

Notes on the Effectiveness of Nonviolent Action

Conventional Wisdom

- Based on two myths:
 - War and revolutions kill and maim people, but they are effective and therefore necessary.
 - Nonviolent action is moral and good, but ineffective and therefore mostly useless.
- This is not true!

Reality about War and Revolution

- It is true that war and revolution can **sometimes** be effective.
 - WWII, though horribly destructive overall, was effective in preventing tyrants in Germany, Italy, and Japan from achieving their goal of taking over the world. A few revolutions — such as those liberating countries in Africa and Central America — have overthrown corrupt tyrants.
 - Police can stop robberies, assaults, and rapes. SWAT teams can stop psychopaths from killing innocent people, and jails can prevent sociopaths from terrorizing a community.
- **But** it is also true that wars and revolutions are **not** very effective:
 - Because the situation was changed by force rather than changing the hearts and minds of the population, wars and revolutions are **often overturned later**.
 - In every violent war or revolution, at least **one side always loses**, so violence is only half-effective at best.
 - Wars and revolutions **kill, maim, and traumatize** a lot of soldiers/revolutionaries. And in modern times, especially with our massive bombs, missiles, and land mines, they also kill, maim, and traumatize a lot of innocent bystanders — that is, civilians (including children). Lots of people lose.
 - And they often **destroy the civil infrastructure** (drinking water systems, energy utility systems, sewers and sewage treatment plants, roads and bridges, health facilities) **and tear apart civil institutions** that ordinary people rely on to maintain their health and a decent life. Everyone loses.

Truth about Nonviolent Action

- Since 1970, nonviolent action has **very effectively toppled** dozens of dictatorships around the world.
 - These include:
 - South Africa's apartheid regime
 - The Soviet Union
 - Totalitarian governments in Poland, East Germany, and the rest of the Soviet satellite states
 - Pinochet regime in Chile
 - Marcos regime in The Philippines
 - Milosevic regime in Yugoslavia
 - Many more.
 - Not all were ultimately successful (some faltered, strayed, or were overturned later), but generally they were **as effective as most revolutions or wars**.
 - Did a lot less damage to people and society.
 - Nonviolent actions empowered people, built community and democratic structures.
 - **Ad hoc**: Most of these were carried out by people who knew very little about nonviolent action and who made it up as they went along. In contrast, most wars and revolutions are carried out by highly skilled soldiers relying on knowledge, skills, and weapons that have been developed over 3,000 years. Imagine if as much energy had gone into developing nonviolent action.
- Most important and effective US social movements have been **primarily nonviolent**.
 - **Examples**:
 - Boston Tea Party before the US Revolutionary War
 - Efforts to overturn slavery before the US Civil War
 - Populist movement of 1870-90s
 - Women's suffrage movement
 - Progressive movement in 1910s
 - US labor movement in 1930s
 - US civil rights movement in 1940-60s
 - US anti-Vietnam war movement in 1960-70s
 - US gay rights movement
 - US environmental movement

- Worldwide anti-corporate globalization (fair trade) movement
- Sometimes they ended with violence (Revolution, Civil War)

How Nonviolent Action Works

- Authorities (powerholders) usually have very little power on their own. They are not powerful because they are stronger or smarter than everybody else, but **because others support and obey them.**
- Authorities rely on:
 - **Active support and obedience** of some people (army, police, guards, other government workers)
 - **Consent** by other opinion leaders (business, labor, church, and education leaders, news reporters, etc.)
 - **Coerced acceptance** by some people (economic coercion of workers, legal/bureaucratic coercion of people, physical coercion of prisoners, etc.)
 - **Passive acquiescence** by most people (consumers, voters, etc.)
- When a few critical support people or massive numbers of less critical **people withhold their support** or refuse to passively consent, **then authorities lose their power.**
- Examples of **ways to undercut the power** of authorities:
 - **Challenge** — People vocally challenge authorities, including speaking out, lobbying, writing letters to newspaper editors, writing and distributing leaflets, etc.
 - **Defeat in Elections** — Voters vote officeholders out of office.
 - **Fire** — Bosses or owners (shareholders) fire authorities.
 - **Ignore** — People ignore the ideas or commands of authorities.
 - **Strike** — Government workers or business owners or workers refuse to work, refuse to provide services or goods, or refuse to pay taxes.
 - **Boycott** — People refuse to patronize institutions or buy goods and thereby cut off demand for those products. They begin to patronize or buy alternative goods and services.
 - **Blockade** — People interfere with business as usual and force change.
- Examples of **critical people**:
 - Personal family and friends of authorities
 - Personal needs workers of authorities (assistants, cooks, cleaners, day care workers, etc.)
 - Security personnel (police, army, prison guards, computer security people, etc.)
 - Key government bureaucrats
 - Key opinion makers (politicians, news media owners, reporters, editors, renowned statespeople, academics, celebrities)
 - Key maintainers of critical infrastructure (power plant workers, bridgekeepers, gas station attendants, truckers, longshore workers, TV and radio technicians, newspaper production plant workers, computer network maintainers, computer database maintainers, etc.)
- **To build a movement** against authorities, activists engage in many activities:
 - Educate and persuade people about the bad situation and about how to change it
 - Educate and persuade people to withhold their support/consent and how to do so
 - Organize people into groups for mutual support and action
 - Arrange activities to demonstrate opposition and challenge authorities (vigils, rallies, lobbying, elections, strikes, boycotts, tax resistance, etc.)
 - Build alternative institutions to provide other ways to satisfy people's important needs and wants
 - Provide support, comfort, and refuge for people when they face counterattack from authorities so they can continue withholding their support