

# Nonviolent Action As "The Sword That Heals"

Challenging Ward Churchill's "Pacifism As Pathology"

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Ward Churchill, "Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America" (Winnipeg, Canada: Arbeiter Ring, 1998), 176 pp.

Ward Churchill's book "Pacifism as Pathology" has become an important reference point for many of the "new activists" who have made headlines in the "battle of Seattle," in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Prague and other confrontations with economic and social injustice. Ward Churchill is an activist with the American Indian Movement and other groups, a prolific writer, and a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado.

While hanging out with the new activists I decided to write a response to Churchill's book, and was spurred on by the chance to participate in a public debate with him in Boulder in February, 2001. We had a good and spirited interchange; audience members remarked on the value of seeing two older activists with real differences talk with each other as allies alert for the emergence of common ground.

Ward and I are both looking for sources of power that are strong enough to cut away the chains of injustice and oppression, and at the same time support the healing of this scarred planet Earth and its trampled people. Martin Luther King believed that nonviolent action is that "sword that heals," so I've taken the title of this essay from King's writing. I'll start out with some points of agreement between Ward and me, and then go on to challenge some of the points Ward makes in his book.

## Where can I agree with Ward Churchill?

We agree that the world has massive injustice, exploitation, and is in a dead-end course in relation to the needs of the planet. We've personally experienced the oppression of being brought up working class; his being indigenous and my being gay has brought us still more of the harshness and pain of oppression. We have no illusions about capitalism, about top-down authoritarian structures, or the murderous U.S. Empire.

When we survey the results of social movements of the last half-century, I agree with Ward's disappointment that the movements claimed as successes by nonviolent advocates have not been more far-reaching. Racism is still rampant in the U.S. despite the civil rights movement's concrete gains in equal accommodations, voting rights, and affirmative action. The nuclear power industry still markets its deadly plants abroad and still poisons people at home through its nuclear wastes, despite the anti-nuclear power movement's success in ending the building of new plants here. The U.S. Empire continues military interventions abroad that make it today's number one global killer despite the success of the anti-Vietnam war movement in creating a "Vietnam syndrome" that put some restraints on U.S. powerholders. (1)

While I share Ward's disappointment that those movements and others didn't accomplish more, I may differ with him by celebrating the gains that we did make. I believe that we activists grow more through a combination of self-criticism AND self-affirmation than we do by only second-guessing ourselves.

I agree that pacifists are sometimes smug and self-righteous, unwilling to open themselves to genuine pragmatic debate about courses of action but instead using a moral ideology to shield themselves from open-minded consideration of alternatives.

Ward points out that nonviolent activists have a history of running real risks and even sacrificing their lives for social change. At the same time, there have been many nonviolent protests which have contented themselves with polite witness and ritualized arrests, minimizing risk and minimizing impact. I agree with this criticism.

I also agree that excluding armed struggle from consideration dogmatically, rather than weighing the pros and cons of mixing both violent and nonviolent tactics, doesn't contribute to creating strategy. At the Boulder debate I emphasized that long-term strategy and vision are what our movement needs most of all.

I agree with Ward that a great way to think about struggle is pragmatically: what are the means that have the best chance of reducing suffering, increasing justice, and creating a new society?

This essay therefore mostly focuses on pragmatics. I'll respond to Ward's challenges in terms of practical, hard-headed realities. I'll pick a fight with some of the assumptions he makes on pragmatic grounds. I'll challenge his reading of history at some points in terms of what the power realities were. And I'll describe some movements that learned, from their own pragmatic experience, that they could wage struggle more successfully through nonviolent direct action than through violence.

### **Needed: A strategy for violent revolution in the U.S.**

Ward writes that his goal is to debunk pacifism and challenge its moral smugness. He says he does not intend to articulate an armed struggle strategy for the U.S.; that's a separate task.

"Violent revolution" and "nonviolent revolution" are actually in the same boat at this time -- neither has a spelled-out strategy for the U.S. There is a huge need for strategic thinking among advocates of armed struggle as well as advocates of nonviolent struggle.

The last time in the U.S. that many activists talked seriously about "revolution" -- the late 'sixties -- the socialist activist and writer Martin Oppenheimer found himself in public discussions with activist leaders who were advocating violence but could not put a strategy together. To assist them and himself, he wrote a book, "The Urban Guerrilla", (2) in which he developed two different strategies using armed struggle and tested them in the book in terms of likely consequences. Pragmatically, both of the armed struggle strategies led to disaster for democracy and justice.

For activists who are doing more than self-expression, but really want transformation, the need is as great as ever to create a persuasive strategy for revolution using armed struggle. That strategy does not yet exist.

How we go about developing strategy is influenced by our assumptions about how the world works, so comparing assumptions can be helpful. No amount of argumentation about assumptions, however, will substitute for the hard work of creating strategy. Since many of the new activists are based in colleges and universities, and most are affluent and can take the time to do this hard work, I'm hoping they will accept the challenge!

### **Is pacifism axiomatic among progressives in the U.S.?**

In his book Ward argues that pacifism is the ideology of nonviolent political action, and is axiomatic among progressives in mainstream North America. If he means that nonviolent action is built into the way most progressives design their national campaigns for change, I disagree.

Some years ago I was called to Washington, D.C., to consult with a large progressive coalition that had been working for legislation that would help poor and working people. Their campaign was failing, and they wanted me to help them design a series of nonviolent protests. My first question to the group of national leaders was: "Where is the rebel energy in your coalition?" Silence followed. Finally, they began reciting the story of when various militant groups had left the coalition in disillusionment. In short, there was no rebel energy left. "In that case," I said, "this will be a short meeting. You can't pull off powerful nonviolent direct action without rebel energy. You've run this campaign as a conventional lobbying operation and you can't -- at the last minute -- switch gears and become a nonviolent protest movement!"

This is only one example of many. The overwhelming commitment of most progressive leaders in North America is to conventional methods like electoral campaigns, lobbying, lawsuits, petitioning, letter-writing, public relations, and the like, instead of to nonviolent action. This has always been true. When Martin Luther King first emerged as a civil rights leader, the established groups hoped he and his nonviolent tactics would disappear: their confidence was in lawsuits and lobbying. Even the labor movement, born in militancy in the 19th century, these days prefers supporting electoral candidates to strikes.

It's understandable that Ward and I disagree on this, because we use similar words but are actually observing different things. In his book Ward uses "pacifism," "nonviolence," and "nonviolent revolution" interchangeably, even though they show up very differently in practice.

Nonviolence, or (as I prefer to call it) nonviolent action, is used mostly on a grassroots level --when people need "street heat" to achieve a goal. Demonstrations, sit-ins, occupations, strikes, boycotts: there are many methods of nonviolent action that we can read about in the papers every day, and people use them because they often work better than more conventional means such as lobbying and petitioning. The national professional opposition organizations don't build nonviolent direct action into their thinking, as I said, but grassroots activists turn to it a lot just because it often works, to save trees or get some housing for homeless people or force a change in AIDS policy or get apparel manufacturers to stop buying from sweatshops.

In the U.S. nonviolent action is used mostly by the working class and poor, more by people of color than whites, and more by younger people than by older people. While the bulk of nonviolent action in the U.S. is done by working class community-based organizations, important uses have been made by unions, lesbians and gays, people with disabilities, environmentalists, students, and others.

"Pacifism," on the other hand, is an ideology, a belief system that holds that it is immoral to injure or kill people to achieve your goals. Pacifists believe that good ends can't justify killing. Also, their understanding of cause and effect is that good ends grow out of good means, like a good cake grows out of good ingredients. They believe that both morality and good sense require that we "live the change we want to see." Probably the best-known pacifists to people in the U.S. are Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, who founded and led the United Farmworkers, and Mohandas K. Gandhi.

A huge majority of those who engage in nonviolent action in the U.S. are not pacifists. Dr. King knew very well that most African Americans who risked their lives in his campaigns were not believers in pacifism; they used nonviolent action situationally. And there are many pacifists who rarely if ever engage in nonviolent action, who rarely take to the streets or go on strike or do civil disobedience. So mixing up "pacifism" and "nonviolence," as Ward does, confuses more than it clarifies.

Mixing "nonviolent action" and "pacifism" with "nonviolent revolution" muddies the waters even more. The "Manifesto for Nonviolent Revolution", (3) the most widely-adopted statement of this position, is much more radical than most users of nonviolent action or most pacifists are willing to go. The "Manifesto" calls for an end to

corporate capitalism, to the nation-state system, and to the destruction of the environment. It denounces patriarchy, racism, and other systems of social oppression. It projects a vision of a hugely different social order where freedom flourishes, economic enterprises are democratic, and humans live at peace with the planet. More radical than the Marxist-Leninists by far, the "Manifesto" seeks to learn from the failures of the Left to point to fresh and creative approaches in the future.

### **Were the Jews murdered in the Holocaust nonviolent?**

The most extreme -- and painful -- result of confusing the words is in Ward's description of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust. First, he overstates how passive the Jews were in the face of the Holocaust. It's really important that we honor the brave Jewish people who worked against genocide. (4) Second, he says that the Jews who were intimidated into silence, or who were in denial about what was happening, were engaged in nonviolent action! "History affords us few comparable models by which to assess the effectiveness of nonviolent opposition to state policies, at least in terms of the scale and rapidity with which consequences were visited upon the passive." (5)

All of us who have engaged in nonviolent direct action know the difference between action and passivity. Join any discussion among workers who are deciding whether to go out on strike and you'll hear the difference between the active ones and the passive ones. Join any community discussing whether to defend themselves against a new toxic waste dump, and you'll hear the difference between active and passive.

In the 1930s Gandhi was concerned about trends in Nazi Germany and wrote to a leading Berlin rabbi urging him to organize a resistance and to mobilize as many Jews and allies as possible against the threat. Wherever Gandhi saw passivity in an unjust situation, he urged that active nonviolent resistance replace the passivity. In fact, Gandhi was so opposed to passivity that he advised that, if we see an evil being committed and the only options we know about are passivity and violence, we should take the option of violence! Of course Gandhi believed that in real life there are always more than two options, and we can create effective nonviolent actions to take.

### **Does the success of nonviolent action depend on violence threatened or used by others in the situation?**

Ward argues that the successes for nonviolence in the Indian struggle against Britain and the U.S. civil rights movement were in reality dependent on violence. He believes that Britain had just exhausted itself militarily in World War II and couldn't maintain its dominance of India through arms, so it surrendered. The war made independence possible. The problem with this argument is that Britain went on to maintain other colonies well past Indian independence in 1948. One dramatic example is Britain's ruthless suppression of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the 1950s by bombing villages. Britain retained capacity for major military response to an armed struggle for independence, but couldn't continue domination against a nonviolent struggle for independence. It's not that the war made Indian independence possible: it's that the Indian people's own noncooperation made Indian independence possible.

In the case of the U.S. civil rights struggle, at the risk of over-simplification I'd identify the curve of effectiveness in achieving tangible, concrete goals like this: 1955-1965, the curve goes up and up. Some of the goals were: to integrate buses (Montgomery, Freedom rides); to integrate lunch counters and other public accommodations (sit-ins, stand-ins, swim-ins, etc. the Birmingham campaign and the 1964 Civil Rights Act); to enable blacks to vote in the deep South (Mississippi Summer, Selma March, the 1965 Voting Rights Act).

The curve starts downward from 1965 in terms of major beachheads taken by the mass movement, although for years afterward there was implementation of what was made possible by earlier gains, like getting black officials

elected even in the deep South. Notably, from 1965 there were riots in northern cities like Newark, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Watts, and the rise of the Deacons of Defense and Black Panther Party. By 1968 even non-threatening legislation like a bill to fund rat control in inner cities was openly laughed at in the House of Representatives. The mass civil rights movement lost much of its power precisely at the time when it lost its consensus on nonviolent struggle as the basis for mass action.

### **But aren't governments able to crush militarily any nonviolent movement they want to?**

No, judging from the behavior of military dictatorships that have been overthrown by nonviolent action. Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic had overwhelming military power in 2000, and was thrown out by a nonviolent movement. Same with Philippines dictator Marcos in 1986. Same with the East German, Hungarian, Czech, and Polish dictatorships in 1989. The Shah of Iran had one of the ten most powerful armies in the world and a secret police whose ruthlessness was second to none. He was overthrown 1977-79, nonviolently. (6) I could go on and on.

What makes Ward's argument in this book so disempowering to activists is that he discounts people power, which is the main power we have access to! Grassroots activists can't match the government's money, and we can't match the government's violence. What we have potential access to is people power, and discounting people power is an invitation to despair.

The underlying assumption in Ward's book is that violence is the most powerful political force in the world. This is conventional wisdom, shared by most right-wingers, left-wingers, and people in the middle; it's as popular as the old consensus that the earth is flat. And it is just as incorrect.

Activists frequently discover the weakness of violence through our own experience. I remember during a training for the United Mine Workers Union talking with a leader who was recalling his days as a teenager in the coal mines. "I have to tell you that I prefer the good old days when a strike meant that we could also tear things up, beat up scabs, shoot at company trucks -- you know, we had a lot of guns and knew how to use them. But," he sighed, "that stuff doesn't work any more. Go ahead, teach us nonviolent struggle!"

I call that "nonviolent action as a last resort."

A classic case was in El Salvador in 1944, when an armed uprising failed to overthrow dictator Hernandez Martinez. The government was strong enough to beat back armed struggle. So the students initiated a nonviolent insurrection, making a big point of the nonviolent part because of the defeat using violence. They threw Martinez out nonviolently -- "people power" succeeded where violence had failed. The students in neighboring Guatemala were so impressed that they initiated a nonviolent insurrection against the "iron dictator of the Caribbean" -- Jorge Ubico -- and Ubico was thrown out, too. (7)

A number of liberation movements that used armed struggle in the Third World have now given up those means and switched to others. The Zapatistas of Chiapas are perhaps the best known example of this phenomenon. In the early 1980s the African National Congress realized that its armed struggle strategy was failing; it was woefully insufficient to defeat apartheid. It couldn't even involve the masses of people in the cities who were eager to act for freedom. So, without formally giving up their guerrilla activity, they plunged into nonviolent struggle: boycotts, strikes, demonstrations of all kinds. The result was the end of apartheid despite a very well-armed state with a terroristic police force. (8)

When movements are pragmatic enough to learn from their own experience, they often turn away from violence, and even from property destruction. The Solidarnosc labor movement in Poland, for example, was largely a youth movement for freedom from the military dictatorship of the Communist Party. In their early direct action campaigns they mixed some property destruction in with their strikes and occupations. As they evaluated, they realized that the property destruction only gave the dictator justification to come down hard on them and reduced the number of allies they could get. So they decided to give that up, broadened their movement, and went on to win. Of course the military state wanted to crush them, but wasn't able to because people power is simply more powerful than military power.

Because this fact flies in the face of conventional wisdom, I was puzzled about how it could be so. Bernard Lafayette, a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee staffer from the deep South, explained it to me with a metaphor. Bernard said that a society is like a house. The foundation is the cooperation or compliance of the people. The roof is the state and its repressive apparatus. He asked me what happens to the house if the foundation gives way. He went on to ask: "How will it change what happens if more weapons are put on the roof, bigger tanks, more fancy technology? What will happen to the house then, if the foundation gives way?"

I had to admit: if the foundation gives way, the roof will fall no matter how much money is invested in weapons.

One way to test this is to look at a case like the fall of the Shah of Iran. He had not only one of the larger armies in the world and a completely ruthless secret police, but also the backing of the U.S.A. The opposition leadership chose to use a completely nonviolent strategy, which worked. How could it have? Nothing in Ward's book explains how this is possible. It couldn't happen, according to Ward, because militarily powerful states smash nonviolent movements.

The foundation of the house of the Shah was the compliance of the people. When the foundation gave way, the house collapsed.

Nothing is more important for today's activists to know than this: the foundation of political rule is the compliance of the people, not violence. People power is more powerful than violence. The sooner we act on that knowledge, the sooner the U.S. Empire can be brought down.

### **Isn't violence advisable for self-defense, in combination with other tactics?**

It seems only common sense, with the state out to get you, that you supplement community organizing and nonviolent action tactics with armed self-defense. While I know of instances when individual violent self-defense paid off pragmatically, the track record of organizations that have tried that policy is sobering.

The best-known case in the U.S. is the Black Panther Party, which did community organizing, ran educational programs, created breakfast programs for poor children, and adopted a policy of armed self-defense. The Panthers were not developing an armed struggle for social change. That choice enabled them to stay close to the people they were organizing, in contrast to the experiment by the Weather Underground to try to create an armed revolution that resulted in their isolation from the people and political irrelevance.

Even though the Panthers claimed a right to self-defense that many fair-minded U.S. citizens would say is part of our tradition, they were cut down. Their effort to create the capacity for armed self-defense gave the racist federal government the opening it needed to destroy at least one of its enemies.

The government would have liked to destroy the nonviolent Black freedom organizations as well, and F.B.I. chief J. Edgar Hoover did try to destroy the influence of Dr. King, but the government could only go so far in acting against explicitly nonviolent organizations. That's why governments repeatedly pay spies to join nonviolent movements and try to turn them violent. The government often needs movements to be violent in order to be able to repress them effectively.

In a strange twist, there are times when violent forces actually need to be protected by nonviolent action.

When the Black Panther Party wanted to have a national convention in Philadelphia, they had difficulty getting a venue. Quakers gave them the use of their largest Meetinghouse. Police chief Frank Rizzo saw this as an opportunity to swagger and threaten, and no one could be sure what the provocation might lead to. So Quakers circled the Meetinghouse and stood shoulder to shoulder to create a protective shield between the police and the Panthers.

On a larger scale this was repeated in the Philippines during the 1986 overthrow of dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Toward the end of the struggle a part of the army, led by General Ramos, went over to the people's side. Marcos still controlled the larger part of the army, which he ordered to attack Ramos' camp and subdue the rebellion. Catholic radio stations working with the people power movement sounded the alarm. Many thousands of Filipinos rushed to the site, intervened between the Marcos loyalists and the rebels, and nonviolently immobilized the loyalist troops, thereby saving the outgunned rebel soldiers.

### Is nonviolent action a "white thing"?

That would be a big surprise to the hundreds of thousands of people of color in the U.S. who have used nonviolent direct action in campaigns for over a century. (In 1876 in St. Louis African Americans were doing freedom rides against discrimination on trolley cars, to take one of thousands of examples.) In any given week there are community-based organizations of people of color, all across the U.S., who are engaged in nonviolent action: marches, sit-ins, street blockades, boycotts, civil disobedience, and the like. Books could be written just about the unions of people of color, like the hospital workers, hotel workers and janitors, who go out on strike as well as using other tactics.

A far, far higher proportion of people of color have engaged in nonviolent action in the U.S. than have white people, and continue to do so year in and year out. Not to mention the role of nonviolence in the anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia. When we think of nonviolence, why do the names of Gandhi, King, Aung San Suu Kyi, Cesar Chavez, so easily leap to mind? They are only the tip of the iceberg.

Neither the mass media nor the schools have served us well in letting us know what's really going on. They glamorize violence. It's up to us activists to spread the information about people power. How many activists know that Kwame Nkrumah led a successful nonviolent campaign for Ghana's independence in the '50s? Or that Kenneth Kaunda led another in Zambia in the '60s? The successful struggle of Nepalese students for greater democracy just a few years ago? The prolonged nonviolent campaign for democracy in Taiwan which withstood torture, killings, and widespread suffering before success came in the '90s? The strategic shift of the ANC to major reliance on nonviolent action in the early '80s, leading to the end of apartheid government? The heroic 1990 struggle of the Mohawks in Quebec which saved ancestral land from being turned into a white golf course? (9)

I won't even start with the myth that nonviolent action is inherently middle class -- that's even more off base than the myth that it's white. A far higher proportion of working class people have engaged in nonviolent action than middle class people. Since unions have been the "shock troops" of class struggle, to read their history is to read a large part

of the history of nonviolent action in the U.S.

### **Is there a racist division of labor between white people creating alternative institutions and people of color doing the street actions?**

Ward seems to discount the value of what traditionally has been called "prefigurative work:" building alternatives so a new society begins to take shape within the womb of the old. Further, he states that whites avoid risk by building alternatives, allowing the risk-taking to be done by people of color in the streets.

It seems to me that Ward downplays the huge place in communities of color that is taken by culture work and alternatives. Long before the Nation of Islam took headlines for their alternative-building, African Americans have been re-creating culture and building pride, for example. For some leaders of color, alternatives have been a pragmatic, strategic imperative.

Take, for example, Gandhi's analysis of the condition of the Indian people after being oppressed by white Britain. He saw abundant signs of internalized oppression: dependency, oppression of women, drug abuse, alcoholism, preference for British-made goods, low self-esteem. He hated authoritarianism and did not want to commit his life to a struggle resulting in a brown dictatorship replacing a white dictatorship. Therefore, he launched what he called "the Constructive Programme," which aimed to empower Indians by making them healthy and building alternative institutions. His constructive program was also his anti-racist program.

Did it take time away from direct action? Of course. The Indian National Congress only did an all-out nationwide campaign every decade or so. In the meantime, they did many local direct actions and, just as important, did "prefigurative work." Their strategy engaged the enemy on many fronts, not just the front of street combat. Then when they did launch all-out struggle, they had much more power than they would have simply with raw rage.

Cesar Chavez, realizing that previous one-dimensional efforts to organize farm workers in California failed, designed a strategy that included building co-ops and other alternative institutions as the first stage. He reasoned, correctly as it turned out, that the severely oppressed farm workers needed the skills and confidence of organization-building before they would be ready for combat. The nonviolent struggle he then led was a brilliant success and remains a model especially for organizers working with poor people of color.

Gandhi and Chavez have that in common with guerrilla struggles like the Vietnamese freedom fighters and Nicaragua's Sandinistas: the intention to build the new society while dismantling the old. When activists in the U.S. build a pragmatic strategy for liberation here, we'll need to consider that seriously.

As a white person, I would say that whites have a huge need to create a healthy way of being that sheds arrogance and racism. As a gay man I've also seen ways that homophobia has hurt my people and reduced the energy available for social change, and that's been true among people of color as well as whites. As a man brought up working class I challenge middle class and owning class activists to work on their classism, which would definitely create a more grounded, more sustained, and more effective movement. (10)

So I disagree very strongly with Ward about this point. Unless we just want to recycle oppression with different people in the same roles, alternatives need to be created by both people of color and by white people.



## Doesn't a pragmatic activist want to be open to all tactics at any time?

Something that especially concerns Ward Churchill is the ruling out of certain tactics dogmatically. He says that, if we want a goal, like revolution, sincerely enough, we won't want to rule out in advance any means of getting there. We need to be open to all tactics, from petitioning to civil disobedience to street fighting to open warfare -- whatever it takes.

When I'm in my tactical head, Ward's advice seems sound to me. After all, if I'm building a house, why not assemble the largest possible kit of tools?

When I start thinking strategy, though, the advice doesn't add up. Here's an example. The Danish people didn't expect to be invaded by the Nazis during World War II. They improvised as best they could, and in a very, very high-stakes struggle they engaged in a "diversity of tactics." In the first phase their tactics ranged from collaboration to petitions to sabotage. The diversity didn't work: some tactics worked against each other. The Danes moved on to another set of diverse tactics: sabotage, nonviolent demonstrations, and labor strikes. Again, the tactics undermined each other; each act of sabotage gave the Germans fresh excuse to come down hard on the workers and the demonstrators.

What really worked in maintaining Danish integrity and undermining the Nazi war effort was the strategy which emerged: it included the underground press, major strikes (even at one point a general strike), nonviolent demonstrations, and smuggling the Jews out to a safe haven in Sweden. (11)

The strategy that emerged was internally consistent, and the tactics therefore supported each other instead of subtracting from each other.

Here's an example closer to home. A small group of activists in the Movement for a New Society threw a monkey wrench into a U.S. foreign policy objective by designing a campaign strategy that was internally coherent. The U.S. was supporting, as it often does, a military dictatorship that was killing thousands of people. In fact, Pakistani dictator Yahya Khan was killing hundreds of thousands of people in East Bengal who wanted independence. The U.S. government lied about its support, but the activists learned that Pakistani ships were on their way to U.S. ports to pick up military supplies for the continuing massacre. The group also realized that if longshoremen refused to load the ships, the U.S. government would be foiled.

The problem was, the East Coast longshoremen were, if anything, politically inclined to support the government, and wanted to feed their families. The activists repeatedly tried to persuade the longshoremen to act in solidarity with the East Bengalis, without success. It was time for direct action. The group announced a blockade of the port which was expecting the next Pakistani freighter, and began practicing "naval maneuvers" with sailboats, rowboats and the rest of its motley fleet. The media gave ongoing coverage, and longshoremen witnessed on television as well as in person the strange antics of protesters who seemed to believe they could stop a big freighter with tiny boats. The tactic raised the longshoremen's motivation to listen and discuss, and they agreed that, if the activists created a picket line, the longshoremen would refuse to cross it!

When the campaign succeeded in that city, the activists took it to other port cities and finally the International Longshoremen's union agreed workers would not load Pakistan-bound weapons anywhere in the U.S. The blockade,

initiated by a small group, succeeded because the group crafted direct action tactics specifically geared toward the part of the public that most needed to be influenced. (12)

The campaign would have failed if some of the activists had decided to do property destruction at the docks: such action would have driven away the longshoremen who were the key allies that made the campaign successful. Further, campaigners who would have been tolerant of "diversity of tactics" that included property destruction would have been irresponsible, because they would have been letting down the Bengalis who were under attack. In today's climate among the anti-globalization activists, some activists might give up effectiveness in order to stay on good terms with their friends in the movement, but that is a difficult choice to defend if you really care about sea turtles and poor people in third world countries.

Diversity of tactics open to all possibilities is like trying to build a house without a strategy, a house that includes solar panels, a woodburning stove, a massive oil furnace, electric baseboard heating, huge windows facing north, asbestos insulation, a jacuzzi in every bedroom, a meditation room dedicated to simplicity, and so on. When we build a house we do make choices, guided by some overall concept. That's what makes sense when building a house or when building a revolutionary movement.

### **Isn't "nonviolent revolution" a contradiction in terms?**

Ward Churchill challenges the idea that one can both be a revolutionist and nonviolent. Nonviolence is essentially reformist, he believes, and revolution implies violence. I appreciate this challenge, because every day in any large newspaper we read about nonviolent action used to force policy changes and other reforms; where do we go to learn about the possibilities of nonviolent action for revolutionary change?

In the spring of 1968 France experienced a mass revolutionary insurrection that came close to toppling the government. It's the closest thing to what we're talking about that's shown up lately, because it happened in what's called an "advanced industrial liberal democracy." It's very relevant to the debates I hear now among activists.

In May students in Paris initiated a struggle for educational reform by occupying their universities and demonstrating in the streets. The police responded brutally, and word spread rapidly about the suffering of the students. French labor unions had their own reasons for discontent, and decided to go out on strike. Soon there were eleven million workers striking, with many of them occupying their workplaces. Occupation became the tactic of the moment: workers occupied giant auto factories, gravediggers occupied cemeteries, and dancers occupied the Folies Bergere.

The struggle deepened. Demands radicalized from reform to revolution, among workers as well as among students. Some towns cut off contact with the central government and began printing their own currency. President De Gaulle was forced to consult with generals of French troops stationed in Germany to make sure they were ready to come home and do widespread repression, because he wasn't confident of the reliability of troops stationed on French soil. The bulk of the students and workers were on one side of the polarization and the rich were on the other side. The question mark was the middle class: which way would it swing? Many of them were parents or friends of students and were appalled by the police brutality, and initially favorable to the students.

State-controlled TV entered the fray more fully by showing, over and over, scenes of property destruction by the students, for example dragging cars to street intersections and setting them on fire to create barricades -- a powerful message not only to property-conscious middle class people but even to workers who'd saved for years to be able to buy a car.

Also facing the middle class was the void where a vision might be: if the state was overthrown, would there be a place for them in the new society? No one could answer that question, because there was no manifesto from these new revolutionists that could reassure anyone. All the middle class could do was sit with their fears while watching flames on TV.

We know the outcome: the movement lost and the big capitalists and state won, although the shake-up did lead to some reforms. A question we activists in the U.S. might ask is: why did the students drive away their allies who were essential for their success?

There are many reasons and readers interested in this case can find it in my book. (13) The most pressing reasons for us now are:

- ❑ The students were operating in a tradition that said "revolution = violence or at least destruction" and since they'd moved to a revolutionary stance, they accepted what went with it as a package. They weren't able to be innovative about the means of revolution.
- ❑ The students didn't understand that the foundation of the French "house," its political order, was the compliance of its people, and they could win by increasing the people's nonviolent noncooperation. In 1968 they didn't have the examples of the fall of the Shah of Iran, of Marcos, of Eastern European dictatorships, and so on, so they couldn't realize that a power greater than armed struggle is people power.

The suffering of the French students and workers is not in vain if activists learn from their experience. Nonviolent action is as coercive, or more coercive, than violence in dealing with oppressors but the basis of coercion is hugely different. The coercive power of violence springs mainly from destruction: classically, destroying the army of the opponent, and these days other kinds of destruction as well. Activists using violence need to destroy, destroy, and destroy until the opponent gives up or loses its capacity to resist.

The coercive power of nonviolent action, by contrast, comes from noncooperation. The opponent's dependency on compliance bounces back against him when people refuse to "go along with the program." Even the Shah has to pack his bags; even Hernandez Martinez must flee the country. In some cases the dictatorship surrenders and in others their very apparatus dissolves, as in East Germany.

If the French students had known that their real chance to win was based on the power of noncooperation, they would not have needed barricades and property destruction-- those tactics are in much better alignment with a strategy that evolves into armed struggle.

### How can a pragmatic revolutionist, lacking a strategy, decide between violence and nonviolent action?

Strictly speaking, s/he can't. Without a couple of strategies to compare, an activist insisting on strict practicality has a hard time. Take the confusion of violence with "radical" or "revolutionary." There are plenty of times when violence is used for reform, not for radical change. Think, for example, of Teamsters shooting at Greyhound buses during a strike. Are they using violence to replace capitalist ownership of the company with workers? I don't think so. Or white people lynching black people. Are they campaigning to send blacks back to Africa (a revolutionary change), or to "keep them in their place" (a reform, from their point of view)?

Violence is not the badge of radicalness or revolutionary fervor because it's constantly used for many purposes, including simple self-expression. What makes violence revolutionary is when it plays a role in a strategy for fundamental social change, and that strategy for the 21st century U.S. is something we are still waiting to see.

The strictly pragmatic, hard-boiled, non-moralistic practical revolutionist will want to be able to make a comparison between strategies using armed struggle and strategies using people power, in terms of which strategies are most likely to get us to our vision of a new society. Activists will then be able to argue among various armed strategies and nonviolent strategies.

### How can we choose while strategies are still getting created?

Since even the most pragmatic among us can't make an informed pragmatic choice until the strategies exist, we're all in the same non-pragmatic boat in the meantime. We'll need to make personal choices based on other considerations. Here's how I personally choose.

I carry tremendous anger because of what's been done to me as a working class man and as a gay man. I can't begin to count the number of times I've encountered the stereotypes of "dumb," "violent," "uncultured," "lazy," or "a sex fiend," "child molester," "dirty," "sissy," "immoral," "weird." Despite years of inner work, healing my wounds in a variety of ways, I still carry self-doubt like a sack on my shoulders.

I've been discriminated against, although I haven't been seriously physically attacked. I've watched friends do terribly self-destructive things from the oppression they've internalized; I've been in movement groups which got stuck because their oppression led them to cannibalize their own leaders; I've cried with friends who humiliated themselves by staying in the closet when there was no need, and with friends who discounted their own impact because of their class background.

This year-in and year-out experience of hurt gives me a bias in favor of violence as a means of self-expression. Although I sometimes rage in the safe company of friends, I would love to rage publicly and "fuck things up."

Given all that, my choice for strategic nonviolent action is an anchor, some solid ground that supports me to be the smart working class man that I really am, that assists me to be the balanced gay man that I really am, and that supports my creativity. Whenever I get lost in the fog of my own upset, I have a principle handy that reminds me that I can reach for a big picture, that I can take a minute to get centered, that I can start creating options.

And it often works. I've been surrounded by a hostile gang on a deserted city street in the middle of the night and my creativity started humming as if I were Einstein. I found a nonviolent way to save myself. I've had a knife pulled on me by an enraged teenager and found a way to get us both off the path of destruction. I got police to stop beating me, right-wingers to pull back after they jumped me -- I could go on but you get the idea. When I volunteered to go to Sri Lanka as a nonviolent bodyguard for human rights activists threatened with assassination, a good friend pleaded with me to accept his gift of a gun and bulletproof vest. I refused, by then confident that, in the moment of confrontation, I would find a better and safer way.

One way to choose is to pay attention to my personal bias, and compensate for it by accepting an anchoring principle that holds me steady. (14)

Another way to choose is to notice the cultural bias, and take responsibility for the way the culture conditions us. I'm a man, and the conditioning of men is very clear. What do John Wayne, George W. Bush, Chairman Mao, and the average male CEO all agree on? Political power grows out of the barrel of the gun. That belief about power is the reigning paradigm for the whole culture, but men have a special job in implementing that paradigm because we're brought up to be willing to kill and be killed. Wherever the patriarchy rules, violence is blessed "when push comes to shove."

The activist Starhawk is far more interesting on power than the patriarchal over-simplification. She describes three kinds of power: power-over (domination, most dramatically expressed in the act of killing), power-with (cooperation with others, teamwork), and power-from-within (psychological and spiritual force). (15) I was brought up as a man to believe implicitly that power-over is the strongest; when the strongest possible force is needed, we are programmed not even to question violence.

The wonderfulness of human beings is that we do sometimes go outside our cultural boxes, and even men will be more creative than the programming expects. Abdul Gaffar Khan of the Northwest Frontier of colonial India was brought up in a nomadic culture even more steeped than mine in guns and the violent version of manly honor. He broke out of his conditioning and organized a movement of his fierce Pathan people to struggle nonviolently against the British. The British fought back more ruthlessly against the Pathan campaigners than against other campaigners, but the Pathans were steadfast and disciplined.

My culture says, "To be a real man, I must be willing to use violence." I choose to noncooperate with that script. The patriarchy has lost its credibility with me. I commit to strategic nonviolence and defy the patriarchy to sway me by playing mind games with my identity.

I do like to be pragmatic, which is why I spent five years writing the book "Strategy for a Living Revolution", a pragmatic framework for starting to create a specific revolutionary strategy here in the U.S. (16) I hope we will soon have competing strategies to debate and discuss. In the meantime, what works for me is to have a place to stand in the unfolding history of nonviolent struggle, while I join with comrades to learn and create.

## FOOTNOTES

1 One of the ways the Vietnam syndrome had impact was to deter Ronald Reagan from invading Nicaragua with U.S. troops, a deterrence heightened by the threat by the Pledge of Resistance to create widespread disruption and ignite public uproar. *Back to text*

2 (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969). *Back to text*

3 This document was created out of an international, collective process and published in a number of languages. George Lakey, "A Manifesto for Nonviolent Revolution" (Philadelphia: Movement for a New Society, 1976), reprinted in Richard Falk, Samuel S. Kim, Saul H. Mendlovitz (eds.), "Toward a Just World Order" (Boulder, Co.; Westview Press, 1982) pp. 638-652). *Back to text*

4 To learn more about strong nonviolent resistance to the Nazis by Jews, see Yehuda Bauer's article in "Protest, Power and Change" [1997] ed. Roger S. Powers and William B. Voegelé, pp. 276-277. *Back to text*

5 Ward Churchill, "Pacifism as Pathology", cited above, p. 37. *Back to text*

6 See the account by Stephen Zunes in "Unarmed Resistance in the Middle East and North Africa," in Stephen Zunes, Lester R. Kurtz, and Sarah Beth Asher, eds., "Nonviolent Social Movements : A Geographical Perspective" (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) pp. 44-46. *Back to text*

7 George Lakey, "Powerful Peacemaking: A Strategy for a Living Revolution", (Gabriola Island, British Columbia,

[Canada: New Society Publishers, 1987\) ch. 2. \*Back to text\*](#)

[8 Stephen Zunes, "The Role of Nonviolence in the Downfall of Apartheid," "Nonviolent Social Movements" \(cited above\), pp. 203-230. \*Back to text\*](#)

[9 For a larger sample of the thousands of cases of mass nonviolent action by people of color, see Bill Sutherland and Matt Meyer, "Guns and Gandhi in Africa: Pen African Insights on Nonviolence, Armed Struggle and Liberation in Africa" \(Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000\); Philip McManus and Gerald Schlabach, eds., "Relentless Persistence: Nonviolent Action in Latin America" \(Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 1991\); Patricia Parkman, "Insurrectionary Civic Strikes in Latin America: 1931-1961" \(Cambridge, Mass.: Albert Einstein Institution, 1990\); Stephen Zunes, Lester R. Kurtz, and Sarah Beth Asher, eds., "Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective" \(cited above\); Gene Sharp, "The Politics of Nonviolent Action" \(Cambridge, Mass.: Porter Sargent, 1973\). \*Back to text\*](#)

[10 A clear and inspiring book by a woman who built a grassroots organization by facing honestly the class and race divisions in our society is by Linda Stout, "Bridging the Class Divide" \(Boston: Beacon Press, 1996\). \*Back to text\*](#)

[11 This is captured vividly in the documentary film "A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict," which was shown on Public Broadcasting System in 2000 and is available from Films for the Humanities and Sciences, PO Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543-2053; web site: \[www.films.com\]\(http://www.films.com\). The companion book is by Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, "A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict" \(New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000\). \*Back to text\*](#)

[12 This campaign, which has more to teach us about direct action than there's room to go into here, is described blow-by-blow by Richard K. Taylor, "Blockade" \(Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1977\). This campaign in solidarity with Bangladesh happened in 1971-72. \*Back to text\*](#)

[13 "Powerful Peacemaking: A Strategy for a Living Revolution", cited above, ch. 2. \*Back to text\*](#)

[14 Barbara Deming writes powerfully and eloquently about this in her essay "Revolution and Equilibrium" published in 1968 in Liberation Magazine, available from the A.J. Muste Memorial Institute, 339 Lafayette St, New York, NY 10012. \*Back to text\*](#)

[15 "Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics" \(Boston: Beacon Press, 1988\), ch. 1. \*Back to text\*](#)

[16 The revised edition was called "Powerful Peacemaking: A Strategy for a Living Revolution", cited above. \*Back to text\*](#)

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