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The facts are in: Nonviolent resistance works

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"Nonviolence is fine as long as it works," Malcolm X once said. Recently, Columbia University Press published an extraordinary scholarly book that proves how nonviolence works far better as a method for social change than violence. This breakthrough book demonstrates that Gandhi was right, that the method of nonviolent resistance as a way to social change usually leads to a more lasting peace while violence usually fails.

Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan uses graphs, charts, sociological research and statistical analysis to show how in the last century, nonviolent movements were far better at mobilizing supporters, resisting regime crackdowns, creating new initiatives, defeating repressive regimes and establishing lasting democracies. Their evidence points to the conclusion that nonviolent resistance is more effective than armed resistance in overturning oppressive and repressive regimes and in leading to more democratic societies.

This report should cause the whole world to stop in its tracks and take up nonviolent conflict resolution and nonviolent resistance to injustice instead of the tired, old, obsolete methods of war and violence.

Why Civil Resistance Works is the first systematic study of its kind and takes us well beyond the research of Gene Sharp and others to demonstrate once and for all the power of nonviolent civil resistance for positive social change. Anyone interested in the methodology of nonviolent conflict resolution should get this book and study it. Indeed, one wishes the State Department and the government would learn its lessons, renounce its violence and start supporting nonviolent, people-power movements.

For more than a century, from 1900 to 2006, campaigns of nonviolent resistance were "more than twice as effective as their violent counterparts in achieving their stated goals," the authors conclude. By attracting widespread popular support through protests, boycotts, civil disobedience and other forms of nonviolent

noncooperation, these campaigns broke repressive regimes and brought major new changes for justice and peace. Much of the book focuses on four case studies to explain their conclusions: the Iranian revolution of 1977-1979; the first Palestinian Intifada of 1987-92; the Philippines People Power revolution of 1983-1986; and the Burmese uprising of 1988-90.

Through their statistical analysis, the authors found that nonviolent resistance presents "fewer obstacles to moral and physical involvement and commitment, and that higher levels of participation contribute to enhanced resilience, greater opportunities for tactical innovation and civic disruption (and therefore less incentive for a regime to maintain its status quo), and shifts in loyalty among opponents' supporters, including members of the military establishment."

Contrary to popular belief, "violent insurgency is rarely justifiable on strategic grounds," they write. "Nonviolent resistance ushers in more durable and internally peaceful democracies, which are less likely to regress into civil war."

"We analyze 323 violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns between 1990 and 2006," the authors explain in their introduction.

Among them are over one hundred major nonviolent campaigns since 1900, whose frequency has increased over time. In addition to their growing frequency, the success rates of nonviolent campaigns have increased. How does this compare with violent insurgencies? One might assume that the success rates may have increased among both nonviolent and violent insurgencies. But in our data, we find the opposite: although they persist, the success rates of violent insurgencies have declined. The most striking finding is that between 1900 and 2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts. Among the 323 campaigns in the case of anti-regime resistance campaigns, the use of a nonviolent strategy has greatly enhanced the likelihood of success? This book investigates the reasons why?in spite of conventional wisdom to the contrary?civil resistance campaigns have been so effective compared with their violent counterparts.

While only one in four violent campaigns succeed, about three out of four nonviolent campaigns succeed, they report. "We argue that nonviolent campaigns fail to achieve their objectives when they are unable to overcome the challenge of participation, when they fail to recruit a robust, diverse, and broad-based membership that can erode the power base of the adversary and maintain resilience in the face of repression."

The evidence of their research points to the superiority of nonviolent resistance at every level, including against genocidal regimes. "The claim that nonviolent resistance could never work against genocidal foes like Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin is the classic straw man put forward to demonstrate the inherent limitations of this form of struggle," they note.

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While it is possible that nonviolent resistance could not be used effectively once genocide has broken out in full force, this claim is not backed by any strong empirical evidence. Collective nonviolent struggle was not used with any strategic forethought during World War II, nor was it ever contemplated as an overall strategy for resisting the Nazis. Violent resistance, which some groups attempted for ending Nazi occupation, was also an abject failure. However, scholars have found that certain forms of collective nonviolent resistance were, in fact, occasionally successful

in resisting Hitler's occupation policies. The case of the Danish population's resistance to German occupation is an example of partially effective civil resistance in an extremely difficult environment.

The famous case of the Rosenstrasse protests, when German women of Aryan descent stood for a week outside a detention center on the Rosenstrasse in Berlin demanding the release of their Jewish husbands, who were on the verge of being deported to concentration camps, is a further example of limited gains against a genocidal regime brought about by civil resistance. The German women, whose numbers increased as the protests continued and they attracted more attention, were sufficiently disruptive with their sustained nonviolent protests that the Nazi officials eventually released their Jewish husbands?The notion that nonviolent action can be successful only if the adversary does not use violent repression is neither theoretically nor historically substantiated.

These studies "call for scholars to rethink power and its sources in any given society or polity," the authors suggest. "Our findings demonstrate that power actually depends on the consent of the civilian population, consent that can be withdrawn and reassigned to more legitimate or more compelling parties ... We hope that this book challenges the conventional wisdom concerning the effectiveness of nonviolent struggle and encourages scholars and policy makers to take seriously the role that civilians play in actively prosecuting conflict without resorting to violence."

I have long believed that Gandhi -- and Jesus -- were right to insist on the method of nonviolent resistance for both moral and practical reasons, but now the facts are in. The evidence is all laid out in this scholarly report.

The book went to press just as the revolutions of the Arab Spring were beginning. "If these last several months have taught us anything, it is that nonviolent resistance can be a near-unstoppable force for change in our world, even in the most unlikely circumstances." This book is a great resource for those of us who teach and advocate peace and nonviolence. More, it is a source of hope proving the ancient wisdom that mobilized nonviolent resistance is the best weapon for peaceful change. May it be taught far and wide and inspire many more to join the grassroots nonviolent movements for a new world of justice and peace.

On Oct. 28, John Dear will give a talk about *Lazarus, Come Forth!* at Maryknoll in Ossining, N.Y. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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