

A Nonviolent Strategy to End Violence and Avert Human Extinction. The Teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King

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Around the world activists who are strategic thinkers face a daunting challenge to effectively tackle the multitude of violent conflicts, including the threat of human extinction, confronting human society in the early 21st century.

I wrote that ‘activists who are strategic thinkers face a daunting challenge’ because there is no point deluding ourselves that the insane global elite – see [‘The Global Elite is Insane’](#) – with its compliant international organizations (such as the UN) and national governments following orders as directed, is going to respond appropriately and powerfully to the multifaceted crisis that it has been progressively generating since long before the industrial revolution.

For reasons that are readily explained psychologically – see [‘Love Denied: The Psychology of Materialism, Violence and War’](#) and, for more detail, see [‘Why Violence?’](#) and [‘Fearless Psychology and Fearful Psychology: Principles and Practice’](#) – this insanity focuses their attention on securing control of the world’s remaining resources while marginalizing the bulk of the human population in ghettos, or just killing them outright with military violence or economic exploitation (or the climate/ecological consequences of their violence and exploitation).

If you doubt what I have written above, then consider the history of any progressive political, social, economic and environmental change in the past few centuries and you will find a long record of activist planning, organizing and action preceding any worthwhile change which was invariably required to overcome enormous elite opposition. In short, if you can identify one progressive outcome that was initiated and supported by the global elite, I would be surprised to hear about it.

Moreover, we are not going to get out of this crisis – which must include ending violence, exploitation and war, halting the destruction of Earth’s biosphere and ongoing violent assaults on indigenous peoples, ending slavery, liberating occupied countries such as Palestine, Tibet and West Papua, removing dictatorships such as those in Cambodia and Saudi Arabia, ending genocidal assaults such as those currently being directed against the people of Yemen and the Rohingya in Myanmar, and defending the rights of a people, such as those in Catalonia, to secede from one state and form another – without both understanding the deep drivers of conflict as well as the local drivers in each case, and then developing and implementing sound and comprehensive strategies, based on this dual-faceted analysis of each conflict.

In addition, if like Mohandas K. Gandhi, many others and me you accept the evidence that violence is inherently counterproductive and has no countervailing desirability in any context – expressed most simply by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. when he stated ‘the enemy is violence’ – then we must be intelligent, courageous and resourceful enough to commit ourselves to planning, developing and implementing strategies that are both exclusively nonviolent and powerfully effective against extraordinarily insane and ruthlessly violent opponents, such as the US government.

Equally importantly, however, it is not just the violence of the global elite that we must address if extinction is to be averted. We must also tackle the violence that each of us inflicts on ourselves, our children, each other and the Earth too. And, sadly, this violence takes an extraordinary variety of forms having originated no later than the Neolithic Revolution 12,000 years ago. See [‘A Critique of Human Society since the Neolithic Revolution’](#).

Is all of this possible?

When I first became interested in nonviolent strategy in the early 1980s, I read widely. I particularly sought out the literature on nonviolence but, as my interest deepened and I tried to apply what I was reading in the nonviolence literature to the many nonviolent action campaigns in which I was involved, I kept noticing how inadequate these so-called ‘strategies’ in the literature actually were, largely because they did not explain precisely what to do, even though they superficially purported to do so by offering ‘principles’, ‘guidelines’, sets of tactics or even ‘stages of a campaign’.

I found this shortcoming in the literature most instructive and, because I am committed to succeeding when I engage as a nonviolent activist, I started to read the work of Mohandas K. Gandhi and even the literature on military strategy. By the mid-1980s I had decided to research and write a book on nonviolent strategy because, by then, I had become aware that the individual who understood strategy, whether nonviolent or military, was rare.

Moreover, there were many conceptions of military strategy, written over more than 2,000 years, and an increasing number of conceptions of what was presented as ‘nonviolent strategy’, in one form or another, were becoming available as the 1980s progressed. But the flaws in these were increasingly and readily apparent to me as I considered their inadequate theoretical foundations or tried to apply them in nonviolent action campaigns.

The more I struggled with this problem, the more I found myself reading [‘The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi’](#) in a library basement. After all, Gandhi had led a successful 30 year nonviolent liberation struggle to end the British occupation of India so it made sense that he had considerable insight regarding strategy. Unfortunately, he never wrote it down simply in one place.

A complicating but related problem was that among those military authors who professed to present some version of ‘strategic theory’, in fact, most simply presented an approach to strategic planning (such as using a set of principles or a particular operational pattern) or an incomplete theory of strategy (such as ‘maritime theory’, ‘air theory’ or ‘guerrilla theory’) and (often largely unwittingly) passed these off as ‘strategic theory’, which they are not. And it was only when I read Carl von Clausewitz’s infuriatingly convoluted and tortuously lengthy book *On War* that I started to fully understand strategic theory. This is because Clausewitz actually presented (not in a simple form, I hasten to admit) a strategic theory

and then a military strategy that worked in accordance with his strategic theory. 'Could this strategic theory work in guiding a nonviolent strategy?' I wondered.

Remarkably, the more I read Gandhi (and compared him with other activists and scholars in the field), the more it became apparent to me that Gandhi was the only nonviolent strategist who (intuitively) understood strategic theory. Although, to be fair, it was an incredibly rare military strategist who understood strategic theory either with Mao Zedong a standout exception and other Marxist strategists like Vladimir Lenin and Võ Nguyên Giáp understanding far more than western military strategists which is why, for example, the US and its allies were defeated in their war on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

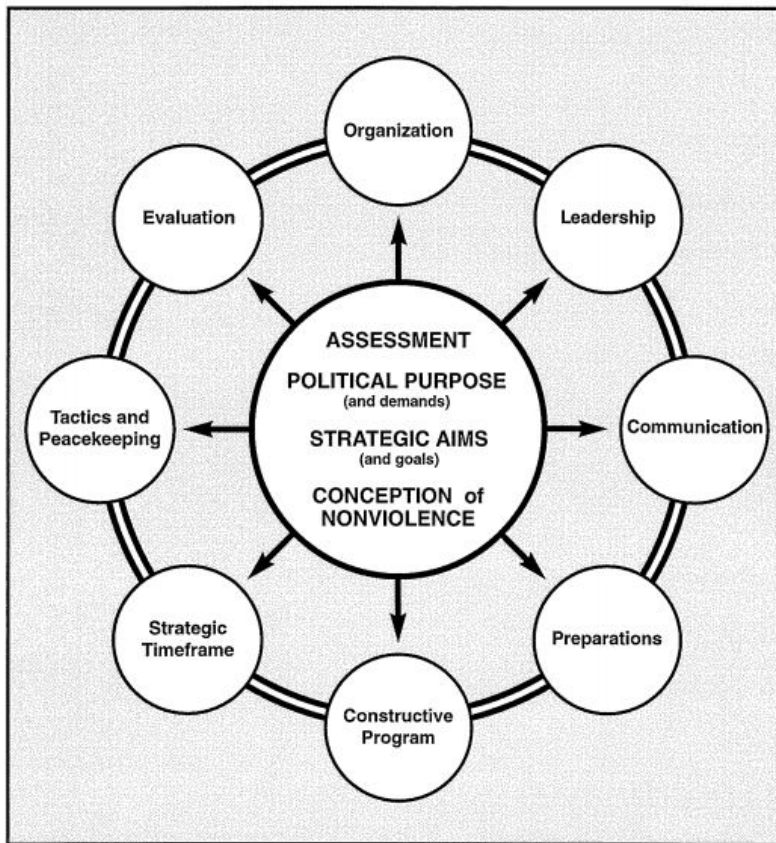
Some years later, after grappling at length with this problem of using strategic theory to guide nonviolent strategy and reading a great deal more of Gandhi, while studying many nonviolent struggles and participating in many nonviolent campaigns myself, I wrote [*The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach*](#). I wrote this book by synthesizing the work of Gandhi with some modified insights of Clausewitz and learning of my own drawn from the experience and study just mentioned. I have recently simplified and summarized the presentation of this book on two websites: [Nonviolent Campaign Strategy](#) and [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategy](#).

Let me outline, very simply, nonviolent strategy, without touching on strategic theory, as I have developed and presented it in the book and on the websites.

Nonviolent Strategy

You will see on the diagram of the [Nonviolent Strategy Wheel](#) that there are four primary components of strategy in the center of the wheel and eight components of strategy that are planned *in accordance with* these four central components. I will briefly describe the four primary components.

THE NONVIOLENT STRATEGY WHEEL



The Nonviolent Strategy Wheel is reproduced from Robert J. Burrowes, *The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Source: [Nonviolent Campaign Strategy](#)

Before doing so, however, it is worth noting that, by using this Nonviolent Strategy Wheel, it is a straightforward task to analyze why so many activist movements and (nonviolent) liberation struggles fail: they simply do not understand the need to plan and implement a *comprehensive* strategy, entailing all twelve components, if they are to succeed.

So, to choose some examples almost at random, despite substantial (and sometimes widespread) popular support, particularly in some countries, the antiwar movement, the climate justice movement and the Palestinian and Tibetan liberation struggles are each *devoid of a comprehensive strategy to deploy their resources for strategic impact* and so they languish instead of precipitating the outcomes to which they aspire, which are quite possible.

Having said that a sound and comprehensive strategy must pay attention to all twelve components of strategy it is very occasionally true that campaigns succeed without doing so. This simply demonstrates that nonviolence, in itself, is extraordinarily powerful. But it is unwise to rely on the power of nonviolence alone, without planning and implementing a comprehensive strategy, especially when you are taking on a powerful and entrenched opponent who has much to lose (even if their conception of what they believe they will ‘lose’ is delusional) and may be ruthlessly violent if challenged.

For the purpose of this article, the term *strategy* refers to a planned series of actions (including campaigns) that are designed to achieve the two strategic aims (see below).

The Political Purpose and the Political Demands

If you are going to conduct a nonviolent struggle, whether to achieve a peace, environmental or social justice outcome, or even a defense or liberation outcome, the best place to start is to define the political purpose of your struggle. The political purpose is a statement of ‘what you want’. For example, this might be one of the following (but there are many possibilities depending on the context):

- To secure a treaty acknowledging indigenous sovereignty between [name of indigenous people] and the settler population in [name of land/country] over the area known as [name of land/country].
- To stop violence against [children and/or women] in [name of the town/city/state/country].
- To end discrimination and violence against the racial/religious minority of [name of group] in [name of the town/city/state/country].
- To end forest destruction in [your specified area/country/region].
- To end climate-destroying activities in [name of the town/city/state/country].
- To halt military production by [name of weapons corporation] in [name of the town/city/state/country].
- To prevent/halt [name of corporation] exploiting the [name of fossil fuel resource].
- To defend [name of the country] against the political/military coup by [identity of coup perpetrators].
- To defend [name of the country] against the foreign military invasion by [name of invading country].
- To defend the [name of targeted group] against the genocidal assault by the [identity of genocidal entity].
- To establish the independent entity/state of [name of proposed entity/state] by removing the foreign occupying state of [name of occupying state].
- To establish a democratic state in [name of country] by removing the dictatorship.

This political purpose ‘anchors’ your campaign: it tells people what you are concerned about so that you can clearly identify allies, opponents and third parties. Your political purpose is a statement of what you will have achieved when you have successfully completed your strategy.

In practice, your political purpose may be publicized in the form of a political program or as a list of demands. You can read the five criteria that should guide the formulation of these political demands on one of the nonviolent strategy websites cited above.

The Political and Strategic Assessment

Strategic planning requires an accurate and thorough political and strategic assessment (although ongoing evaluation will enable refinement of this assessment if new information emerges during the implementation of the strategy).

In essence, this political and strategic assessment requires four things. Notably this includes

knowledge of the vital details about the issue (e.g. why has it happened? who benefits from it? how, precisely, do they benefit? who is exploited?) and a structural analysis and understanding of the causes behind it, including an awareness of the deep emotional (especially the fear) and cultural imperatives that exist in the minds of those individuals (and their organizations) who engage in the destructive behavior.

So, for example, if you do not understand, precisely, what each of your various groups of opponents is scared of losing/suffering (whether or not this fear is rational), you cannot design your strategy taking this vital knowledge into account so that you can mitigate their fear effectively and free their mind to thoughtfully consider alternatives. *It is poor strategy (and contrary to the essence of Gandhian nonviolence) to reinforce your opponents' fear and lock them into a defensive reaction.*

Strategic Aims and Strategic Goals

Having defined your political purpose, it is easy to identify the two strategic aims of your struggle. This is because *every campaign or liberation struggle has two strategic aims and they are always the same:*

1. To increase support for your campaign by developing a network of groups who can assist you.
2. To *alter the will* and *undermine the power* of those groups who support the problem.

Now you just need to *define your strategic goals for both mobilizing support for your campaign and for undermining support for the problem.* From your political and strategic assessment:

1. Identify the *key social groups* that can be mobilized to support and participate in your strategy (and then write these groups into the 'bubbles' on the left side of the campaign strategy diagram that can be downloaded from the strategy websites), and
2. identify the *key social groups* (corporation/s, police/military, government, workers, consumers etc.) whose support for the problem (e.g. the climate catastrophe, war, the discrimination/violence against a particular group, forest destruction, resource extraction, genocide, occupation) is vital (and then write these groups into the columns on the right side of the campaign strategy diagram).

These key social groups become the primary targets in your campaign. Hence, the derivative set of specific strategic goals, which are unique to your campaign, should then be devised and each written in accordance with the formula explained in the article [‘The Political Objective and Strategic Goal of Nonviolent Actions’](#). That is: ‘To cause a [specified group of people] to act in the [specified way].’

As the title of this article suggests, it also explains the vital distinction between the political objective and the strategic goal of any nonviolent action. This distinction is rarely understood and applied and explains why most ‘direct actions’ have no strategic impact.

You can read appropriate sets of strategic goals for ending war, ending the climate

catastrophe, ending a military occupation, removing a dictatorship and halting a genocide on one or the other of these two sites: [Nonviolent Campaign Strategic Aims](#) and [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategic Aims](#).

The Conception of Nonviolence

There are four primary conceptions of nonviolence which have been illustrated on the [Matrix of Nonviolence](#). Because of this, your strategic plan should:

1. identify the particular conception of nonviolence that your campaign will utilize;
2. identify the specific ways in which your commitment to nonviolence will be conveyed to all parties so that the benefits of adopting a nonviolent strategy are maximized; and
3. identify how the level of discipline required to implement your nonviolent strategy will be developed. This includes defining the 'action agreements' (code of nonviolent discipline) that will guide activist behaviour.

It is important to make a deliberate strategic choice regarding the conception of nonviolence that will underpin your strategy. *If your intention is to utilize the strategic framework outlined here, it is vitally important to recognize that this framework is based on the Gandhian (principled/revolutionary) conception of nonviolence.*

This is because Gandhi's nonviolence is based on certain premises, including the importance of the truth, the sanctity and unity of all life, and the unity of means and end, so his strategy is always conducted within the framework of his desired political, social, economic and ecological vision for society as a whole and not limited to the purpose of any immediate campaign. It is for this reason that Gandhi's approach to strategy is so important. He is always taking into account the ultimate end of all nonviolent struggle – a just, peaceful and ecologically sustainable society of self-realized human beings – not just the outcome of this campaign. He wants each campaign to contribute to the ultimate aim, not undermine vital elements of the long-term and overarching struggle to create a world without violence.

This does not mean, however, that each person participating in the strategy must share this commitment; they may participate simply because it is expedient for them to do so. This is not a problem as long as they are willing to commit to the '[code of nonviolent discipline](#)' while participating in the campaign.

Hopefully, however, their participation on this basis will nurture their own personal journey to embrace the sanctity and unity of all life so that, subsequently, they can more fully participate in the co-creation of a nonviolent world.

Other Components of Strategy

Once you have identified the political purpose, strategic aims and conception of nonviolence that will guide your struggle, and undertaken a thorough political and strategic assessment, you are free to consider the other components of your strategy: organization, leadership, communication, preparations, constructive program, strategic timeframe, tactics and peacekeeping, and evaluation.

For example, a vital component of any constructive program ideally includes each individual traveling their own personal journey to self-realization – see [‘Putting Feelings First’](#)– considering making [‘My Promise to Children’](#) to eliminate violence at its source and participating in [‘The Flame Tree Project to Save Life on Earth’](#) to preserve Earth’s biosphere.

Needless to say, each of these components of strategy must also be carefully planned. They are explained in turn on the nonviolent strategy websites mentioned above.

In addition to these components, the websites also include articles, photos, videos, diagrams and case studies that discuss and illustrate many essential elements of sound nonviolent strategy. These include the value of police/military liaison, issues in relation to tactical selection, the importance of avoiding secrecy and sabotage, how to respond to arrest, how to undertake peacekeeping and the 20 points to consider when planning to minimize the risk of violent police/military repression when this is a possibility.

Conclusion

The global elite and many other people are too insane to ‘walk away’ from the enormous violence they inflict on life.

Consequently, we are not going to end violence in all of its forms – including violence against women, children, indigenous and working peoples, violence against people because of their race or religion, war, slavery, the climate catastrophe, rainforest destruction, military occupations, dictatorships and genocides – and create a world of peace, justice and ecological sustainability for all of us without sound and comprehensive nonviolent strategies that tackle each issue at its core while complementing and reinforcing gains made in parallel struggles.

If you wish to declare your participation in this worldwide effort, you are welcome to sign the online pledge of [‘The People’s Charter to Create a Nonviolent World’](#).

Given the overwhelming violence that we must tackle, can we succeed? I do not know but I intend to fight, strategically, to the last breath. I hope that you will too.

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