

Well-Designed Strategic Nonviolent Actions

by Randy Schutt

<http://www.vernalproject.org/Papers/WellDesignedNV.html>

This paper lists the components of well-designed strategic nonviolent actions — actions that effectively challenge injustice and war by building a massive movement of people who withdraw their cooperation from and resist reprehensible policies.

Introduction

For an action to be well designed, it should have clear long-range goals that are in alignment with a good society, a cogent strategy for achieving those goals, and tactics that fit into that strategy. Without these elements, an action is simply a “protest” that can be easily ignored. Well-designed strategic nonviolent actions — like the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56 and the Clamshell Alliance occupation of the Seabrook nuclear power plant in 1977 — can launch massive movements that bring about far-reaching progressive change.

Many recent anti-war demonstrations do not appear to be well conceived. They have a short-range goal of disrupting normal affairs through a diversity of tactics, but no clear long-range goal or strategy. Presumably, the long-range goals/strategy that activists have in mind for these actions are:

- To attract media attention that indicates to the public that something is happening.
- To challenge and tie up the police so as to increase costs to local government and politicians.
- To raise the social cost of the war to the local business elite by disrupting their businesses so as to hurt them in their pocket-books.
- To thereby induce these local members of the power elite to pressure the national elite for change (stop the war on Iraq).
- To build the progressive movement by involving new people who want to do some sort of social change activity. Since people have seen demonstrations on TV, the idea is to invite them to immediately participate in something similar.

When these demonstrations go exactly as envisioned by their creators, then they do achieve these goals to some extent. Using “diversity of tactics” is a clever way to enable a lot of people to participate at a level they feel comfortable while being more disruptive than a simple lowest-common-denominator vigil or a symbolic civil disobedience action would be. Since these tactics are usually direct, are targeted toward especially egregious institutions, and are not violent towards people, they are not indiscriminate, unprincipled, or immoral. And these actions typically require little preparation and demand little commitment or effort from participants.

However, these actions are often unpredictable and intimidating — and that can scare the public into supporting “law and order” politicians. Moreover, allowing a “diversity of tactics” makes these demonstrations vulnerable to being hijacked by misguided new activists, crazy people, or undercover police agents (*agents provocateurs*) who might verbally abuse bystanders, trash buildings, overturn cars, or ignite a riot. These activities can then be blamed on the movement and used to destroy our reputation.

For example, the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) demonstration in 1999 involved about 60,000 people, including a unique confluence of human rights activists, environmental activists, and labor activists. It also included several thousand activists who nonviolently blockaded the WTO conference site. They successfully delayed the WTO meeting from starting for a day and

encouraged delegates from smaller countries to stand up to bullying by the major trade countries — these were major victories for the fair trade movement. But a small number of demonstrators — fewer than 50 — who set dumpster fires and trashed a Starbucks outlet got most of the publicity. These inflammatory scenes were aired relentlessly in order to discredit the movement. Now, a few years later, most of the public remembers the Seattle demonstration only for this turmoil — and remembers it with fear and anger.

Unintended Consequences

As this example shows, the unintended consequences of a poorly designed action that goes awry in this way are:

- Members of the power elite use TV footage of our actions to scare the public and induce them to spend their tax dollars on more police, more surveillance, more infiltration of activist groups, and more repression. Also, the police feel more righteous in suppressing us.
- Members of the local elite pressure the national elite to crack down more on activists. Members of the national elite use this footage to label us “terrorists” and repress us.
- New participants in our actions feel uneasy being associated with behavior they don’t support, and they leave the movement. Potential new activists are wary of us and stay away (or even become right-wing activists — such as David Horowitz did: see http://www.penthouse.com/features/0212f_horowitz).

When I look at the history of the last 35 years, I see us suffering from the unintended consequences of the poorly designed demonstrations of 1967-71. For 35 years, we’ve wasted a lot of time trying to get our real message out and to distance ourselves from the image of “radicals in the ‘60s” who “hated America” (disagreed with the policies of the power elite and burned US flags), “hated our troops” (criticized or spit on soldiers), or “supported the enemy” (visited Hanoi, chanted “Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh”), “rioted” (damaged property or were beaten up by the police), or engaged in sabotage and terrorism (like the Weather Underground and the Symbionese Liberation Army). I hope we don’t have to spend the next 35 years trying to recover from poorly designed actions of today.

Components of Well-Designed Strategic Nonviolent Actions

To avoid these problems, well-designed strategic nonviolent actions include these components:

- Clear, admirable goals that are in alignment with a good society, cogent strategies that can achieve those goals, and tactics that enact those strategies.
- Tactics that clearly illuminate and focus attention on our message and our goals. They should fit the context and climate of the times. They should also be creative and innovative so our actions are fascinating and strike a chord with the public.
- A way to differentiate our goals and behaviors from those of the power elite in a way that makes us appear good and them appear bad (actions that dispel the myths created by their propaganda and that reveal what they are really doing). At all points, we must do our best to appear (and actually be) reasonable and

responsible. This includes trying to negotiate in good faith with those with whom we disagree and proposing realistic alternatives to policies we oppose. It also means clearly establishing that conventional avenues for change (working within the system) have been tried and exhausted before employing less conventional methods. In an exceptionally good action, we engage in positive behavior that is generally permissible and even desirable. Since the action is illicit in this particular situation for no sensible reason, it vividly illustrates the illegitimacy of the current state of affairs.

- Public and honest statement of our goals, strategies, and tactics so that people trust us and embrace us — and are not surprised or shocked by what we do.

- Discussion with authorities and police so they are not alarmed by what we do.

- Public and honest statement of who the participants in the action will be — the name of our organization, the name of a contact person, how to contact us, etc. — so we are known and not menacing.

- Endorsement by respected organizations or people that the public generally trusts and/or positive advance media coverage (since members of the public don't have any other way to verify who we are or what we intend).

- A way to clearly delineate what behavior will be carried out by the participants in the action (nonviolence guidelines) so the public, the police, and the media all know who we are and what we are intending (and we can clearly differentiate ourselves from the power elite and from anyone who behaves in any menacing way).

- A way to ensure everyone who is part of our actions will abide by those behavior guidelines (nonviolence peacekeepers) so that the public, the police, and the media trust that we will actually engage in the behavior we have stated.

- Extensive preparation workshops where all participants can learn about the theory and practice of strategic nonviolent action as well as the particulars of the upcoming action to ensure that participants fully understand what we are trying to accomplish.

- Lots of public education and extensive organizing in advance so that our goals, strategies, and tactics are understood by many people and cannot be easily maligned or distorted by the media and the power elite.

- Extensive outreach to the news media so our actions are less likely to be misunderstood or distorted. By developing good relationships with reporters, they can come to understand and trust us.

- Extensive efforts to inform the public of our actions through means that are not controlled and distorted by the power elite (personal discussion, leafleting, alternative media).

A usual long-range goal is to build the movement until it includes the vast majority of people so that we can democratically

Some More Good Resources

“Effective Nonviolent Action” by Randy Schutt

<http://www.vernalproject.org/Papers/Effective-112W.pdf>

“Why Nonviolence? Introduction to Nonviolence Theory and Strategy” by Bob Irwin

<http://www.vernalproject.org/OPapers/WhyNV/WhyNonviolence1.html>

“Mass Action Since Seattle: 7 Ways to Make our Protests More Powerful” by George Lakey

<http://www.trainingforchange.org/strategy/mass-action.html>

transform society (not a tiny minority of us trying to impose our will on others). A usual strategy is to make the movement clearly positive, honest, democratic, cooperative, and reasonable and contrast that with the power elite's negativity, dishonesty, dictatorial control, oppression, and exploitation. Even though we may engage in illegal behavior, we want to make it very clear that we are not criminals, thugs, or self-righteous attention-seekers (instead, we want to reveal that members of the power elite are criminals, thugs, and self-righteous attention-seekers). The best actions make it abundantly clear through the action itself that we are good guys and the power elite are behaving reprehensibly. For example, in the South in the 1960s Black people politely lined up to register to vote and the white police beat them up for doing so — this action made it abundantly clear that the Black folks were good guys. The changes they were demanding were eminently reasonable — in fact, they were commendable.

Well-designed actions expose the myths that enable the power elite to garner support from the public. These actions reveal the ugly reality to the public so that people will withdraw their support and actively resist the elite. The best actions do this in a clear, unambiguous way in which the message cannot be distorted (best if it can be conveyed in a single image without having to use any words).

Also, good actions are often designed in such a way that a repressive response would generate unfavorable publicity that would threaten the power of the elite, thus forcing them to tread lightly and treat us well. For example, though draping folded-paper peace cranes over a war memorial without permission is illegal, the authorities are less likely to arrest us if doing so would generate massive unfavorable publicity for them.

Other Components

Good actions also often include:

- Centering behavior (meditation, prayer, fasting, exhortations toward good behavior, reading of nonviolence guidelines) to get participants into the right frame of mind to act in an exemplary manner.

- Engaging in public acts of social service prior to the action (repairing a devastated ecosystem, distributing food to the homeless, giving gifts to children, etc.) to help the public understand that we truly are benign and seek a good society.

- Publicly stating that we are willing to “take responsibility for our actions” and “suffer the consequences” as a way of making it clear that we are good guys and not self-centered shirkers.

Well-designed strategic nonviolent actions that include these components can bring about far-reaching progressive change. But poorly conceived actions with critical flaws can fall far short of their potential.

“Notes on Nonviolent Action” by Randy Schutt

<http://www.vernalproject.org/Papers/NVNotes-1113W.pdf>

“Nonviolent Action as the Sword That Heals” by George Lakey

<http://www.trainingforchange.org/strategy/sword-that-heals.html>

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