



## Scholar Promotes Alternatives To War

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You have to wonder how prepared an 18- or 19-year-old is for a war that would likely include the use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. Young men and women stationed in the Middle East, on alert for disaster of the unknown, are in harm's way if war against Iraq or North Korea is declared by the United States, with or without allies. All of the technologically advanced gas masks, specialized suits intended to protect against weapons of mass destruction, and high caliber guns and precision missiles cannot absolutely insulate these young men and women from the probability that Saddam Hussein will resort to using weapons of mass destruction. Given that, one must begin to wonder whether war for noble or ignoble reasons and the body bags of loved ones who will most certainly perish in battle, is the best strategy to achieving democratic reforms or peace.

Dr. Gene Sharp, Senior Scholar at the Albert Einstein Institute in Boston, believes that there are a multitude of alternatives to war. In fact, he points out that history is full of these alternatives, where people from almost every cultural and ethnic background have assumed non-violent struggle to successfully combat and dismantle dictatorships, achieve civil and human rights, eliminate Apartheid and slay other seemingly invincible dragons. "There's a whole range of other types of struggles and resistance that have been practiced for thousands of years," says Sharp. "Struggles have been responsible to a large degree for the liberation of Eastern Europe, non-violent struggle was used in resistance against Nazi regimes, against Communist regimes, against European colonial powers, against indigenous military regimes, and has a track record which is far more impressive than most people understand."

Sharp dismisses the belief that war is necessary, preferring to consider whether non-violent struggle can be so refined and made so much more effective than it has in the past that it could be used instead of war to resolve conflicts in which there are really serious issues at stake. "The results of war are sometimes pretty disastrous," he says. Even though the United States feels that it is all but assured of a victory in Iraq, the consequences of this war on a broader spectrum may result in larger, unanticipated losses. "Sometimes the good guys lose, to say nothing of the casualties of war."

Most recently non-violent struggle was successfully implemented by a group of young Serbs who called themselves Otpor. While allied forces claim that President Milosevic's dictatorship ended because of a bombing campaign, which was led by the United States, Otpor's 23-year-old leader, Srdja Popovic says the bombing campaign in fact hampered the resistance efforts of Otpor and kept Milosevic in power for another year. War was not unknown to a country that had been ravaged by war with each generation. "Non violence proved that we are civilized people," said Popovic. "That shifting power in this society can be bloodless . . . Fear disintegrated. Milosevic's greatest problem was that he solved so much problems with fear. But fear, as you know, is a doubled-bladed sword . . . It's efficient manner of ruling people, but there is a problem with fear,

you need a lot of time to produce massive fear and, once that pyramid starts to crumble, the pyramid of fear it collapses much faster.”

Challenging their minds not just to speak their resistance, but to act, this group of scrappy young kids in their 20s created solidarity in purpose by assigning each person to a role - handling the media, organizing the funding, handling police arrests, or spreading their message by coordinating protest activities, etc. Enacting the methods outlined in Dr. Sharp's books, which were taught by Robert Helvey, these young activists proved that they could stand up to a powerful dictatorship that was infamous for acts of violence and “ethnic cleansing.”

Dr. Sharp has shared his research and insights on the topic of non-violent struggle in numerous books that have been published in many languages and used as valuable resource information all throughout the world. “The Anti-Coup” addresses how to block, deter, discourage and defeat undemocratic seizures of the state apparatus. Contending that “The strength of dictatorships is dependent on sources of power in the society, which in turn depend on the cooperation of a multitude of institutions and people,” it is possible to be able to cut off the lines that fuel dictatorships, that bank on fear with resistance. A defiance to cooperate with the dictating power with civil disobedience, boycotts, the distribution of leaflets, the organization of marches, coordination of resistance activities, and the discovery of the weak link in the social, economic and political structure can successfully “attack” dictatorships through non-violent struggle.

War is not a valid option - perhaps it could be viewed as a cop-out. “I think superpowers have a responsibility to explore what other kinds of struggles have been used which might be refined and developed so that little countries don't start building nuclear weapons, so frustrated minorities do not go to blowing up important buildings and killing thousands of people because they find they do have an alternative means of struggle which could be used.”

## **An Interview With Dr. Gene Sharp**

### ***Non-Violent Alternatives To War***

**TeenSpeak:** We are taught from a very young age that we are to use our words and violence to deal with conflicts. What happens between grade school and the letter we receive from recruitment offices that alters this credo?

**Sharp:** I think it's a more complicated situation than that scenario presents. That assumes that the only thing between violence on the one hand and non-violence is just plain words. People automatically think that if we can't talk our way through what we need, then we have to use violence. But, there's a whole range of other types of struggle and resistance that people have used in the past and will use in the future which not only includes the processing of elections but also direct resistance through boycotts and strikes and civil disobedience and non-violent protest. Those have not received sufficient attention in our educational system so that people often have very little awareness of them.

**TeenSpeak:** In today's world it is believed that might makes right. What is the matter with this logic?

**Sharp:** Even the terminology of might, by which you probably have in mind violence by some kind of military means, assumes that there is no other kind of might. And yet the regimes that have faced non-violent struggles have certainly recognized that those struggles were mighty and often very powerful. But they weren't violent. And we have to keep that option of struggle, which, is powerful, which is mighty, which is force, but it is waged by non-violent methods in mind.

**TeenSpeak:** When is war necessary?

**Sharp:** In at least half the cases of wars, one side loses. Both sides are using violence and that is 50 percent effectiveness before you start! World War I was supposed to make the world safe for democracy, yet, if we look at the history since 1918 up to the present, how safe has the world been for democracy? We forget what the purpose of the war was and was it won? History textbooks often emphasize wars. We need to study all kinds of nonviolent struggle and learn how it has been used in resistance against Nazi regimes, against Communist regimes, against European colonial powers, against indigenous military regimes, etc. Non-violent struggle has a track record, which is far more impressive than most people understand.

**TeenSpeak:** What should be the responsible role of a superpower in the world?

**Sharp:** I think superpowers have a responsibility to explore what other kinds of struggles have been used which might be refined and developed so that little countries don't start building nuclear weapons, so frustrated minorities do not go to blowing up important buildings and killing thousands of people because they find they do have an alternative means of struggle which could be used. The superpowers really ought to be devoting one or two percent of their military budgets to exploring these other possibilities. That's the least that one could ask for.

**TeenSpeak:** Are the outcomes of non-violent struggle longer lasting in their results?

**Sharp:** Potentially, yes. But we need to know that at the end, a non-violent struggle will not produce a perfect society without problems. There will be future problems that people will have to be prepared for. Greater human tolerance must also be met with the willingness and capacity to use non-violent struggle when they face new problems.

**TeenSpeak:** How can non-violent resistance work in authoritarian regimes?

**Sharp:** Sometimes very well. You can ask that question in the reverse. How can violent resistance work under authoritarian regimes? You sometimes get it with terrorist or guerrilla warfare and a tremendous repression. You have to focus on not how strong the regime is, but focus on the internal problems. Where are they weak? Where are they trying to do something that they are failing? What are their sources of power? How can you weaken the supply of those sources of power or take them away completely? If you can find that, you can focus your resistance on their weakness.

**TeenSpeak:** What are the results of a US multi-lateral or unilateral attack against Iraq?

**Sharp:** Oh, I think that they are getting into so much trouble that I wish they wouldn't do it. You can blow up buildings, you can slaughter soldiers, you can put a puppet government in and control the capitol buildings and still achieve little. In Kabul they say their regime there doesn't control much of anything outside of Kabul in Afghanistan. How can you administer and control whole populations when you don't even speak the language - much less would they accept you? What if that war doesn't go so well? What if other countries get involved? What if the lesson the Arabs and the Muslims learn is that the U.S. is out to beat them all down and bomb their cities? That wins no friends, either for the United States or for democracy. But if they can carry out a struggle, like the Serbs carried out, and with our help, perhaps with handbooks on how to undermine dictators, with financial support, with short-wave or other radio broadcasts, information on what has happened in other countries, then they will feel that the U.S. really cares about them. That gives them the real power. That is the real basis of self-sustaining, self-survivable democratic systems.

**TeenSpeak:** How can we be successful in the war on terror without using war as an option?

**Sharp:** That phrase is very unfortunate because it assumes that you can really fight and deal with

a war waged by terrorism by superior violence by more war. I think that is nonsense. I think all that teaches the terrorists is that they weren't sufficiently brutal and destructive. It teaches them that violence is a superior power, so that they have to do the best violence they could do. It escalates the violence and that will, of course, not solve the problem at all, but will make it much worse.

**TeenSpeak:** How can we overcome human nature, which is prone to violence, and mobilize mass populations to practice non-violent resistance?

**Sharp:** First of all, human nature is not necessarily prone to violence. Humans can be very violent and very brutal but that's not necessarily their genetic make-up. We have great potential for doing all kinds of evil and violent things and great potential for doing other things. Non-violent struggle has happened all of the time throughout centuries in all parts of the world in all cultures. If you look through history, you will discover that non-violent struggle, although it was not prepared, although the people there often didn't know what the hell they were doing, they were feisty, and gutsy and stubborn enough that they resisted and sometimes they won against great odds. That demonstrates that it can happen.

**TeenSpeak:** Institutions gain their strength from individuals. Institutions are only as strong as people's belief in them. If they no longer believe in them, don't the institutions crumble?

**Sharp:** Yes, of course.

**TeenSpeak:** What has to happen for non-violent struggle to occur and for us to feel powerful in a world where there are nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction?

**Sharp:** There was a case I heard described some years back in South Africa, at a time when the apartheid regime was very strong. The Africans were poorly organized and they felt very intimidated. The people were thought to be too weak to challenge this repressive white dominated regime. They didn't tackle apartheid immediately, but they tackled the issue of unclean water, which was making people and babies very sick. They did that skillfully and they won. That sent a shiver up and down the spines of everybody who took part in that. From that, these people got a sense of empowerment. They realized that they could do something. And, if you could do something, then you could do something more.

**TeenSpeak:** What should we do with regard to Iraq and the situation we find ourselves in?

**Sharp:** In some ways, that's a little bit like saying: If someone has put you in a car in which the brakes have been cut, and the car is steered towards a cliff, and the steering wheel doesn't work very well either, what can you do to save us from going over the cliff? These kinds of issues should have been faced decades ago. At this point, I would say let's focus on other ways of dealing with dictatorships. The assumption that you can deal with these problems through war and military means to get a better society I think is extremely foolish and very unwise and verges on nonsense.

**TeenSpeak:** Should we have people on the ground there distributing pamphlets and the like?

**Sharp:** No. We don't speak the language. We should have people disseminating the idea that you can undermine dictatorships without war right here in the United States. War is a foolish waste of resources and lives. We must get to the root of the problem. So they get rid of one totalitarian regime in Afghanistan, there is still the one in Iraq. You get rid of the one in Iraq, and there is another one somewhere else. And when you think you have got things all sorted out, then something like North Korea pops up. We need to learn how to really get rid of dictators and prevent new dictatorships from arising. Nonviolent struggle is extremely complicated and very sophisticated. But it's based upon something that is very simple: stubbornness. Humans are very capable of being very stubborn. No, I won't do that. No, we won't help. No, we won't do that. No,

we won't submit to censorship. No, we won't report on the political opinions of our neighbors and our family. No, we won't pay that kind of money for you to oppress us, etc., and we must think about how we can expand that to massive societies. The 20th century is full of these kinds of examples and they are usually not receiving that much attention in our history courses.

**TeenSpeak:** What are you most proud of?

**Sharp:** Oh, I guess if I've helped through my writings predominantly to reveal, not really to innovate, but to reveal what is already there, what has already been practiced, then I suppose that's it. There's a saying, "If that which exists is possible, what has already happened clearly was possible." It means minimally, it could be repeated. But better than that, we could learn how to do that more effectively by conscious analysis and strategic planning and gutsy action. That this idea is gradually growing throughout many parts of the world is very important.

**TeenSpeak:** So, if we can disseminate this information and learn from the past and capitalize on it, evolve in the way we approach conflicts - even as the world seems daunting in terms of the conflicts that we face - are you optimistic?

**Sharp:** In spite of all of the terrible things, I maintain a considerable degree of optimism. All of this is a lot of work. And, it won't happen - such a change in attitude towards conflicts - with a snap of the fingers or a flip of the wrists. It's going to happen as a result of the hard work and intelligent application of talents of human beings in a great variety of ways. We need an awful lot of historical research on past cases for example. We need analysis of what kind of opponents we have faced. Where are their weaknesses and how can we undermine and then defeat them? And there's room in all of this for people who have a lot of public relations skills, writing, artistic work, scholars, strategists, translators, and there's a role for all kinds of people to participate in this and everyone will have to find their own way and their own niche but every bit helps.