

In June 2008, at the initiative of Professor Stephen Zunes of the University of San Francisco, the letter below was circulated among U.S. and internationally based scholars and activists as a response to critiques circulating about the work of Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution. The letter first appeared on Professor Zunes's website (<http://www.stephenzunes.org/petition/>) and is now available for viewing on the website of the Albert Einstein Institution (www.aeinstein.org).

Open Letter in Support of Gene Sharp and Strategic Nonviolent Action

As scholars and activists in longstanding opposition to efforts by the U.S. government – either directly or indirectly – to overthrow, undermine, subvert, or otherwise intervene in the internal affairs of other nations, we wish to go on record in defense of Dr. Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution.

Dr. Sharp is widely recognized as one of the world's leading authorities on strategic nonviolent action. He serves as the founder and senior scholar of the Albert Einstein Institution, a small nonprofit organization advancing the study and utilization of nonviolent conflict in defense of freedom, justice and democracy.

During the past year and a half, Dr. Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution have been subjected to a series of false accusations by a number of foreign governments of receiving guidance and financial support from the Bush administration, working with the CIA, and engaging in activities designed to promote U.S. imperialism. These and other groundless charges have also appeared in a series of articles which have been posted in recent months on a number of progressive web sites and elsewhere as if they were true. We, however, reject such claims categorically.

We are aware of, and are adamantly opposed to, efforts by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and other U.S. government-funded efforts to advance U.S. strategic and economic objectives under the guise of “democracy promotion.” We recognize, however, that Dr. Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution are *not* part of such an agenda.

Rather than being a tool of imperialism, Dr. Sharp's research and writings have inspired generations of progressive peace, labor, feminist, human rights, environmental, and social justice activists in the United States and around the world.

There have also been a small number of individuals who have taken advantage of resources offered by Dr. Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution whose commitment to justice and equality are questionable. The nature of the Institution's work, however, is transpartisan, cutting across political boundaries and conceptions, making its resources available to virtually anyone who is interested in learning about strategic nonviolent action. Providing educational materials and consultation on strategic nonviolent action to particular individuals, therefore, should not be misinterpreted as endorsing their ideological agenda or as evidence of collaboration with any government. As with similar false charges which have recently appeared regarding the work of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), the Center for Applied Nonviolent Actions and Strategies (CANVAS), and similar groups, critics confuse the Albert Einstein Institution's willingness to provide generic information on the history and dynamics of strategic nonviolent action with nefarious efforts by the U.S. government to undermine foreign governments critical of U.S. hegemonic goals and neo-liberal economic policies.

Except for receiving a couple of small one-time grants from the NED and IRI (well prior to the Bush administration coming to office) in order to translate some of Dr. Sharp's theoretical writings, the

Albert Einstein Institution has never received any money from any government or government-funded entity. Nor does Dr. Sharp or the Albert Einstein Institution collaborate with the CIA, the NED, or any U.S. government or government-funded agencies; nor has Dr. Sharp or the Albert Einstein Institution ever provided financial or logistical support to any opposition groups in any country; nor has Dr. Sharp or the Albert Einstein Institution ever taken sides in political conflicts or engaged in strategic planning with any group.

The Albert Einstein Institution operates with a very minimal budget out of Dr. Sharp's home with a staff consisting of two people – Dr. Sharp and a young administrator – and is quite incapable of carrying out the foreign intrigues of which it has been falsely accused.

Unlike some U.S.-funded “democracy-promotion” projects which assist pro-Western elites in top-down institution-building efforts and sophisticated political campaigns with the goal of seizing power, the Albert Einstein Institution, ICNC, CANVAS and related groups work primarily with grassroots activists who seek to empower civil society through nonviolent direct action regardless of their particular government's relations with the United States.

More fundamentally, these recent attacks against Dr. Sharp, the Albert Einstein Institution and similar groups represent a gross misunderstanding of the nature of strategic nonviolent action in the struggle for political freedom.

Indeed, those who attempt to dismiss recent popular nonviolent struggles against autocratic regimes as somehow being instigated and controlled by Western powers invalidate the ability of the millions of people who have placed their bodies on the line for freedom and justice to think for themselves or play a decisive role in determining their own nations' future. The United States is no more responsible for the recent nonviolent liberal democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe than the Soviet Union was responsible for earlier armed leftist revolutions in Central America. Every successful popular nonviolent insurrection has been rooted in the belief by the majority of people that their rulers were illegitimate and the current political system was incapable of redressing injustice, thereby no longer deserving their obedience or cooperation. Unlike a military coup or other U.S.-backed efforts at “regime change,” it is virtually impossible for any nonviolent insurrection to succeed when the movement's leadership and agenda does not have the backing of the majority of the population.

The popular nonviolent uprisings which led to the overthrow of corrupt and undemocratic regimes in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine earlier this decade – like similar movements which ousted U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Philippines, Chile, Mali, Bolivia, and other countries in previous decades – were a result of independent actions by the people of those nations struggling for their rights. As a result, neither Gene Sharp nor any other foreign individual, organization or government deserves the credit or the blame for their victories.

Nonviolent struggle has historically been the weapon of the poor and disenfranchised through which they can gain an advantage over powerful and wealthy elites whose capacity to use violence against them is usually far superior. It is therefore ironic that some of those who view themselves as champions of oppressed peoples mischaracterize these popular nonviolent movements simply as tools of U.S. imperialism and global capital.

We therefore call upon people of conscience to reject the false allegations leveled against Gene Sharp, the Albert Einstein Institute and other groups promoting strategic nonviolent action; to continue to struggle against U.S. imperialism in all of its manifestations; and, to support popular democratic movements engaging in nonviolent action in the cause of human rights and social justice in the United States and throughout the world.

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