

Nonviolence / POWER

The power of the people

Some defining strategies in the rich history of nonviolent action – and the people behind them.

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number –
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you –
You are many – they are few.

(PB Shelley, The Mask of Anarchy, written after the massacre carried out by the British Government on a peaceful rally at Peterloo, Manchester in 1819.)

WITHDRAW YOUR CONSENT

Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi and the people of India.¹

India – 1930. Fewer than 100,000 British troops control 350 million Indians. Mohandas Gandhi identifies that the British ‘have not taken India from us – we have given it to them’. At the beginning of what would be a 17-year campaign of non-cooperation to oust British colonial rule from India, the 60-year-old undertakes a 384-kilometre walk to the beach to gather salt – illegal under British law. After 24 days’ walking, on the eve of the law-breaking, he meets with 12,000 supporters on the beach and tells them: ‘Hold the salt in your fist and think it is worth 60 million rupees. That is how much the [British] Government have been taking from us through their monopoly on salt.’ At dawn on 6 April 1930, Gandhi picks up a fist of mud and salt. Later, he declares: ‘We will practise such non-cooperation that finally it will not be possible for the Administration to carry on.’ By midsummer, even with Gandhi and most of India’s leaders in jail, the Government has lost control of most major cities. In the years that follow, Gandhi proves a master strategist, advertiser and motivator. His strategies form the foundation upon which many of today’s nonviolent actions are built.

STRATEGIZE

James Lawson and the students of Fisk University, Nashville, US.¹

When the well-dressed black students of Fisk University first sit at lunch-counters reserved for white Americans one Saturday afternoon, they are regarded as a curiosity. This is Nashville in 1960 where white and black Americans are totally segregated so, of course, they are refused service. But by the third Saturday of their sit-in, white tolerance has faded. Police – out in force – beat and arrest the Afro-Americans who are at the lunch counters... only to find a second, then a third wave take their place. Trained for months beforehand to withstand white taunts and physical violence, the students – who have broken no law other than convention – refuse bail. Their imprisonment provokes national sympathy, draws a deluge of recruits – white and black – from throughout the country and leads to a crippling boycott of white stores in downtown Nashville. Their actions start the process of desegregation of all city services that occurs over the following four years. This is an outstanding example of what people-power can achieve through disciplined training based on a carefully planned strategy that anticipates, then neutralizes, the response of the oppressors. Unlike the Indians who responded to Gandhi, these Afro-Americans are in a minority who take on a majority – and win.

USE WHAT YOU'VE GOT

Lysistrata and the women of Athens.²

It is 411 BC. The Peloponnesian war between Sparta and Athens is in its 21st year. The Greek women from opposing sides meet and decide that the war must stop. ‘We must refrain from the male altogether,’ says their chief strategist, Lysistrata. And, if forced into intercourse, Lysistrata advises them to ‘yield to their [men’s] wishes, but with a bad grace; there is no pleasure in it for them when they do it by force.’ And so the sex-strike is born, the men’s resolve crumples and a treaty of peace is signed.

That, of course, was fiction – a political satire by Greek dramatist Aristophanes (447-385 BC). Had Lysistrata’s grand plan materialized, Athens might not have needed to surrender the war to Sparta in 404 BC. But the idea is still active – employed by women in a Turkish village in 2001 to get a decent water supply; by Icelandic women in 1979 to help the passage of equal opportunity laws; and in Colombia at a violent moment in the country’s drug wars to achieve a brief ceasefire in 1997. The play *Lysistrata* is itself used as a worldwide act of dissent against the war on Iraq with 1,029 productions staged in 59 countries – all on 3 March 2003.

IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES

Mkhuseli Jack and the Port Elizabeth resistance against apartheid.¹

By 1985, violent resistance is failing black South Africans. Even though millions of South Africans are demanding an end to apartheid, the white Government’s security forces are widespread, well armed, and dealing out death on a daily basis. ‘Let us expose this violence and bring it right to the doorsteps of the whites,’ Mkhuseli Jack tells the black townspeople living around Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape Province. After two

months' preparation, Jack urges a huge crowd on 13 July 1985 at a funeral to boycott the white-owned businesses in Port Elizabeth where nearly half a million blacks normally shop. And on Monday, the streets are empty. There is nearly 100 per cent compliance with the boycott in the weeks that follow. When a state of emergency is imposed and the black leaders arrested, the desperate white store owners pressure the Government to have them released. Another boycott, another state of emergency and another spate of arrests follow over the next 12 months. And although the boycotters' demands – which include withdrawing Government troops and opening public amenities to the black population – are not met immediately, the boycotts shift power to the black communities and help undermine the white regime and its system of apartheid that will collapse eight years later.

PUBLICIZE THE TRUTH

The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.³

'In order to guarantee the security of the State,' the commander-in-chief of Argentina's military forces tells journalists in October 1975, 'all the necessary people will die.' Five months later, the military seize power in Argentina and hold it vice-like until 1983. Public executions would make martyrs of their targets, so instead people are 'disappeared': kidnapped, then tortured and murdered away from public view. No-one is immune. As many as 80,000 writs of habeas corpus – applications seeking release from arbitrary detention – are sought from the courts and refused. The resulting terror created amongst the population initially makes it impossible to organize resistance against the regime.

On 30 April 1977, 14 mothers meet in Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo wanting, simply, to know what has happened to their children. Despite beatings, threats, arrests and disappearances, their marches become a weekly event and their ranks eventually swell to 2,000 mothers and grandmothers, many carrying pictures of those who have disappeared. Referring to the military as 'assassins' and 'torturers' – and using slogans like 'You took them alive, we want them returned alive,' – their example encourages other citizens, then international organizations, to speak out too, exerting pressure on the regime that contributes to its collapse.

Their tool – speaking the truth – puts nonviolent action within everyone's grasp.

NONVIOLENCE HALL OF FAME

THE THINKERS include: 1552-53: French scholar Étienne de La Boétie argues that tyranny can be overthrown peaceably if the majority withdraws its consent: 'It is therefore the inhabitants themselves who permit... their own subjection, since by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude.'

1849: Henry David Thoreau is jailed – for one night – after refusing to pay the Massachusetts poll tax levied for what he believes is an unjust war on Mexico. Urging others to follow his example, he writes *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, which argues: ‘Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is... a prison.’

1955-68: Dr Martin Luther King Jr agitates and organizes for equal opportunity for African-Americans in the US with his rousing public speeches before he is assassinated at just 39 years of age.

1973: Gene Sharp popularizes ‘the consent theory of power’ (first articulated by La Boétie) in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, which includes 198 methods of protest, persuasion, non-cooperation and nonviolent intervention, and is immediately hailed as a definitive study.

1996: Robert Burrowes identifies situations where a ruler’s power is not dependent on the consent and co-operation of the people they oppress – for instance, in the Israeli occupation of Palestine – but on the sustained support of elite allies whose consent must be withdrawn for nonviolent action to succeed.

NONVIOLENT MILESTONES include: 1350 BCE: Jewish midwives Shiprah and Puah commit the first recorded act of civil disobedience by refusing to carry out Pharaoh’s order to kill Jewish babies.

258 BCE: The world’s first successful strike. When the Plebeians – the main constituents in the Roman army – withdraw to the mountains because the Senate prevaricates on granting them certain civil rights, the Senate takes immediate action.

1870s: Kusunose Kita refuses to pay taxes while being denied the vote as a woman, beginning the women’s rights movement in Japan.

1930: As Gandhi is defying the British salt laws, trained and uniformed Pathun recruits form the world’s first professional nonviolent army, the Khudai Khidmatgars. A hundred thousand-strong at their peak, they lead civil disobedience strikes and protests that sweep across the Northwest Frontier of India.

World War Two: The plans of Minister-President of Norway, Vidkun Quisling, to introduce Nazi indoctrination into schools are scuttled when between 8,000 and 10,000 Norwegian teachers sign a statement of refusal, and 1,000 – removed to freezing conditions and hunger in the North – will not retract.

1943: Gentile women gather at Rosenstrasse, Berlin, to protest the arrest of their Jewish husbands – detained there before transfer to Auschwitz. The crowd grows from 24 to 1,000. After 6 days’ protest, the 1,500 men are released.

1955: Rosa Parks – a black seamstress in Montgomery, US – refuses to surrender her seat in a city bus to a white rider as she's supposed to do under a City ordinance. Following a boycott of the bus company lasting 381 days, a Supreme Court Decision outlaws racial segregation on public transport.

1972: After a series of demonstrations of up to 120,000 people and after many draft resisters are imprisoned, Australia pulls out of the Vietnam War.

1986: When word gets out that Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos has rigged the voting count in the 1986 elections, Cardinal Sin – head of the Catholic Church – calls on Filipinos to place their unarmed bodies between Government troops and 300 army defectors. Hundreds of thousands of people make a human wall around the defectors, offering the soldiers small gifts and putting flowers down their guns. When Marcos orders the troops to attack, they refuse. Marcos flees.

OTHER OPPRESSORS and REGIMES REMOVED FROM POWER when the force of tens, sometimes hundreds, of thousands of people take to the streets to demand that they go include:

1944 – Hernandez Martinez (El Salvador) 1944 – General Jorge Ubico (Guatemala) 1957 – British colonial rule (Ghana) 1982 – Luis García Meza and the Generals who succeeded him (Bolivia) 1985 – Jaafar Nimeiry (Sudan) 1988 – Augusto Pinochet (Chile) 1989 – Egon Krenz, Erich Honecker and the Soviet Union (East Germany) 1989 – Gustav Husak and the Soviet Union (Czechoslovakia) 1989 – The Soviet controlled Polish United Workers' Party Government (Poland) 1990 – The Soviet Union (Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia) 1992 – Amadou Toumani Toure (Mali) 1993 – Didier Ratsiraka (Madagascar) 2000 – Slobodan Milosevic (former Yugoslavia) 2001 – Joseph Estrada (The Philippines) 2003 – Eduard Shevardnadze (Georgia) 2004 – Viktor Yanukovych and Leonid Kuchma (Ukraine) 2005 – 14,000 Syrian troops (Lebanon) 2005 – Askar Akayev (Kyrgyzstan)

Other references and reading includes: E Easwaran, *A Man to Match His Mountain* – Badshah Khan, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, Nilgiri Press, California, 1985; G Sharp 'Disregarded History: The power of Nonviolent Action', in *Freedom*, March/April 1976; G Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*, Porter Sargent, Manchester (US), 2005; H Zinn *et al*, *The Power of Nonviolence – writing by advocates of peace*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2002.

1. P Ackerman and J Duvall, *A Force More Powerful*, St Martin's Press, New York, 2000, in addition to the documentary series of the same name produced and written S York.
2. L Burns *Sex Strikes Through the Ages: The Legacy of Lysistrata* The American Repertory Theatre, www.amrep.org , 2002; www.lysistrataproject.com .
3. MB Steger, *Judging Nonviolence – the dispute between realists and idealists*, Routledge, New York, 2003; R Arditti *Searching for Life – The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.

