

PRINCIPLE

MAINTAIN NONVIOLENT DISCIPLINE

Time and again, unarmed masses of people have triumphed over armed-to-the-teeth forces using humble techniques like strikes, occupations, boycotts, and sit-ins. But only because people have remained nonviolent.

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“NONVIOLENT METHODS PUT THE OPPRESSOR IN A DECISION DILEMMA: EITHER RAIN PAIN ON A BUNCH OF UNARMED RESISTERS, OR CAPITULATE.”

“We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protests to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It's amazing to think that unarmed masses of people have defeated armed-to-the-teeth forces using humble techniques as strikes, occupations, boycotts, and sit-ins. One way of understanding why this can happen is that nonviolent methods put the oppressor in a decision dilemma: either rain pain on a bunch of unarmed resisters, or capitulate. The former can turn public opinion toward the protesters and undermine the legitimacy upon which the oppressor's power rests. If the resistance persists, escalating crackdowns can start to backfire, even to the point that the police or military refuse to participate. Eventually the sovereign has no choice but to capitulate.

This basic logic frays, however, as soon as the resisters start meeting violence with violence. If the opponent succeeds in portraying resisters as a threat to peace and order, it escapes the decision dilemma, reasserting its legitimacy by playing the part of protector, of securer, of stabilizer. Unless you can scrounge up enough guns to match the military's firepower, your movement is toast.

POTENTIAL RISKS

When a given nonviolent tactic doesn't work, it's tempting to conclude that nonviolence has failed and the only recourse is violence. That's incredibly hasty. There is an enormous range of nonviolent tactics — Gene Sharp famously listed 198 of them, and that's just for starters — varying from purely symbolic acts to direct action designed to disrupt the smooth operation of oppressive systems. There is no one-tactic-fits-all solution: when one nonviolent tactic isn't doing the trick, try another, or more than one at once!

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Angola 15+2
- Battle in Seattle

Political scientist Erica Chenoweth and sociologist Kurt Schock examined the data of past resistance movements and found that having an armed flank dramatically reduces the ability of an uprising to attract widespread participation. Most people aren't interested in getting martyred in a firefight, so they'll stay home. Rather than merely representing one wing of a "diversity of tactics," therefore, undisciplined violence in a movement tends to lessen the effectiveness of nonviolent mass movements (see: THEORY: Strategic nonviolence). That's why oppressors love to insert provocateurs into resistance movements to push them into violence and then discredit them.

Many people keep nonviolent discipline for mainly strategic reasons: They do it because it's effective, rather than as a matter of principle. In practice, though, maintaining nonviolent discipline in the face of provocation can be difficult if you don't consider it at least partly as an end in itself. Fortunately, almost everybody aspires to build the least violent society possible. To the extent that we build our movements as models of the world we'd like to see, nonviolent discipline should come naturally.

The practice of maintaining nonviolent discipline should never be confused with passivity or acquiescence in the face of injustice.

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LEARN MORE

The Politics of Nonviolent Action, vols 1-3

Gene Sharp, Porter Sargent, 1973

http://www.everydayrebellion.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/198_methods-1.pdf

Why Civil Resistance Works

Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, 2011

http://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/IS3301_pp007-044_Stephan_Chenoweth.pdf

The Trifecta of Civil Resistance: Unity, Planning, Discipline

Hardy Merriman, 2010

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/hardy-merriman/trifecta-of-civil-resistance-unity-planning-discipline>

- Battle of the Camel
- Brazil's Free Fare Movement
- Burmese Students' Long March
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army
- Gezi Park iftar
- Justice for Janitors
- Kisangani Demands Electric Power
- Occupy Wall Street
- Reclaim the Streets
- Schools of Struggle
- Standing Man
- Stripping Power in Uganda
- Taxi drivers strike against taxation
- The Salt March
- Welcome to Palestine
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation
- Yellow Pigs in Parliament
- #YouStink

Tactics

- Blockade
- Citizen's arrest
- Civil disobedience
- Eviction blockade
- Flotilla
- General strike
- Gherao (encirclement)
- Hunger strike
- Jail solidarity
- Mass street action
- Nonviolent search and seizure
- Occupation
- Public filibuster
- Trek

Principles

- Anger works best when you have the moral high ground
- Define "hardcore" strategically
- Don't dress like a protester
- Escalate strategically
- If protest is made illegal, make daily life a protest
- Kill them with kindness
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Take risks, but take care
- The real action is your target's

reaction

Theories

- Direct action
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Hamoq and hamas
- Palace coup
- Revolutionary nonviolence

Methodologies

- Action star
- Pillars of power

TAGS

Campaign strategy, Nonviolence