

Making Change Nonviolently

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Since Donald J. Trump was inaugurated as president, many Americans have carried out a wide variety of collective nonviolent actions to oppose many of his and his administration's policies. The actions include massive marches in Washington, D.C. in concert with marches in cities across the nation. They also include strikes, boycotts, walkouts, and regular meetings to plan and conduct ongoing programs of resistance. The actions have been conducted by diverse segments of the American people.

These nonviolent strategies and tactics follow and build on those used throughout American history. Many of the social movements relying on nonviolent methods of struggle have yielded widely beneficial changes in American society. But often they have failed to make substantial lasting change and sometimes they have been counterproductive. Frequently, there are mixed results over time. Fortunately there are resources that increase the likelihood that the choice of actions will have positive results.

Considerable research and theorizing has been done about the effectiveness of various nonviolent actions and reasons for failures. An important leader in such studies has been Gene Sharp, who died on January 28, 2018, at age 90. His influential work was based on extensive research about numerous actual nonviolent undertakings. His research confirmed the premise that authority is based on the obedience and goodwill of the subjects. When that obedience is withdrawn from presumed authorities, their authority is lost. He published many books and pamphlets analyzing how nonviolent strategies can be applied in various circumstances. Many of these materials are accessible at the website he established: <https://www.aeinstein.org>. In addition, webinars, videos, and other materials are accessible on the website of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict: <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>.

Overall, the evidence is clear that social movements seeking substantial change that rely on nonviolent methods are more likely to achieve their objectives than are those movements that resort to violence. After all, violence usually prompts counter violence by the more powerful, which suppresses the effort to change the pre-existing conditions. Relying on nonviolent actions, of course, does not ensure success. Fortunately, there is strong empirical evidence about more or less effective ways of applying nonviolent practices.

Careful analysis of the conflict is a paramount practice before initiating actions, whether from the perspective of a leader from any side, an interested party, or a possible intervener. The many possible opposing and potentially engaged entities should be identified. Their diverse positions and interests should be considered, keeping in mind the heterogeneity of the entities and the varying priority of their concerns. That analysis should guide planning for future actions.

Planning entails setting short term, mid-term, and long term goals and selecting the methods appropriate to advance toward the chosen goals. The choice of means and of ends should influence each other and also each side's choices should take into consideration the likely choices of the adversary. Formulating goals should involve reflecting on how the opposing side

will react, mobilize, and fight back. Thus, selecting a very ambitious goal may appeal to supporters, but antagonize the opponents and strengthen their resolve. Goals that seem to threaten the vital interests of an opponent, are less likely to be achieved than are more modest goals.

Careful attention needs to be given to alternative methods of conducting a struggle. A fight does not require reliance only on coercion, whether violent or nonviolent. Persuasive inducements are often important aspects of many strategies. Thus, appeals to shared values and interests relating to religion, country, or company may convince opposing sides that they have more to win together than they can gain at the other's expense. Furthermore, promises of benefits after concessions are made may sweeten demands and help advance important goals. Thus, striking workers can claim that improved working conditions will result in increased productivity, benefiting managers and owners.

Successful nonviolent campaigns usually combine coercion with persuasion and promised benefits, if not to all the opponents, then to a goodly number of them. Illustratively, the people who fought for civil rights in the southern states of America used many different strategies, which incorporated nonviolent coercion, persuasion, and prospective benefits in order to make gains at the community, state, and national levels.

At present, very many Americans are engaged in direct actions to resist some political and social changes and bring about other changes. Some people have demonstrated their opposition to the policies that the new administration in Washington introduced, by carrying out marches and rallies, but also by nonviolent acts of noncompliance in implementing the new policies. In addition, many alternative policies have been urged and strategies employed to win their establishment. This is true in efforts to enhance security against gun violence, against sexual harassment, against racist deprivations, and other ways of denying equal opportunities to the inalienable rights of all people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is also true for efforts to improve policies to meet shared threats, for example, relating to global warming.

Furthermore, many efforts are designed to strengthen American democratic institutions ensuring greater freedom and equality. For example, this is the case for improving the opportunity for all U.S. citizens to vote in political elections rather than suppressing that right.

The present extensive activity is a manifestation of the vitality of the American society. That contentious conduct can be done best when it is done nonviolently and with thoughtful reflection. Ultimately, the people have the power to make the changes they want. As Gene Sharp knew, authority depends on the obedience and goodwill of the subjects.