

Chapter One

FACING ACUTE CONFLICTS

All conflicts are not equal

We live in a world of many conflicts, and we have a responsibility to face many of them.

Not all conflicts are equal. Some are much more important than others, and in some conflicts the issues at stake are more difficult to resolve in acceptable ways than are those in other conflicts.

Where the issues are of only limited importance, the difficulties in reaching a resolution are often small. Potentially, we can split the difference, agree on a third option, or postpone dealing with some issues until a later time. Even in these lesser conflicts, however, the group with a grievance requires effective means of pressing its claims. Otherwise, there is little reason for one's opponents to consider those claims seriously.

There are, however, many other conflicts in which fundamental issues are, or are believed to be, at stake. These conflicts are not deemed suitable for resolution by any methods that involve compromise. These are "acute conflicts."

Waging acute conflicts

In acute conflicts, at least one side regards it as necessary and good to wage the conflict against hostile opponents because of the issues seen to be at stake. It is often believed that the conflict must be waged in order to advance or protect freedom, justice, religion, one's civilization, or one's people. Proposed settlements that involve basic compromises of these fundamental issues are rarely acceptable. Likewise, submission to the opponents, or defeat by them, is regarded as disastrous. Yet, compromise or submission is often believed to be required for peaceful solutions to acute conflicts. Since these are not acceptable options for the parties involved, people therefore believe that it is necessary to wage the conflict by applying the strongest means available to them. These means often involve some type of violence.

There are alternatives

Violence, however, is not the only possibility. War and other forms of violence have not been universal in the waging of acute conflicts. In a great variety of situations, across centuries and cultural barriers, another technique of struggle has at times been applied. This other technique has been based on the ability to be stubborn, to refuse to cooperate, to disobey, and to resist powerful opponents powerfully.

Throughout human history, and in a multitude of conflicts, one side has instead fought by psychological, social, economic, or political methods, or a combination of them. Many times this alternative technique of struggle has been applied when fundamental issues have been at stake, and when ruthless opponents have been willing and able to apply extreme repression. This repression has included beatings, arrests, imprisonments, executions, and mass slaughters. Despite such repression, when the resisters have persisted in fighting with only their chosen "nonviolent weapons," they have sometimes triumphed.

This alternative technique is called nonviolent action or nonviolent struggle. This is "the other ultimate sanction." In some acute conflicts it has served as an alternative to violent struggle.

In the minds of many people, nonviolent struggle is closely connected with the persons of Mohandas K. Gandhi and

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The work and actions of both men and the movements that they led or in which they played crucial roles are highly important. However, those movements are by no means representative of all nonviolent action. In fact, the work of these men is in significant ways atypical of the general practice of nonviolent struggle during recent decades and certainly throughout the centuries. Nonviolent struggles are not new historically. They have occurred for many centuries, although historical accounts frequently give them little recognition.

Widespread nonviolent struggle

Nonviolent struggle has occurred in widely differing cultures, periods of history, and political conditions. It has occurred in the West and in the East. Nonviolent action has occurred in industrialized and nonindustrialized countries. It has been practiced under constitutional democracies and against empires, foreign occupations, and dictatorial systems. Nonviolent struggle has been waged on behalf of a myriad of causes and groups, and even for objectives that many people reject. It has also been used to prevent, as well as to promote, change. Its use has sometimes been mixed with limited violence, but many times it has been waged with minimal or no violence.

The issues at stake in these conflicts have been diverse. They have included social, economic, ethnic, religious, national, humanitarian, and political matters, and they have ranged from the trivial to the fundamental.

Although historians have generally neglected this type of struggle, it is clearly a very old phenomenon. Most of the history of this technique has doubtless been lost, and most of what has survived has been largely ignored.

Many cases of the use of nonviolent action have had little or nothing to do with governments. Modern cases include labor-management conflicts and efforts to impose or resist pressures for social conformity. Nonviolent action has also been used in ethnic and religious conflicts and many other situations, such as disputes between students and university administrations. Important conflicts between the civilian population and governments where one side has employed nonviolent action have also occurred very widely. The following examples are often of this type.

Cases of nonviolent struggle

From the late eighteenth century through the twentieth century, the technique of nonviolent action was widely used in colonial rebellions, international political and economic conflicts, religious conflicts, and anti-slavery resistance.¹ This technique has been aimed to secure workers' right to organize, women's rights, universal manhood suffrage, and woman suffrage. This type of struggle has been used to gain national independence, to generate economic gains, to resist genocide, to undermine dictatorships, to gain civil rights, to end segregation, and to resist foreign occupations and coups d'état.

In the twentieth century, nonviolent action rose to unprecedented political significance throughout the world. People using this technique amassed major achievements, and, of course, experienced failure at times. Higher wages and improved working conditions were won. Oppressive traditions and practices were abolished. Both men and women won the right to vote in several countries in part by using this technique. Government policies were changed, laws repealed, new legislation enacted, and governmental reforms instituted. Invaders were frustrated and armies defeated. An empire was paralyzed, coups d'état thwarted, and dictatorships disintegrated. Nonviolent struggle was used against extreme dictatorships, including both Nazi and Communist systems.

Cases of the use of this technique early in the twentieth century included major elements of the Russian 1905 Revolution. In various countries growing trade unions widely used the strike and the economic boycott. Chinese boycotts of Japanese products occurred in 1908, 1915, and 1919. Germans used nonviolent resistance against the Kapp *Putsch* in 1920 and against the French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. In the 1920s and 1930s, Indian nationalists used nonviolent action in their struggles against British rule, under the leadership of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Likewise, Muslim Pashtuns in what was the North-West Frontier Province of British India (now in Pakistan) also used

¹ For bibliographic references to books in English on many of these cases, see Ronald M. McCarthy and Gene Sharp, with the assistance of Brad Bennett, *Nonviolent Action: A Research Guide*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997.

nonviolent struggle against British rule under the leadership of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan.

From 1940 to 1945 people in various European countries, especially in Norway, Denmark, and The Netherlands, used nonviolent struggle to resist Nazi occupation and rule. Nonviolent action was used to save Jews from the Holocaust in Berlin, Bulgaria, Denmark, and elsewhere. The military dictators of El Salvador and Guatemala were ousted in brief nonviolent struggles in the spring of 1944. The American civil rights nonviolent struggles against racial segregation, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, changed laws and long-established policies in the U.S. South. In April 1961, noncooperation by French conscript soldiers in the French colony of Algeria, combined with popular demonstrations in France and defiance by the Debré-de Gaulle government, defeated the military coup d'état in Algiers before a related coup in Paris could be launched.

In 1968 and 1969, following the Warsaw Pact invasion, Czechs and Slovaks held off full Soviet control for eight months with improvised nonviolent struggle and refusal of collaboration. From 1953 to 1991, dissidents in Communist-ruled countries in Eastern Europe, especially in East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, repeatedly used nonviolent struggles for increased freedom. The Solidarity struggle in Poland began in 1980 with strikes to support the demand of a legal free trade union, and concluded in 1989 with the end of the Polish Communist regime. Nonviolent protests and mass resistance were also highly important in undermining the apartheid policies and European domination in South Africa, especially between 1950 and 1990. The Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines was destroyed by a nonviolent uprising in 1986.

In July and August 1988, Burmese democrats protested against the military dictatorship with marches and defiance and brought down three governments, but this struggle finally succumbed to a new military coup d'état and mass slaughter. In 1989, Chinese students and others in over three hundred cities (including Tiananmen Square, Beijing) conducted symbolic protests against government corruption and oppression, but the protests finally ended following massive killings by the military.

Nonviolent struggle brought about the end of Communist dictatorships in Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1989 and in

East Germany, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1991. Noncooperation and defiance against the attempted “hard line” coup d’état by the KGB, the Communist Party, and the Soviet Army in 1991, blocked the attempted seizure of the Soviet State.

In Kosovo, the Albanian population between 1990 and 1999 conducted a widespread noncooperation campaign against repressive Serbian rule. When the de facto Kosovo government lacked a nonviolent strategy for gaining de jure independence, a guerrilla Kosovo Liberation Army initiated violence. This was followed by extreme Serbian repression and massive slaughters by so-called ethnic cleansing, which led to NATO bombing and intervention.

Starting in November 1996, Serbs conducted daily parades and protests in Belgrade and other cities against the autocratic governance of President Milosevic and secured correction of electoral fraud in mid-January 1997. At that time, however, Serb democrats lacked a strategy to press the struggle further and failed to launch a campaign to bring down the Milosevic dictatorship. In early October 2000, the Otpor (Resistance) movement and other democrats rose up again against Milosevic in a carefully planned nonviolent struggle and the dictatorship collapsed.

In early 2001, President Estrada, who had been accused of corruption, was ousted by Filipinos in a “People Power Two” campaign.

There were many other important examples this past century, and the practice of nonviolent struggle continues.

The many methods of nonviolent struggle

A multitude of specific methods of nonviolent action, or nonviolent weapons, exist. Nearly two hundred have been identified to date, and without doubt, scores more already exist and others will emerge in future conflicts. These methods are detailed in Chapter Four.

Methods of nonviolent action include protest marches, flying forbidden flags, massive rallies, vigils, leaflets, picketing, social boycotts, economic boycotts, labor strikes, rejection of legitimacy, civil disobedience, boycott of government positions, boycott of rigged elections, strikes by civil servants, noncooperation by police, nonobedience without direct supervision, mutiny, sit-

ins, hunger strikes, sit-downs on the streets, establishment of alternative institutions, occupation of offices, and creation of parallel governments.

These methods may be used to protest symbolically, to put an end to cooperation, or to disrupt the operation of the established system. As such, three broad classes of nonviolent methods exist: *nonviolent protest and persuasion*, *noncooperation*, and *nonviolent intervention*.

Symbolic protests, though in most situations quite mild, can make it clear that some of the population is opposed to the present regime and can help to undermine its legitimacy. Social, economic, and political noncooperation, when practiced strongly and long enough, can weaken the opponents' control, wealth, domination, and power, and potentially produce paralysis. The methods of nonviolent intervention, which disrupt the established order by psychological, social, economic, physical, or political methods, can dramatically threaten the opponents' control.

Individuals and groups may hold differing opinions about the general political usefulness and the ethical acceptability of the methods of nonviolent struggle. Yet everyone can benefit from more knowledge and understanding of their use and careful examination of their potential relevance and effectiveness.

A pragmatic choice

Nonviolent struggle is identified by what people do, not by what they believe. In many cases, the people using these nonviolent methods have believed violence to be perfectly justified in moral or religious terms. However, for the specific conflict that they currently faced they chose, for pragmatic reasons, to use methods that did not include violence.

Only in rare historical instances did a group or a leader have a personal belief that rejected violence in principle. Nevertheless, even in these cases, a nonviolent struggle based on pragmatic concerns was often still viewed as morally superior.

However, belief that violence violates a moral or religious principle does not constitute nonviolent action.² Nor does the simple absence of physical violence mean that nonviolent action is occurring. It is the type of activity that identifies the technique of nonviolent action, not the belief behind the activity.

The degree to which nonviolent struggle has been consciously chosen in place of violence differs widely among historical examples. In many past cases, nonviolent action appears to have been initiated more or less spontaneously, with little deliberation. In other cases, the choice of a certain nonviolent method—such as a labor strike—was made on grounds specific to the particular situation only, without a comparative evaluation of the merits of nonviolent action over violent action. Many applications of nonviolent action seem to have been imitations of actions elsewhere.

There has been much variation in the degree to which people in these conflicts have been aware of the existence of a general nonviolent technique of action and have had prior knowledge of its operation.

In most of these cases, nonviolent means appear to have been chosen because of considerations of anticipated effectiveness. In some cases, there appear to have been mixed motives, with practical motives predominating but with a relative moral preference for nonviolent means.

What words to use?

The type of action in these cases and others has been given various names, some of which are useful and others of which are inappropriate. These names include “nonviolent resistance,” “civil resistance,” “passive resistance,” “nonviolence,” “people power,” “political defiance,” and “positive action.” The use of the term “nonviolence” is especially unfortunate, because it confuses these forms of mass action with beliefs in ethical or religious nonviolence (“principled nonviolence”). Those beliefs, which have their merits, are different phenomena that usually are unrelated to mass struggles conducted by people who do not share

² It is worth noting that some believers in “principled nonviolence” have even *rejected* nonviolent struggle because it was a way to wage conflict (in which they did not believe).

such beliefs. To identify the technique, we here use and recommend the terms *nonviolent action* or *nonviolent struggle*.

Because of the continuing imprecision and confusion about which words to use, it has been necessary over recent decades to refine existing terminology to describe and discuss such action, and even to develop new words and phrases. Therefore, a short glossary has been included for reference at the end of this book.

Exposing misconceptions

In addition to misconceptions conveyed by unfortunate terminology, there are other areas of confusion in the field of nonviolent struggle as well. Despite new studies in recent decades, inaccuracies and misunderstandings are still widespread. Here are corrections for some of them:

(1) Nonviolent action has nothing to do with passivity, submissiveness, or cowardice. Just as in violent action, these must first be rejected and overcome before the struggle can proceed.

(2) Nonviolent action is a means of conducting conflicts and can be very powerful, but it is an extremely different phenomenon from violence of all types.

(3) Nonviolent action is not to be equated with verbal persuasion or purely psychological influences, although this technique may sometimes include action to apply psychological pressures for attitude change. Nonviolent action is a technique of struggle involving the use of psychological, social, economic, and political power in the matching of forces in conflict.

(4) Nonviolent action does not depend on the assumption that people are inherently “good.” The potentialities of people for both “good” and “evil” are recognized, including the extremes of cruelty and inhumanity.

(5) In order to use nonviolent action effectively, people do *not* have to be pacifists or saints. Nonviolent action has been predominantly and successfully practiced by “ordinary” people.

(6) Success with nonviolent action does not require (though it may be helped by) shared standards and principles, or a high degree of shared interests or feelings of psychological closeness between the contending sides. If the opponents are emotionally unmoved by nonviolent resistance in face of violent repression, and therefore unwilling to agree to the objectives of the nonvio-

lent struggle group, the resisters may apply coercive nonviolent measures. Difficult enforcement problems, economic losses, and political paralysis do not require the opponents' agreement to be felt.

(7) Nonviolent action is at least as much of a Western phenomenon as an Eastern one. Indeed, it is probably more Western, if one takes into account the widespread use of strikes and economic boycotts in the labor movements, the noncooperation struggles of subordinated European nationalities, and the struggles against dictatorships.

(8) In nonviolent action, there is no assumption that the opponents will refrain from using violence against nonviolent resisters. In fact, the technique is capable of operating against violence.

(9) There is nothing in nonviolent action to prevent it from being used for both "good" and "bad" causes. However, the social consequences of its use for a "bad" cause differ considerably from the consequences of violence used for the same "bad" cause.

(10) Nonviolent action is not limited to domestic conflicts within a democratic system. In order to have a chance of success, it is *not* necessary that the struggle be waged against relatively gentle and restrained opponents. Nonviolent struggle has been widely used against powerful governments, foreign occupiers, despotic regimes, tyrannical governments, empires, ruthless dictatorships, and totalitarian systems. These difficult nonviolent struggles against violent opponents have sometimes been successful.

(11) One of the many widely believed myths about conflict is that violence works quickly, and nonviolent struggle takes a long time to bring results. This is *not* true. Some wars and other violent struggles have been fought for many years, even decades. Some nonviolent struggles have brought victories very quickly, even within days or weeks. The time taken to achieve victory with this technique depends on diverse factors—including the strength of the nonviolent resisters and the wisdom of their actions.

What about human nature?

Despite the widespread occurrence of this type of conflict, many people still assume that nonviolent struggle is contrary to "human nature." It is often claimed that its widespread practice

would require either a fundamental change in human beings or the acceptance of a powerful new religious or ideological belief system. Those views are not supported by the reality of past conflicts that have been waged by use of this technique.

In fact, the practice of this type of struggle is not based on belief in “turning the other cheek” or loving one’s enemies. Instead, the widespread practice of this technique is more often based on the undeniable capacity of human beings to be stubborn, and to do what they want to do or to refuse to do what they are ordered, whatever their beliefs about the use or nonuse of violence. Massive stubbornness can have powerful political consequences.

In any case, the view that nonviolent struggle is impossible except under rare conditions is contrary to the facts. That which has happened in the past is possible in the future.

The extremely widespread practice of nonviolent struggle is possible because the operation of this technique is compatible with the nature of political power and the vulnerabilities of all hierarchical systems. These systems and all governments depend on the subordinated populations, groups, and institutions to supply them with their needed sources of power. Before continuing with the examination of the technique of nonviolent struggle, it is therefore necessary to explore in greater depth the nature of the power of dominant institutions and all governments. This analysis sheds light on how it is that nonviolent struggle can be effective against repressive and ruthless regimes. They are vulnerable.

