, but the presumption is that one side wins and the other loses: This is what mathematicians call a *zero-sum game* (as in most competitive sports, where for every winner there is a loser, so the sum total of wins and losses equals zero). Even when overtly seeking a compromise—hence, a win-win or positive-sum solution—each side typically attempts to profit at the other’s expense and to compromise only when it has no alternative. By contrast, *satyagraha* aims to resolve the source of the conflict rather than to defeat or destroy the opponent. The goal is to persuade the adversary that all parties have more to gain by acting in harmony and love than by persevering in discord and violence. Rather than viewing the other as an enemy to be overcome, the *satyagrahi* considers him or her a participant in a shared search for a just (i.e., “truthful”) solution to the problem at hand.

Ends Versus Means

Not surprisingly, since he attributed so much importance to the process of attaining truth and justice, Gandhi was unalterably opposed to any doctrine in which the ends justify the means. He maintained that there was “the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree.” Of course, a seed can be distinguished from a tree, but, nonetheless, the two are inseparably linked; French philosopher Jacques Maritain wrote that the means of achieving a goal is “in a sense the end in the process of becoming.” When the means are pure, the end will be desirable; if the route to political protest is sullied with violence or hatred, the end also will be spoiled. Philosopher Hannah Arendt concurred, adding that “the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.”⁵

For pacifists in the Gandhian mold, violence is reactionary: The more violence, the less revolution. By using violent methods, revolutions and even antiwar movements can build up reservoirs of resentment and hatred, as well as possibly laying the foundations for additional injustice and yet more violence. This stands not only as a warning against violence but also as a caution against letting frustration drive peaceful protest into violent and often self-destructive avenues.

By contrast, political activists of the extreme left and right are often prone to make moral compromises, convinced that their vision of the world-as-it-should-be justifies almost any means of attaining it. Lenin, for instance, announced that “to achieve our ends, we will unite even with the Devil.” In his poem “To Posterity,” Bertolt Brecht, playwright and Marxist, warned about how violence has corrupted and perverted the noblest intentions:

Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow harsh. Alas, we

Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness

Could not ourselves be kind.⁶

Neither the extreme left nor the far right has shared Gandhi's acute sensitivity to the relationship between means and ends. And whereas most people would agree that it is desirable to avoid aggression and international intimidation, a Gandhian would also question the legitimacy of employing (i.e., deploying) instruments of violence as means toward those ends.

Nonviolence in Practice

Cicero, in *The Letters to His Friends*, asks, "What can be done against force, without force?" Students of nonviolence would answer, "Plenty." Moreover, they would question whether anything effective, lasting, or worthwhile can be done against force, *with* force. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., nonviolent leader of the civil rights movement in the United States during the late 1950s and 1960s and a visionary who, like Gandhi, was also intensely practical and result oriented, wrote that "returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."⁷

As Gandhi put it, "as evil can only be sustained by violence, withdrawal of support of evil requires complete abstention from violence."⁸

This does not mean, however, that the *satyagrahi* is forbidden anger, even hatred; rather, these feelings are carefully directed toward the various *systems* of evil, rather than toward individuals. Gandhi wrote that

I can and do hate evil wherever it exists. . . . I hate the ruthless exploitation of India even as I hate from the bottom of my heart the hideous system of untouchability for which millions of Hindus have made themselves responsible. But I do not hate the domineering Englishman as I refuse to hate the domineering Hindus. I seek to reform them in all the loving ways that are open to me. My noncooperation has its roots not in hatred, but in love.⁹

For Gandhi and his followers, it was impossible to elevate oneself by debasing others, just as it debases others by permitting them to dominate one's self.

Nonviolent Action and Government Reaction

In practice, Gandhi's *satyagraha* took many forms: marches, boycotts, picketing, leafleting, strikes, civil disobedience, the nonviolent occupation of various government facilities, vigils and fasts, mass imprisonments, refusal to pay taxes, and a willingness at all times to be abused by the authorities and yet to respond nonviolently, with politeness, courage, and determination. This, as Gandhi was fond of pointing out, demanded far more strength than is required to pull a trigger, far more courage

than is needed to fight or to fight back. Gandhian techniques thus do not offer an alternative to fighting; rather, they provide other, nonviolent ways of doing so. As a result, the nonviolent struggle is if anything more intense than its violent counterpart.

The extraordinary courage and humaneness of the Indian *satyagrahis* contrasted dramatically with the ugly violence of the occupying power, thereby helping sway world opinion as well as the British electorate—which became increasingly sympathetic to Gandhi’s cause. This is not unusual: Violent governmental overreaction to nonviolent protest historically has had the effect of transforming victims into martyrs, who become symbols of their regime’s callous wrongheadedness. For example, in 1819, a nonviolent crowd in Manchester, England, was attacked by soldiers while peacefully listening to speeches calling for the repeal of the Corn Laws. This so-called Peterloo Massacre became a rallying cry for radicals who eventually succeeded in their demands. The slaughter of participants in the Paris Commune of 1871 led to greater solidarity among the French working class. Similarly, violence and brutality directed toward U.S. civil rights workers in the 1960s led to widespread revulsion and moral indignation against the system of racial segregation in the South, just as the Kent State University killings in 1970 galvanized sentiment opposed to the Vietnam War.

Living With and Transforming Violence

For nonviolent campaigns to be successful, the campaigners must have steadfast determination, self-respect, and also (Gandhi would add) respect for the opponent. A favorite expression of 1960s radicals was “power to the people.” Followers of nonviolence believe that people are most powerful when they have sufficient moral courage. Courageous nonviolent “warriors” may gradually become immune not only to the threat of violence directed toward them but also to the inclination to employ violence themselves. The latter comes from having sufficient clarity of purpose (Gandhi would call it “selflessness”). As Gandhi saw it, this does not involve a purging of anger but rather a transforming of it: “I have learnt through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger and as heat conserved is transmuted into energy, even so our anger controlled can be transmuted into a power which can move the world.”¹¹

When a victim responds to violence with yet more violence, he or she is behaving in a manner that is predictable, perhaps even instinctive, which tends to reinforce the aggression of the original attacker and even, in a way, to vindicate the original violence, at least in the attacker’s mind: Since the “victim” is so violent, presumably he or she deserved it. Moreover, there is a widespread expectation of countervailing power analogous in the social sphere to Newton’s First Law, which states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Thus, if *A* hits *B* and then *B* hits back, this nearly always encourages *A* to strike yet again. Gandhi was not fond of the Biblical injunction “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” pointing out that if we all behaved that way, soon the whole world would be blind and toothless! Instead, if *B* responds with nonviolence, this not only breaks the chain of anger and hatred (analogous to the Hindu chain of birth and rebirth); it also puts *A* in an unexpected position. “I seek entirely to blunt the edge of the tyrant’s sword,” wrote

Gandhi, “not by putting up against it a sharper-edged weapon, but by disappointing his expectation that I would be offering physical resistance.”¹²

Accustomed to counterviolence—and even, perhaps, hoping for it—the violent person who encounters a nonviolent opponent who is courageous and respectful, even loving, toward the aggressor becomes a “victim” of a kind of moral judo in which the attacker’s own energy is redirected, placing him or her off balance. “It would at first dazzle him and at last compel recognition from him,” wrote Gandhi, “which recognition would not humiliate but would uplift him.”¹⁰ And, in fact, many of Gandhi’s most bitter opponents were almost inevitably won over. Consider this account of a meeting between the young Gandhi and the legendary General Jan Smuts of South Africa. Gandhi spoke first:

“I have come to tell you that I am going to fight against your government.”

Smuts must have thought he was hearing things. “You mean you have come here to tell me that?” he laughs. “Is there anything more you want to say?”

“Yes,” says Gandhi. “I am going to win.”

Smuts is astonished. “Well,” he says at last, “and how are you going to do that?” Gandhi smiles. “With your help.”¹³

Years later, Smuts recounted this meeting, noting—with humor—that Gandhi was correct.

Nonviolence as a Proactive Force

Nonviolence is often described as nonviolent *resistance*, implying that it is a reaction, a response to some initial force. But, in fact, as practiced by Gandhi and his followers (including Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States), nonviolence is *proactive* much more than *reactive*. These practitioners of politically active nonviolence were masters at taking the initiative and keeping their opponents off balance. Their tactics were unpredictable, spontaneous, radical, and experimental—and, not surprisingly, government authorities found them baffling and exasperating. It is said—of some people and some nations—that “they only understand force,” and therefore they cannot be moved by anything other than force or the threat of force. The truth, however, may be precisely the opposite: Those who understand and expect violent force can generally deal effectively with it; after all, it is typically their stock in trade. *Satyagraha*—soul-force rather than physical force—is another matter.

Part of the goal of *satyagraha* is to make the oppressor reflect on his or her psychological unity or similarity with the resister and to change, internally. Consider the analogy of an iceberg, which melts below the water line, invisibly, until suddenly, as the weight shifts, it may flip over. In this way, the consciousness of the oppressor may be changed suddenly and dramatically. “If my soldiers began to think,” wrote Frederick the Great, “not one would remain in the ranks.” Nonviolence, adroitly and persistently practiced, has the power of inducing soldiers—and government leaders—to think.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement

In the United States, the most influential modern exponent and practitioner of nonviolence was the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who consciously adapted *satyagraha* for use in the American South. King studied Gandhi's philosophy and methods, traveled to India, and emerged as the chief spokesperson, architect, and spiritual leader of the nonviolent civil rights campaign in the United States.

Like Gandhi, King spent time in prison for his nonviolent defiance of unjust laws supporting racial discrimination. His "Letter From Birmingham Jail" is one of the classic statements of the philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience and the evils of racial intolerance. In it, King also expressed a sense of courage and urgency:

We know from painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. . . . I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.¹⁴

During the 1950s and 1960s, transportation, restaurants, sports events, restrooms, libraries, and schools were often racially segregated in the American South, with superior facilities reserved for "whites only." Voting rights were often denied or severely restricted by poll taxes, literacy tests, and outright intimidation. Lynching of African Americans was common, and racial violence widespread, often led by the Ku Klux Klan, a semisecret band of white supremacists.

Perhaps the seminal event in King's leadership of the civil rights movement was the Montgomery (Alabama) bus boycott, which started in December 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to take a seat in the back of a public bus. After thousands of African Americans walked miles to work rather than use segregated buses, public facilities were eventually integrated. Later, "Freedom Riders," seeking to desegregate interstate bus transportation (in accord with a 1960 Supreme Court decision), endured frequent beatings and mob violence, while state police often failed to provide protection, typically arresting the Riders instead. Sit-ins began at segregated lunch counters in 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, at the soda fountain of a five-and-ten-cent store. With King's encouragement, these nonviolent sit-ins, boycotts, and marches quickly spread to more than 100 cities, and eventually succeeded in integrating restaurants throughout the South.

These were years when Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway of the University of Alabama to deny admission to black students, and when electric cattle prods, police dogs, and high-pressure water hoses were used against peaceful demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama. Nonviolent civil rights marchers were herded to jail in Jackson, Mississippi, with the police harassing the marchers and offering them no protection against abusive crowds. Four young black girls were killed by a bomb blast while at Sunday school in Birmingham Baptist Church. Throughout, King maintained a steadfast devotion to nonviolence, based on his

perception of Christian principles. “Let no man pull you so low,” he was fond of saying, “as to make you hate him.”

It is no small task, though, to separate hatred of offenses—or of offending institutions—from hatred of the offenders: to hate murder but love the murderer, to hate oppression but not the oppressor, to hate torture but not the torturer. In this, King once again revealed himself a disciple of Gandhi, showing uncompromising respect, even love, for his opponents, while being equally uncompromising in pursuit of the Truth as he saw it. And like Gandhi before him, Martin Luther King, Jr. was himself assassinated.

But also like Gandhi, King mobilized a nonviolent army of followers, captured the conscience of millions, and achieved monumental legal reforms. He founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which emphasized grassroots, community action in addition to nonviolence, and in 1963, he organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, also known as the Poor People’s March, which brought about 500,000 protestors to the U.S. capital. This effort represented a new dimension of King’s nonviolent campaign: extending it from civil rights to a broader concern with social justice for all. His campaign in favor of the Voting Rights Act also helped lead to its passage in 1965. The year before, King had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Shortly before his death, King also started speaking out in opposition to the Vietnam War and the nuclear arms race. “If we assume that humankind has a right to survive,” he once wrote,

then we must find an alternative to war and destruction. . . . The choice today is no longer between violence or nonviolence. It is between nonviolence or nonexistence.¹⁵

Some Nonviolent Successes

Clearly, there have been many examples of “successful violence,” if “success” means conquest of territory, booty, and people; the imposition of a particular social system; or the forcible defeat of would-be aggressors. But it can also be argued that violence, by its nature, inhibits lasting success and sows the seeds of its own instability. When “peace” is imposed by violence or the threat of violence, it is not really peace but rather, violence maintained in a temporary disequilibrium, which is to say, structural violence. The situation in apartheid South Africa was a good example: A kind of “peace” was maintained for decades but only through massive violence, structural as well as direct. It is not surprising that the resulting system was not only destructive of human values but also unstable. (The only surprise, perhaps, is that the demise of South African apartheid was, in the end, relatively non-violent!) Indeed, the turmoil of human history can itself be seen as a monument to the *failure* of violence, not to its success.

In any event, there have been cases of successful nonviolent actions, in addition to the well-known examples of Indian independence and the American civil rights movement. Gandhi himself pointed out that nonviolence is far more pervasive in

ordinary human life than most of us realize and far more frequent (and successful) than violence:

The fact that there are so many men still alive in the world shows that it is based not on the force of arms but on the force of truth or love. . . . Thousands, indeed tens of thousands, depend for their existence on a very active working of this force. Little quarrels of millions of families in their daily lives disappear before the exercise of this force.¹⁶

The Third World

One notable example of the recent force of nonviolence was the toppling of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos by the “people power” of Corazón Aquino’s followers in 1986. This virtually bloodless coup occurred after Marcos loyalists attempted to rig an election in the dictator’s favor. The ensuing protest revolved around persistent nonviolence by Filipino civilians, who at one point interposed themselves between armed forces loyal to Marcos and a small band of dissidents who had declared themselves in support of Aquino and her followers. Newspapers worldwide printed photographs showing Catholic nuns inserting flowers in the barrels of automatic rifles carried by Philippine Army soldiers. Marcos relinquished power and went into exile in the United States when it became evident that his own military would not fire on the unarmed populace (also, after the Reagan administration, which had propped up the Marcos regime, indicated that it was withdrawing support).

A few months later, a similar popular expression of discontent drove Jean-Claude Duvalier, son of longtime Haitian dictator “Papa Doc” Duvalier, from power. Regrettably, the departure of Duvalier did not immediately restore democracy to impoverished Haiti, which still has the highest illiteracy rate and lowest per capita income in the Western Hemisphere, as well as a long tradition of autocratic governments. In any event, in Haiti and the Philippines, spontaneous nonviolent movements succeeded in deposing military dictatorships that appeared deeply entrenched, such that traditional violent revolution would probably have led to a large number of casualties.

In 1987, popular discontent in South Korea led to a series of largely nonviolent demonstrations, which in turn caused the military dictatorship to relinquish power and permit the first democratic elections ever held in that country. In Haiti, the Philippines, and South Korea, violent repression of popular resistance—often several or more years earlier—on the part of these dictatorships contributed heavily to the nonviolent, popular discontent that ultimately toppled their governments.

Eastern Europe

Under reformist leader Alexander Dubček, the Czechoslovak government in the spring of 1968 began granting a range of political and economic freedoms, seeking to establish “socialism with a human face.” In response, the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia in August, crushing the brief “Prague spring.” Although many

Americans think of that Soviet-led invasion as an overwhelming victory for the forces of Soviet repression, in fact the people of Czechoslovakia mounted a remarkable campaign of nonviolent opposition. Although essentially no military resistance was offered to the invading force of nearly 500,000 troops, Czechs for 8 months prevented the installation of a collaborationist government, using general strikes, work slowdowns, clandestine radio broadcasts, and noncooperation by government employees. A compromise (the so-called Moscow Protocols) was reached, which allowed most of the reform leaders to remain in authority; only when riots occurred at Aeroflot offices in Prague—that is, when nonviolent discipline broke down—did Soviet occupying forces remove the reformists and subdue the country.

Twenty-one years later, in the autumn of 1989, massive peaceful demonstrations finally drove the Communist Party from its preeminent place in Czechoslovakia. It is significant that this occurred days after Czech security forces brutally suppressed some prodemocracy demonstrations; outrage at this “police violence” fueled Czech determination to replace the discredited government.

In contrast to the Czech experience, the overthrow of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu involved violence, mostly directed toward the government leadership. Significantly, moreover, it was public outrage at brutal military response to an earlier nonviolent citizens’ protest in the Romanian city of Timișoara that ignited the countrywide revolt.

The Polish trade union movement “Solidarity” followed a strenuously nonviolent path, one that was ultimately successful in changing the Polish government and that served in many ways as a model for the electrifying events throughout Eastern Europe during 1989, whereby an array of unrepresentative, Soviet-backed governments (including Hungary and Bulgaria) was replaced by others, all of them proclaiming democracy—and some of them actually practicing it. In the words of Polish Solidarity leader Lech Walesa, these formidable events, some of the most remarkable in modern times, were accomplished without “so much as breaking a single windowpane.”

Apparent Failures

Also in 1989, the world witnessed the spectacle of the People’s Republic of China—the world’s most populous country, and one that has been in the grip of an authoritarian Communist Party–led government since 1949—convulsed by demands for reform and democratization. For several weeks, nonviolent protesters, led by college students but including a wide cross section of the population, occupied Tiananmen Square in the heart of Beijing, with popular demonstrations of more than 1 million people. Prodemocracy protesters also made themselves heard in Shanghai, Nanking, Hunan, and Hong Kong.

Then, the Chinese government cracked down with a brutal military assault; the precise number of casualties is not known, but probably thousands were killed. The government survived these incidents, although it seems likely that the final word on this process has not yet been spoken. Moreover, the bitterness sown by the government’s violent repression—which on a larger scale resembles the British Army’s Amritsar Massacre in colonial India—will almost certainly have consequences for the future of

China and other governments that practice brutality against nonviolent protesters. As of this writing, the brutal military dictatorship that has oppressed the people of Burma/Myanmar since 1990 was being challenged by nonviolent protests, spearheaded by thousands of Buddhist monks, in solidarity with longtime nonviolent advocate—and Nobel Peace Prize laureate—Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Although the short-term outcome is unpredictable, it is clear that the greater the violence perpetrated, in this case by the Burmese military junta, the less secure the long-term legitimacy of any regime. The same may apply to Chinese occupation and oppression of Tibet.

There is, as Gandhi noted, a special outrage associated with one-sided uses of lethal force. The “Tiananmen Massacre,” occurring on a Sunday in June 1989, was not the first “Bloody Sunday” in history: In 1905, a mass of nonviolent Russian peasants in St. Petersburg, led by Father Gapon, attempted to submit a petition to Czar Nicholas. His troops responded by slaughtering hundreds of unarmed people. This led to a general strike, which ushered in some limited democratic reforms on the part of the government, but which also signaled the beginning of the end for czarist tyranny, culminating ultimately in the Russian Revolution.

A similar case can be made for the “Kent State Massacre” in the United States, although the numbers involved were far smaller, and the public response was far short of revolution. In this incident, Ohio National Guardsmen killed four students who were part of a crowd peacefully demonstrating in opposition to the U.S. bombing of Cambodia in 1970. It generated widespread outrage in the United States and marked a turning point in citizen respect for the federal government and its prosecution of the Vietnam War.

Nonviolence, especially when contrasted with a brutal government response, has an extraordinary power to influence the human mind. Hence, it may well have a profound role to play in practical politics, even—and perhaps especially—against violent, heavily armed, repressive regimes. In 1989 in China, as in Russia 84 years earlier, the populace, as well as many military leaders themselves, was shocked and infuriated at the heavy-handed use of violence against peaceful demonstrators: “The People’s Army,” exhorted one communiqué from the Chinese military itself, “absolutely must not attack the people!” When a state does attack its own people, behaving like state terrorists, it is likely that such a regime will quickly lose its legitimacy, its popular support, and, ultimately, its power.

Interstate Examples

The above examples of nonviolent successes and near-successes refer to conflicts taking place within a given state, rather than between states. Examples of the successful use of nonviolent tactics *between* states are harder to come by, although there are some historical examples.

During the mid-19th century, for example, imperial Austria was seeking to dominate its partner in union, Hungary. The Hungarians were militarily weaker than the Austrians, and they recognized that physical resistance would be useless and probably counterproductive. Instead, Hungarians responded by boycotting Austrian goods, refusing to recognize or cooperate with Austrian authorities, and establishing independent Hungarian industrial, agricultural, and educational

systems. Noncompliance proved a powerful tool. For example, Hungarians refused to pay taxes to Austrian collectors. When the resisters' property was seized, no Hungarian auctioneers would sell them, so Austrian auctioneers were imported. But then, no Hungarian would buy the property, so Austrian purchasers had to be imported as well. In the end, the process proved to be a net financial cost to the Austrian authorities. Austria also sought to enforce compulsory military service and the billeting of Austrian soldiers in Hungarian homes, but noncompliance was such that in 1867 the Austrian emperor consented to a constitution giving Hungary full rights within the Austro-Hungarian union.

Many people associate successful independence movements with war and armed rebellion, such as the American Revolution or the independence of Algeria from France. But, in fact, there have been numerous examples of independence achieved by nonviolent means, including the peaceful separations of Canada from Great Britain in the 19th century, of many colonies from Western powers in the decades following World War II, and so on. In 1905, Norway was granted its independence from Sweden, with no violence whatever. Shortly before, Norwegian nationalists had declared their country to be a free and independent state, almost precipitating a war; in a subsequent plebiscite, all but 184 Norwegians voted for independence, and the Swedish government, acknowledging its "defeat," relented.

During World War II, Norway again became an important site of nonviolent resistance to the Nazis. Germany invaded Norway in April 1940, quickly overcoming Norwegian military resistance. Overcoming the people, however, was much more difficult. A pro-Nazi Norwegian, Vidkun Quisling, was made dictator (since then, a *quisling* has entered the lexicon as a local collaborator who helps form a puppet government). Norwegian society spontaneously and persistently undermined the Quisling government, with solidarity on the part of students and the clergy and, especially, by public school teachers, who refused to participate in mandated pro-Nazi indoctrination programs for their students. The Nazis responded by imprisoning and killing many resisters to the regime, but the refusals continued and the country gradually became increasingly ungovernable. As President Franklin Roosevelt put it, Norway became "at once conquered and unconquerable."

During the autumn of 1943, when Denmark was occupied by German armed forces, large numbers of Danes prevented Nazi authorities from seizing 94% of the 8,000 Danish Jews and deporting them to concentration camps. Using improvised methods of communication and transportation, the outnumbered and vastly outgunned Danish citizens succeeded in smuggling most of these would-be victims to safety in Sweden. Another successful resistance tactic was for large numbers of Danes to defy the German authorities by wearing the Star of David, intended to identify Jews. Virtually the entire country—government, religious leadership, trade unions, and professionals—opposed the Nazi efforts at liquidating the Jewish population, and they were largely successful.

Historical evidence suggests that military force has its political and social limits, even when (as in the modern world) such force is technologically almost unlimited. The United States, for example, dropped 8 million tons of bombs on Indochina—the equivalent of about 300 Hiroshima bombs, and 80 times the amount of bombs that Germany dropped on Britain during World War II—but nonetheless lost the

Vietnam War. It remains to be seen if a military mailed fist can successfully oppress a resistant population over the long haul. Nonetheless, it is questionable whether governments will move in the near future to de-emphasize the use of violence or the threat of violence in their internal and international affairs.

Civilian-Based Defense

Advocates of nonviolence are not limited to peace activists and high-minded moralists. More and more hardheaded realists are questioning fundamental assumptions about peace, defense, and security, as the limitations and dangers of traditional military “solutions” become increasingly clear. A classic case, epitomizing what for many is the paradox of reliance on military means of defense, was the Vietnamese village of Ben Tre, which, according to a U.S. major, had to be destroyed “in order for us to save it.” In particular, the notion of being defended with nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons leaves many people skeptical.

If nonviolence is to make a real impact on international affairs, however, it needs to be seen as something more than the idiosyncrasy of uniquely empowered saints and martyrs or as an impractical tactic proposed by politically marginal figures. Rather, practitioners of nonviolence must adopt a realistic approach, feasible for the great majority of people.

Among the practical suggestions for applying nonviolence to national defense, one of the most organized and realistic involves so-called civilian-based defense, or CBD. (This must be distinguished from “civil defense,” or government plans for protecting citizenry in the aftermath of a nuclear war or equivalent catastrophe.) CBD includes a variety of nonviolent techniques intended to make it very difficult if not impossible for a conquering state to govern another and to gain any benefit from its “victory.”

The major theorist of CBD, Gene Sharp, has identified more than 146 specific techniques of nonviolent action, ranging from general strikes, boycotts, and non-payment of taxes to removal of street signs and sabotage of electrical services. Civilian defenders would not violently resist the occupation of their country, and substantial hardship, suffering, and even death may well result. But military defenders must also anticipate considerable hardship, suffering, and possibly death, even in a “successful” defensive war. Advocates of CBD emphasize that substantial training would be required, as well as a populace willing to commit itself to the success of its enterprise.

But there is nothing new in this: Military training also requires time, effort, and sacrifice, as well as committed participants. (One important distinction is that CBD demands that the public, not just the military, be the participants.) Moreover, most efforts at nonviolent resistance—for example, Hungary in the mid-19th century, Norway in the early 1940s, and Czechoslovakia in 1968—were spontaneous, unprepared, and largely leaderless. Widespread CBD, well rehearsed and planned in advance, has never really been tried. Given its impressive track record when it was essentially extemporized on the spot, the future of CBD might well be bright indeed if it were ever carried out by a populace that had been well trained and prepared.

Furthermore, the prospects of having one's soldiers face such a populace, who were committed to denying the invader virtually all fruits of conquest, just might serve to deter invasion no less effectively than the amassing of military forces—and at substantially less cost and risk.

Sharp argues persuasively that under traditional military doctrines, “the capacity to defend in order to deter has been replaced by the capability to destroy massively without the ability to defend.” By contrast, CBD would aim to

deny the attackers their objectives and to make society politically indigestible and ungovernable by the attackers. . . . Potential attackers are deterred when they see that their objectives will be denied them, political consolidation prevented, and that as a consequence of these struggles unacceptable costs will be imposed on them politically, economically, and internationally.¹⁷

Rather than focusing on moral considerations, Sharp has emphasized the merits of CBD relying on “hardheaded” strategic and cost-effectiveness grounds. He also points out that if nuclear deterrence fails, the results will be utterly catastrophic. By contrast, if deterrence based on CBD fails, the result will be the first opportunity to attempt to implement a truly nonviolent defense.

A national policy of nonviolent CBD would require a state to renounce its interventionist goals in other countries or, at least, to forgo the prospect of direct military intervention in support of economic and political “neo-imperialism.” Such states as the United States, Britain, and France have long deployed military forces capable of “projecting power” far from their shores. These forces—including aircraft carriers, long-range fighter-bombers, mobile artillery, and amphibious assault units—are not normally used for defending a state's own borders; rather, their purpose is to intervene (or threaten to intervene) in other nations, generally far from home and most often in the Third World. A populace trained and organized for CBD might or might not be able to deter an aggressor. But it could not invade or intimidate a distant country, rendering it similar to—but more assertively nonviolent than—nonprovocative defense. For some people, this is an added advantage of CBD; for others, it is a liability.

There is presently little chance that CBD will soon be adopted as the defense strategy of any major state. However, it need not be initiated all-or-nothing. There is no reason why CBD training could not be gradually integrated into existing military doctrine, after which it would be available to assume a more significant role as part of a transition from offensively oriented forces to those concerned—at first primarily and then exclusively—with defense. Highly respected military and political planners in several European states have been studying the prospects for such a transition. CBD represents a revolution in alternative security thinking, one that is currently bubbling just below the level of official policy but that might well emerge in the 21st century, especially with the end of the Cold War and, with it, most official justification for the existence of large, offensive standing armies.

Counterintuitively, there is some danger that in de-emphasizing the role of traditional military forces and placing the primary burden of defense on the shoulders of the civilian population, CBD could contribute to a kind of militarizing of national

cultures, as civilians find themselves forced to confront the essence of national security. The greatest problem, however, is probably a deeply ingrained distrust—on the part of the public as well as the military—of nonviolence as a workable strategy, combined with a widespread fascination with violence and a tendency to rely on it as a last resort, when—in a revealing phrase—“push comes to shove.”

Prospects for Nonviolence

Despite the appeals of nonviolence, it seems unlikely that states will soon convert their defense to such strategies—whether Gandhian *satyagraha* or CBD. In the long run, however, it can be argued that nonviolence offers hope for the survival of humankind, whereas violence does not.

In fact, nonviolence is not limited to tactics of defending a given people; rather, it is directed toward overthrowing an entire system of relationships based on violence, oppression, and the unjust exploitation of the great majority of humans by a privileged elite. Thus, nonviolence is directly relevant not only to the prevention of war but also to the establishment of social justice, environmental protection, and the defense of human rights. It does not aim merely at achieving a more effective national defense but also at a defense of all humanity and of the planet against destructiveness and violence, by seeking to change the terms by which individuals and groups interact.

It can be argued, for example, that the destruction of rain forests, the clear-cutting of temperate zone woodlands, the gouging of the earth in the course of strip-mining, the pollution of water and air, the extinction of plant and animal species, and even the eating of meat and the use of internal combustion engines may all be considered forms of violence, resulting, in a sense, from a lack of *ahimsa*, in Gandhian terms. As former black power leader H. Rap Brown once pointed out, violence is as American as cherry pie.

Sometimes this is presented as reassuring; that is, violence in the United States is nothing new and therefore nothing to get alarmed about. More appropriately, however, it is a warning: Violence is widely considered inimical to humanistic values. Accordingly, it has become commonplace to decry the prevalence of violence in American life, applied not only to international affairs but also to underlying social conditions. Such structural violence includes homicide and abuse of children and spouses, as well as homelessness, drug abuse, environmental destruction, unemployment, poverty, unequal career options, inadequate medical care, and low-quality education.

For some persons deeply committed to nonviolence, the legitimate outrage against violence is sometimes carried to excess; some would claim, for example, that education is violence, child rearing is violence, marriage is violence, etc. By this point, however, an important distinction has been trivialized, leaving no alternatives but passivity and eventually, death, or else indifference and business as usual. But this is a minority and extreme view; nonviolence is, if nothing else, hardheaded and realistic, demanding that we become immersed, albeit with high ideals, in the actual world.

The leading advocates of nonviolence in the 20th century, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., derived the core of their philosophy and the wellsprings of their activism from deeply felt religious faith: Gandhi was a devout Hindu; King was an ordained Southern Baptist minister. Others, by contrast, have emphasized the practical aspects of nonviolence as a tactic for achieving results in the social sphere. For example, Gene Sharp bases his commitment to nonviolent CBD largely on the utilitarian need for alternatives to violence in meeting social injustice, as well as, forcefully but peacefully, to confront domestic tyranny and international aggression.

Advocates of nonviolence have been accused by many conservatives of lacking patriotism, not only because in the past they recommended a less bellicose attitude toward the Soviet Union (among other perceived “threats to American national security”) but also because their efforts appear subversive of some mainstream American values. Thus, in an invited memorandum to the Kerner Commission (convened by President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the causes of violence in American life, following the inner-city riots of the mid-1960s), Thomas Merton warned that the sources of violence can be found “not in esoteric groups but in the very culture itself, its mass media, its extreme individualism and competitiveness, its inflated myths of virility and toughness, and its overwhelming preoccupation with various means of destruction.”

Nonviolence, Merton emphasized, is likely to be resisted because it will be seen as weakening the position of the world’s great powers. There will be other problems. Some government leaders find it much easier, for example, to preside over the rape and pillage of national resources, gaining short-term advantage (including election and reelection) rather than facing the daunting task of working toward a self-sustaining natural ecology. A domestic society purged of structural societal violence might also require a deep rearrangement of current attitudes toward wealth, property, and social privilege. And imagine a state whose military forces are dismantled and which is prepared to defend itself only nonviolently. Wouldn’t it be vulnerable to coercion and attack, leading to loss of freedom and very high casualties? On the other hand, Costa Rica abolished its army in 1948 (after the military supported an unpopular dictator who was subsequently overthrown). It has persisted as a model democracy and has never been invaded, even though Costa Rica’s neighbors have long been dictatorships and Central America has hardly been a peaceful neighborhood.

Pacifism is tolerated in the United States and many other countries, only as long as it is practiced by small and relatively marginal groups. As Merton has pointed out,

There is also an implication that any minority stand against war on ground of conscience is ipso facto a kind of deviant and morally eccentric position, to be tolerated only because there are always a few religious half-wits around in any case, and one has to humor them in order to preserve the nation’s reputation for respecting individual liberty.¹⁸

Would it ever be practical to base a state’s defense on nonviolent, civilian-based tactics and strategies? Some claim that Gandhi succeeded in India and King in the United States only because both Britain and the United States had a long tradition

of relatively humane, civilized treatment of others. In fact, the opposite can also be argued: British responses to colonial insurrections (such as the Sepoy Mutiny in India during the mid-19th century) were often extraordinarily brutal, and the U.S. government did not treat its Native Americans with forbearance, at least not at Wounded Knee and other massacres. It is also questionable whether even a Gandhian nonviolent resistance movement could have prevailed against a Stalin or a Hitler. CBD, for that matter, would be helpless against most bombardment attacks, especially those using weapons of mass destruction—but, of course, military defense would be equally helpless. Opponents of nonviolence as a national strategy often point to the slaughter that might take place if a nonviolent country were invaded by a violent opponent. Supporters of nonviolence can point out, however, that in this case the casualties might very well be lower than if such an invasion were met with countervailing military force.

But the question remains: Beyond nonviolence as a theoretical ideal or as a profound personal witness, will national security policies ever rest on a studied, collective refusal to engage in violence? It is neither psychologically nor politically appealing to contemplate a strategy that “allows” an aggressor to take over one’s country. But neither is it pleasant to contemplate military defense. It may be that military force is merely something with which we are more familiar, not that it is necessarily more effective, especially if the hundreds of billions of dollars now expended on the military were to be redirected toward nonviolent means of individual and collective self-defense. It may also be that governments would vigorously oppose instituting widespread nonviolent training, not only because it would compete with traditional military efforts but also because such training could empower the population to resist the government, thereby posing a threat to the existing state authorities—even in democracies, which, like most governments, are more comfortable responding in kind to violent provocations and armed resistance than to unarmed, nonviolent protest.

A FINAL NOTE ON NONVIOLENCE

Efficacious nonviolence, not merely as an ideal but as a practical policy—personal as well as national—seems foreign to most Westerners, including most professed Christians. “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting,” noted the English writer G. K. Chesterton, “rather, it has been difficult and left untried.” What, we may ask, is the future of nonviolence? That is for all of us collectively to determine. Or, alternatively, we might ask: Does the world have a future *without* nonviolence? In his masterpiece, *Leaves of Grass*, the 19th-century American poet Walt Whitman gives this simple answer:

Were you looking to be held together by lawyers?
 Or by an agreement on a paper? Or by arms?
 Nay, nor the world, nor any living thing, will so cohere.
 Only those who love each other shall become indivisible.¹⁹

NOTES

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16. Mohandas K. Gandhi. 1951. *Non-Violent Resistance*. New York: Schocken.
17. Gene Sharp. 1985. *Making Europe Unconquerable: The Potential of Civilian-Based Deterrence and Defense*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
18. Thomas Merton. 1980. *The Non-Violent Alternative*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
19. Walt Whitman. 1968. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Norton.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What aspects of Gandhian nonviolence are most difficult for Westerners to understand? What aspects are most accessible?
2. Explain what was meant by Gandhi's insistence that *satyagraha* must be done by the strong, not by the weak.
3. What common patterns—and what differences—can you identify between the Indian campaign for independence from Great Britain and the end of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe? Do the same for the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa, the "orange revolution" in Ukraine, and/or the democracy movement in China.
4. Suggest nonreligious bases for nonviolence, in the private as well as the public sphere.
5. Evaluate the realistic prospects for civilian-based defense, using actual examples of potential or current international conflict.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Gene Sharp and Joshua Paulson. 2005. *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*. Manchester, NH: Extending Horizons Books (Porter Sargent).
- Howard Zinn. 2002. *The Power of Nonviolence: Writings by Advocates of Peace*. Boston: Beacon Press.
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