

Effective Nonviolent Action

by Randy Schutt

Sometimes nonviolent action (NVA) is used very powerfully, but sometimes without much effect. Many of our demonstrations are planned with goals that are either unreachable (such as disrupting the activities of the authorities enough to force them to change) or too limited (mere symbolic gesturing). The theory of nonviolent action developed over the last century tells us that NVA is most effective when we use it to undermine the support which allows the status quo to continue. Without that support the current system cannot function and it must change.

Poor Goals for NVA

(1) The goal of NVA should not be simply to *physically disrupt business as usual*. Those with the desire and stamina to resist are almost always a very small number of people, poor and unarmed. The established order can hire thousands of people to fix whatever we might destroy, speed-up whatever we might hinder, or destroy whatever we might create. They can call on the police and military to prevent whatever actions we might take. These military forces have an incredible array of firepower and equipment for reconnaissance and communication. In any kind of battle involving force, they will always win if they try. NVA is mostly effective because it dissuades them from trying. Tough posturing, on the other hand, encourages (dares) them to be adversaries and provides an excuse for violent repression. Even if we could win physically, our use of coercive, strong-arm tactics would appall most of our potential supporters and would bolster the ideology of “might makes right.”

(2) The goal of NVA should also not be simply to “*get arrested*.” If we wanted to get arrested, we could engage in vandalism or sloppy shoplifting. But what would be the point?

(3) The goal of NVA should also not be simply to *protest*. During some periods in history (such as the 1950s), dissent was a special event. There was almost no visible resistance, so any kind of dissent made a powerful statement. Now, fortunately, protest is part of the political scene. No matter what the issue, there is someone who will protest it — in fact, probably people protesting on all sides. Protesters are often seen as just a bothersome distraction — as long as they pose no threat they can be dismissed and ignored. Protest is useful in raising issues, but once raised, simple protest usually cannot bring about substantial change.

Effective NVA

Nonviolent action often involves protest, arrests, and disruption of business as usual, but it is most effective when an action is *carefully designed to use these tactics to undermine support for the established order*. As explained by Sharp, the status quo continues only because most people actively support it or passively consent to it (as voters, workers, consumers, taxpayers, bystanders, and so on). People support the status quo out of habit or custom, because they believe it is best, because they receive some benefits from it, or because they are afraid of sanctions. In the course of living our lives, we all support the established order to a greater or lesser extent.

Fortunately, *most people will also resist repression when they see the repression clearly and feel they can resist*. This resistance can force real changes. When enough people withdraw their passive consent and begin to actively dissent in their workplace (strikes, slowdowns, “forgetfulness”), as consumers (boycotts, selective patronage), as voters, or through direct intervention (speaking out, leafletting, rallying, blockades, occupations, and so on), then things must change. It is particularly obvious (and effective) when certain workers refuse to consent: police or military personnel refuse to follow orders, news reporters and editors report dissenting actions in a favorable light, managers and executives make new, radical decisions.

Good Goals for NVA

The most effective goal of NVA is, therefore, to *convince (by our example) more and more people not to support the established order* — to actively withdraw their consent or to refuse to passively go along. This is not, of course, an easy task, but it is also not impossible. If we can propose a superior alternative and demonstrate how it works, many people will adopt it and abandon the status quo.

Some specific goals for Nonviolent Action are:

(1) To *get a large number of people to know about and understand our analysis or alternative* — move those who are ignorant or indifferent to be actively aware.

(2) To *move some or all of these people closer to accepting our perspective* — to move those who are actively hostile to a position of being neutral, to move those who are neutral to being supportive, and to move those who are supportive to become active participants. We might design our actions specifically to reach one of these groups and move them in a particular way.

(3) To *empower people to feel that they can bring about change*; to inspire and entice them into taking resistive action and to demonstrate how to do it.

It is likely that all of us have been exposed to actions that accomplished these goals — actions that encouraged *us* to become involved in nonviolent action.

How to Make NVA Effective

Effective nonviolent action should *clearly expose the current situation, how it is harmful, and how it violates principles that most people embrace, and then present an alternative and show why that alternative is superior*. Our actions and behavior should be such that *most people feel comfortable with it and the means we use must be consistent with the end results we profess*. If our alternative is attractive, then most people will want us to succeed.

Our actions should also *seriously challenge the established order and force it to respond in some way*. It works best if we can arrange the action so that *every response clearly shows the oppressive nature of the status quo*. For example, by publicly contributing our tax dollars to a day-care center instead of turning them over to the federal government (to make weapons), we set up a dilemma situation. If the government takes our money away from the day-care center or arrests us, it looks bad — like the government opposes support for day-care centers. No response leads to the accomplishment of our goal of redirecting our tax dollars to socially useful purposes and encourages others to redirect their taxes.

We must *disseminate a great deal of information about what we are doing and why, presented in a way that is impressive and understandable*. Before any action it is good to have *already convinced or at least adequately informed large numbers of our friends and at least some of the news media* so their interest and support will counter the condemnation we will likely get from the established order. This can best be accomplished by discussing the issue with many people, passing out leaflets, and sending out press releases several days or weeks in advance.

The more *visual, simple, and direct* our action, the more likely people will be able to understand it, especially if it can all be *summed up in one picture*. For example, during the civil rights movement, black people lined up outside the polls. A single newspaper picture of this scene countered the myth that Blacks were too lazy or apathetic to want to vote and explained that Blacks did indeed want to vote but were prevented from doing so by the white establishment (a societal secret).

As part of our work, it is also useful to *listen to everyone we meet*, both to show that we are open to other ideas and also to truly understand why people believe what they believe and fear what they fear.

If our actions or goals are not understandable and acceptable to at least a large number of people, then we will probably not get very far. This means we must always **start with fairly moderate tactics and demands** and, as our perspective becomes more widely understood, work up to the more dramatic and far-reaching ones. The more reasonable we are, the more oppressive the established order appears and the greater the imperative for change. A good rule of thumb is to **make the most reasonable demand that will still undermine the status quo**. If we get what we ask for, then we have taken an important step and we can go on to ask for more; if we don't, then we have demonstrated how unreasonable the powers that be really are and thus gain more support from more people.

It helps to have a **large number of people** involved in the action (or **people who are prominent and respected**) so that we are not easily dismissed as lone crazies. However, it is also true that an understandable and popular action carried out by a few people can be as effective as an unclear or unpopular action carried out by a very large number of people.

The more **timely and close to home**, the more likely that our action will interest people and give them a way to respond. For example, blockading the White Trains and Trucks that carry nuclear weapons to their silos or submarine bases is a good way to bring the global arms race home to our immediate communities.

If our actions are **part of an overall campaign** that seeks to fundamentally change the power structure and the campaign is part of a wide-ranging movement, then the achievement of limited goals will not be seen as failure or hollow reform, but rather as a first step in an overall plan. Our **visible dedication to long-range goals** encourages others to work harder and longer.

As much as possible our actions should **encourage and inspire people to question authority, think for themselves, trust their own opinions, and act according to their own consciences** — only giving their consent for life-affirming activities and refusing to co-operate with oppression. Good actions will **make us all feel better about ourselves** (increase our self-esteem) and **embolden us to take on more dangerous situations** (empowerment). Everyone should understand the repression we may be forced to endure and accept it voluntarily rather than out of guilt or to prove their bravery. Our self-suffering should demonstrate our dedication to change and our commitment to nonviolent solutions (rather than showing naïveté or idiocy).

Those who speak out must be protected as much as possible from sanctions (ridicule, beatings, job loss, arrest, and so on) imposed by the established order, so we must **support each other physically and emotionally** and focus lots of critical attention on the unsavory behavior of our tormentors. The more we can support people, the more resistance they will be able to offer. It also helps if our actions are **fun** — for our own enjoyment and to show that we are not trying to build a world of grim soldiers.

In the spirit of nonviolence, we should seek to understand the circumstances that have led so many people to accept or defend the established order. With those who are sympathetic to an alternative position, we can acknowledge their fears and encourage them to resist in whatever ways they can. This should be easy for those of us who have recently been in that position ourselves and have only just learned the ways we support the status quo, learned how to resist, and found ways to overcome our fears of resisting. With those people who actively defend the status quo, we can love them personally while we insist that their actions and the status quo change. It is important for us to channel our powerful emotions of anger and defiance in a way that changes the situation and does not attack the self-worth of the people with whom we differ. If we forget and become oppressive, those whom we confront will usually remind us. We all get caught up in the oppressive culture in different ways, and each of us must struggle in our own manner to get out.

A Few References

Coover and others, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution*, 1977, New Society Publishers, especially pages 204-232.
 Sharp, Gene, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Porter Sargent Publishers, Boston, 1973, especially "Part I — Power and Struggle".

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Effects of Various Aspects of Nonviolent Action

Aspect of NVA	Effect on Participants	Effect on Others
Challenges the status quo	Empowering	Makes NVA more understandable, not just "symbolic" posturing. Makes people feel that they, too, could "take on City Hall."
Dramatic	Exciting	Awakens people who are asleep to the issues — most people are completely unaware of what is going on.
Serious	Shows that what we do is important	Demonstrates that what we do is not trivial and that we are dedicated and willing to suffer for our beliefs.
Clearly enunciated, shown in a picture	Understandable	Teaches people the true nature of the society, shows that the status quo violates the values that people hold, and encourages them to demand change.
Well-planned and researched	Empowering and safe	Demonstrates that we know what we are talking about and that we take care of ourselves and others.
Widespread	Sense of belonging and empowerment	Helps create a societal norm that it is OK to dissent — lessens ostracism and condemnation.
Easily explained	Empowers people to talk about their experiences	Makes it possible for people to easily talk to their friends, fellow workers, and neighbors.
Fun	Enjoyable, encourages people to continue	Encourages others to join our actions. Shows that the process of social change can be as good as the ends.