

Give non-violence a chance

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Achieving your aims without warfare is a dangerous idea that terrifies the established order

Lesson No. 1 on the subject of non-violence is that there is no definitive word for it. The concept has been praised by all major religions, yet while every language has a word for violence, no word expresses the idea of non-violence except to describing it by what it isn't: not violence.

The only explanation is that the cultural and intellectual establishments of all societies have viewed non-violence as a marginal point of view, a fanciful rejection of one of society's key components. It has been marginalized because it is one of the rare truly revolutionary ideas, a concept that seeks to change the nature of society, a threat to the established order. It has always been treated as something profoundly dangerous.

Advocates of non-violence—dangerous people—have been present throughout history, questioning the greatness of Caesar and Napoleon and the American Founding Fathers and Churchill. For every crusade and revolution and civil war, many have argued that violence is not only immoral but provides a less-effective means of achieving laudable goals. The case can be made that it was not the American Revolution that secured independence from Britain, that fighting the Nazis in World War II did not save the Jews. But this possibility has rarely been considered, because the Caesars and Napoleons have always used their power to muffle the voices of those who would challenge the necessity of war—and it is these Caesars, as Napoleon observed, who write history. So the ones who have killed become revered. The seldom-expressed but implicit viewpoint of most cultures is that violence is real and non-violence is unreal. But when non-violence becomes a reality, it is a powerful force.

Non-violence is not the same thing as pacifism, for which there are many words. Pacifism is a state of mind. Pacifism is passive; non-violence is active. Pacifism is harmless and therefore easier to accept than non-violence, which is dangerous. When Jesus said a victim should turn the other cheek, he was preaching pacifism. But when he said an enemy should be won over through the power of love, he was preaching non-violence.

Non-violence, exactly like violence, is a means of persuasion, a recipe for prevailing. It requires a great deal more imagination to devise non-violent means—boycotts, sit-ins, strikes, street theatre, demonstrations—than to use force. But there is not always agreement on what constitutes violence. Some advocates of non-violence believe boycotts that cause hunger and deprivation are a form of violence. Some believe that using less-lethal means of force, like throwing rocks or shooting rubber bullets, is a form of non-violence. But the central belief of non-violence is that forms of persuasion that do not use physical force and do not cause suffering are more effective.

Mohandas Gandhi invented a word for it: satyagraha, from satya, meaning truth. Satyagraha,

according to Gandhi, literally means “holding onto truth.”

Lesson No. 2 drawn is that it is always easier to promote war than peace and easier to end the peace than end the war, because peace is fragile and war is durable. Once the first shots are fired, those who oppose the war are simply branded as traitors. All debate ends once the first shots are fired, so firing shots is always an effective way to end the debate. The silence may not last for long, as in the War of 1812, World War I, Vietnam and Iraq—all the unpopular wars in the U.S.—demonstrate, but there is always a moment of enforced silence, and this moment gives war boosters at least a temporary advantage.

The power of non-violence as a practical way of achieving political ends can be seen, ironically, in the American Revolution—the longest war in U.S. history until Vietnam.

Up until the first shots of the war were fired in Concord, Massachusetts, in April 1775, the rebels, even while arguing for war, had been spectacularly successful at what could be considered non-violent resistance. When the British passed the Stamp Act in 1765, which most colonists considered an unfair tax, demonstrations were staged throughout the colonies. The stamp officials were forced to resign in every colony but Georgia. The result of all this was that within a year the act was repealed.

The American revolutionaries, in their pre-war days, were particularly effective in their use of the important non-violent tool, the boycott. Women began weaving cloth by hand rather than buy fabric from British mills. Homespun became the fashion. Spinning bees became patriotic gatherings. An accompanying boycott of tea turned Americans into coffee-drinkers. But debates raged on how to take the tea boycott even further. On December 16, 1773, 60 revolutionaries, dressed as Mohawk Indians, boarded three ships in Boston Harbor and dumped 342 chests of tea into the sea. This was a perfectly managed act of non-violent protest. No incidents of looting or vandalism were reported. According to legend, one padlock was broken and the revolutionaries replaced it.

Why, then, did the rebels turn to warfare? Sentiment was already strongly anti-British. The second U.S. president John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson, the third, late in his life, “The revolution was in the minds of the people, and in the union of the colonies, both of which were accomplished before the hostilities commenced.” The writer François-René de Chateaubriand, who lived through the French Revolution, said almost the exact same thing, “The French Revolution was accomplished before it occurred.”

So if revolutions are accomplished in the minds of the people, why must they be followed by force of arms? Why do almost all political theorists—not only Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau, but later ones such as Marx and Lenin—insist that a revolution must be an armed movement? Is the source of violence not human nature, as philosopher Thomas Hobbes contended, but a lack of imagination?

Just as most news media, political leaders, cultural institutions and pundits tend to glorify war, the world rarely recognizes triumphs of non-violence. This too perhaps is the result of a lack of imagination. One of the most spectacular victories of non-violence in history, in fact, is seldom mentioned.

In the winter of 1989, when democratic yearnings began to unravel the Polish Communist Party, when all of Central Europe subsequently fell, and when finally, in December of 1991, the Soviet Union was dismantled, the rest of the world was shocked and completely taken by surprise. No one was more surprised than U.S. President George H.W. Bush, and his advisers, most of whom were left

over from the recently departed Reagan administration. Had they done it? In time they decided they had—they had overthrown the Soviet Union by taking a hard line. Of course, the U.S. government had been taking a “hard line” ever since the Russian Revolution. Woodrow Wilson had even invaded the infant USSR. But Ronald Reagan, by being a good Cold Warrior and stepping up the nuclear arms race, had pressured the Soviets right out of existence. To make this claim—and some still make it—is to ignore the Eastern Europeans who dedicated their lives to slowly, non-violently chipping away at Soviet authority.

The seeds were planted in 1956 at the University of Warsaw by two Communist students, Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, who, though arrested and expelled from the party, continued to organize at the university. But the rest of the world had no faith in non-violence. The British in particular always insisted that Gandhi’s victory had proven not the effectiveness of non-violence but rather the essential civility of the British. In a 1949 essay on Gandhi in the *Partisan Review*, George Orwell even stated that Gandhi’s tactics would never work against the Russians.

But the Eastern European dissidents’ secret weapon was patience. The Poles accepted that it would take time. Jan Litynski, who had been a student protester in 1968, told *The New York Times*, when the end came, “I guess what surprised me most is that I just did not think it would happen so soon.” It had taken 20 years. Leading Polish dissident Adam Michnik, writing from prison in 1985, summed up the non-violent approach this way: “Taught by history, we suspect that by using force to storm the existing Bastilles we shall unwittingly build new ones.”

By the end of the 1980s, such a large part of the population had turned against repressive Communist regimes that they could no longer function. On October 7, 1989, East German Communist Party leader Erich Honecker ordered security forces to open fire on demonstrators in Leipzig. Egon Krenz, his man in charge of security, flew to Leipzig to prevent the shooting. Krenz feared that if their security forces opened fire it would mean the end of the regime. Ten days later, after Honecker was forced to resign, the regime did resort to violence. Within a month, the regime was gone, and the Berlin Wall was being carted away in small pieces by souvenir-hunters. In Prague, on November 17, 1989, students marching in a procession to commemorate the 1939 shooting of a student by the Nazis were attacked by the Communist police. With East Germany falling, the Czech regime believed they needed to make a show of force. Rallies protesting the regime grew in numbers every day after the attack. The regime lasted only a few more weeks. With violence or without, it was too late for the Soviets and their minions in Eastern Europe. They had lost all credibility with the people. As Gandhi had written, “I believe that no government can exist for a single moment without the co-operation of the people, willing or forced, and if people suddenly withdraw their co-operation in every detail, the government will come to a standstill.” Even before Solidarity, in Poland, alternative trade unions were created. Increasingly, the citizen could live a life apart from the one established by the regime. Though the actions were small, the goals were large. Václav Havel, the dissident Czech playwright and future president, called this “living within the truth.” He argued that if people lived their lives parallel to the state system and not as a part of it—which he termed “living within a lie”—there would always be a tension between these two realities and they would not be able to permanently co-exist. The answer to the abuses of state was not to participate.

Despite these and many other triumphs of non-violence, it is difficult to listen to the violent Palestinian group Hamas, or to the violent Islamist group al Qaeda, or to George W. Bush, who

speaks of a crusade and a permanent “war against terrorism,” and believe that the world has made much progress. But in fact, few wars in history have had as many opponents as the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. This opposition rose up far more quickly than the opposition to the Vietnam War had. And it is getting more difficult to find people to fight wars. Most of those who join the U.S. military do so in search of economic opportunities and hope that they never have to go to war.

In her 1969 study *On Violence*, political theorist Hannah Arendt pointed out that historians and social scientists rarely study the subject of violence. She suggested that this is because violence is such a mainstay of human activity that it is “taken for granted and therefore neglected.” But what if we lived in a world that had no word for war other than non-peace? It would not necessarily be a world without war, but it would be a world that regarded war as an aberrant and insignificant activity. What kind of world would that be?

*Adapted with permission from *Nonviolence: The Hidden History of a Revolutionary Idea* by Mark Kurlansky, which appeared in the U.S. magazine *Orion* (Sept./Oct. 2006), a great source of essays and opinion about nature, culture and politics. More information: www.orionmagazine.org. The article is excerpted from Kurlansky's book, *Nonviolence: Twenty-Five Lessons from the History of a Dangerous Idea* (Modern Library, 2006).*