

INCREASING THE CHANCES OF SUCCESS

Gene Sharp's notes for a dinner talk at the Fletcher Summer Institute for the Advanced Study of Nonviolent Conflict, sponsored by the Fletcher School and the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, June 23, 2007

- We live in a world of many serious conflicts, some of which are not resolvable by compromise. These are the ones that must be waged.
- How can we wage these without either failing to achieve our goals or producing disasters?
- This general situation is not totally new. Comparable situations have long existed.
- At times good people, perhaps saints and prophets or social reformers, have identified a major problem in these situations to lie with the use of violence, and advised people to reject the use of such violence. Some other good people have done so, but almost always only a relative few.
- We have learned, however, that violence does not go away because of protests and witnesses against it. Violence goes away when the conflict can be instead conducted without violence but with effective power. There was no need for anti-war protest in Poland.
- Many people facing conflicts have been most concerned with their big issue, not with violence itself. Their often meritorious issue, may be lifting oppression, dictatorships, injustices, halting genocide and defeating violent attackers. Others people, of course, have used violence for imposing or maintaining those same conditions.
- Great reliance has been placed on violence because it has been believed that it is the most powerful and effective means of struggle. Without use of violent means it has been believed there was only powerless submission. Very few people will give up violence for nothing.
- We now know that violence is not the most powerful and effective means of struggle. By their actions people have often over many centuries, and doubtless millennia, have applied other methods of waging conflicts. By symbolic protests, refusal of cooperation and obedience, and defiant disruption.
- These alternative methods have not produced miracles, but many times they have empowered people to lift oppression, achieve greater justice,

collapse dictatorships, and defeat aggressors, and save intended victims of genocide.

- So-called “ordinary” people have by extraordinary actions sometimes liberated themselves and defeated the massive violence threatened and inflicted against themselves.
- These nonviolent resisters did not win every time. Often they paid a high price for their gains as well as during defeats. Importantly, mostly their actions were improvised and unprepared, often conducted with inadequate discipline and in face of great repression.
- Nevertheless, these people became empowered. They struggled against slavery, achieved voting rights for the disenfranchised, seceded from empires, undermined dictatorships, broke down racial segregation, strengthened exploited workers with the tools of the strike and economic boycott, restored independence to colonized nations, freed intended victims of the Holocaust, spread and defended civil liberties, achieved higher standards of living, ended discrimination, paralyzed an empire, and even defeated totalitarian systems.
- We have learned that much of the historical accounts we have received have at best been incomplete or completely false. False historical accounts have denied credit for major historical achievement to the peoples who have struggled by these nonviolent weapons and sometimes given undeserved credit to violence. These historical falsehoods have distorted our ability to choose wisely how to confront the conflicts we face now and those of the future.
- But, all those achievements of nonviolent struggle are simple introductions for what can come, and is already beginning.
- Already at least in the nineteenth century some historical accounts recorded nonviolent struggles for national independence, labor strikes and economic boycotts. Sometimes the writers attempted to draw lessons from those conflicts to benefit future struggles. Perhaps earlier, but minimally in the 1920s and clearly in the 1930s, broader studies of the conduct of struggles without reliance on violence expanded our awareness of the extremely diverse and widespread use of what has been increasingly recognized as a broad technique for conducting struggles by psychological, social, economic, and political means of action.
- This awareness and the understanding of how this technique operates, how it succeeds if it does, and why it fails if it does, has continued to grow, at least from the 1960s.

- Side by side with the intellectual development of a focus on nonviolent struggle has been a major expansion of the practice of nonviolent struggles in the twentieth century. These cases include struggles in Russia, several parts of Africa, India, China, Latin America, the United States, several parts of Europe, Nazi-occupied countries, and many other places.
- We have learned that people do not need to adopt a new religion or become saints or grow up in a perfect society in order not to use violence. Peace coming from love of the so-called evil-doer is beautiful but very rare. Far more often the choice to use nonviolent means can come out of simple stubbornness.
- We have learned that nonviolent struggle can be practiced more effectively than we assumed. The question has arisen as to how it can be effectively applied in the future in those acute conflicts for which we have believed only major violence can have a chance of success.
- A key first step is for us to decide that our goal in resisting is not merely to witness, or dissent. The goal in many cases should be to change the situation.
- Since 1960 various generic feasibility studies have been done that project the relevance of this technique for applicability in certain types of conflicts. These include defense against invasions and occupations, how to block and defeat coups d'état, and a study on how to end a dictatorship.
- By a series of effective nonviolent struggles to remove specific grievances in the society an incremental, step-by-step fundamental change can be made in the society replacing reliance on violence with reliance on nonviolent pressures and power.
- Out of various motives, often very good ones, groups have sought to spread the message that nonviolent mean should be chosen. Some have sought to actively help promote this spread. Sometimes this helps, but inadequate or simplistic advocacy of nonviolent action or naïve presentations of its potential can actually give false hopes or unrealistic expectations, that are then dashed . These events can impede the adoption of this technique and imperil its effective application.
- Therefore, the Hippocratic oath in medicine needs to be applied to promotion of nonviolent action and efforts to adopt nonviolent struggle: "First, do no harm."
- Acting for change with benefit to humanity requires humility. We all have much to learn. Strategic planning to achieve success and to gain widespread support requires intellectual calculations based on the reality of

nonviolent struggle and the actual situation faced by the victims of oppression and injustices. Major intellectual efforts as well as hard work and courage facing hostile situations and opponents are required.

- Beware of persons who use the word strategy but do not understand what the word means. Do not act on the sole basis of hopes and feelings. Beware of outsiders who tell you what to do.
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- When we knew so little about this technique of struggle we thought such struggles were rare. We now know they have been and can be almost everywhere.
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- Since about 1950 there has been an accelerating spread of the use of this technique in place of both passive submission and violence. Colonial liberation struggles that used nonviolent noncooperation and defiance in India and Africa have been followed by very different uses of this technique to end totalitarian dictatorships in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere and to prevent its return in Russia by means of the hard-line coup.
- A new wave of interest and use of nonviolent struggle began with success of the Serbian Otpor undermining of the Milosovic dictatorship and it is still reverberating far beyond Georgia and Ukraine. There is a new political environment that provides a great opening for realistic hope combined with both humility and competence.
- There has been evidence of a great hunger for knowledge about nonviolent struggle. This is evidenced, for example, by the spread of translations of one booklet ("From Dictatorship to Democracy").
- On the relevance of nonviolent struggle to end dictatorships, now in twenty-seven languages. The Albert Einstein Institution has guided the accuracy, vocabulary, and quality of these translations. This is despite the institution having almost no money to pay translators or assist printing costs, and not even a full time person to assist this immense task.
- There is currently active interest from people living under strong dictatorships to learn how they, too, might achieve self-liberation by nonviolent struggle. With evidence that oral presentations of the know-how of nonviolent struggle are not as effective in sharing this knowledge as we once thought, we are now exploring how this can be done under present circumstances.
- How can people who do not have a Gandhi learn how to plan strategies for their situation? We know that outsiders cannot do this for people in another country. We also know that wisdom, competency, and skill in planning and

conducting nonviolent struggle are desperately needed if nonviolent struggles are to have a chance of success.

- To reach that point, in-depth knowledge of how nonviolent struggle operates is essential. Otherwise, defeat is much more likely. A list of the factors that strongly contribute to achieving success in nonviolent conflicts can be found in the Appendix to *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.
- Wise strategic planning can greatly increase the chances of achieving success.
- A moderately competent guide to strategic planning of nonviolent campaigns now exists in the final chapters of *Waging Nonviolent Struggle*.
- In the most serious conflicts of our world compromise and agreement with the opponents should not be the objective. One should remove the power of the oppressors to oppress.
- Srja Popovic writing for the analytical team of the Centre for Applied NonViolent Action and Strategies, in Belgrade, Serbia (CANVAS) has pointed to the sources of power of all rulers in the first chapter of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* as the key to developing the strategy in the struggle to remove the Milosovic dictatorship. Once identified, the main goal is to weaken and remove those sources of power and the dictatorship must collapse.
- In meeting these needs the Albert Einstein Institution has been playing a crucial role and continues to do so despite grave impediments. There is a greater need for and indeed demand for our counsel than we are equipped to fulfill at present.
- Modern means of communication technology have already proved to be of immense assistance. These means are assisting and accelerating the spread of the know-how of nonviolent liberation.
- The development of strong interest in the potential of nonviolent struggle and dramatic applications of its power have not removed the oppression or eliminated the power-driven violence, and will not soon. To the contrary. there have been and will be not only grave threats to restless freedom and justice loving people, but also desperate spasms of violent retaliation.
- We get a sense of the merit of our studies, the accuracy of our analyses, and the power of the spread of knowledge of this technique, when gross distortions and direct lies about this work and me personally are increasingly spread by people who fear the nonviolent power of people. At times these

false accusations are even believed by people who need freedom from oppression and violence.

- Freedom is not free. There is a price to be paid. Peace will not come by holding hands, but through defiant assertion of the will and the capacity to use the power potential of nonviolent struggle to transform oppression into freedom and justice in peace.