



Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict

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For more than a century, from 1900 to 2006, campaigns of nonviolent resistance were more than twice as effective as their violent counterparts in achieving their stated goals. By attracting impressive support from citizens, whose activism takes the form of protests, boycotts, civil disobedience, and other forms of nonviolent noncooperation, these efforts help separate regimes from their main sources of power and produce remarkable results, even in Iran, Burma, the Philippines, and the Palestinian Territories.

Combining statistical analysis with case studies of specific countries and territories, Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan detail the factors enabling such campaigns to succeed and, sometimes, causing them to fail. They find that nonviolent resistance presents fewer obstacles to moral and physical involvement and commitment, and that higher levels of participation contribute to enhanced resilience, greater opportunities for tactical innovation and civic disruption (and therefore less incentive for a regime to maintain its status quo), and shifts in loyalty among opponents' erstwhile supporters, including members of the military establishment.

Chenoweth and Stephan conclude that successful nonviolent resistance ushers in more durable and internally peaceful democracies, which are less likely to regress into civil war. Presenting a rich, evidentiary argument, they originally and systematically compare violent and nonviolent outcomes in different historical periods and geographical contexts, debunking the myth that violence occurs because of structural and environmental factors and that it is necessary to achieve certain political goals. Instead, the authors discover, violent insurgency is rarely justifiable on strategic grounds.

Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict Details

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Ben Lever says

This was a little more academic than I expected it to be but still very accessible. Its message is very important, too - the data is in and violent insurgency is not a rational last-resort tactic that will succeed when all else fails. It's all statistical, of course, but the truth is that nonviolent civil resistance is more likely to succeed, more likely to result in peaceful democracy (as opposed to the insurgents taking over and being just as bad as the last lot), and safer to participate in. Oh, and violence is not generally chosen as a rational last-resort option, it's chosen because of anger and violent impulses, and because of the presumed futility of nonviolence, as much as anything else.

This book is essential reading for any serious activist or foreign policy wonk, but if you can't be bothered with the whole thing, this lecture gives you a good oversight.

William says

A very excellent study about the efficacy of nonviolent civil resistance.

My only beef with it is that the definitions of "nonviolent" and "violent" resistance campaigns is not given a lot of analysis. Early on in the book, the authors correctly state that "Few campaigns, historically, have been purely violent or nonviolent, and many resistance movements [...] have had violent and nonviolent periods. Armed and unarmed often operate simultaneously in the same struggle." Unfortunately, this complexity isn't reflected in the case studies, which depict nonviolent movements never using violence at all, while the violent movements in the same struggles never utilize nonviolent methods. I think the data speaks for itself on the effectiveness of nonviolence and why it succeeds, it's just disappointing that the book doesn't problematize the dichotomy between violence and nonviolence.

Rose says

An absolutely amazing book that really breaks down civil resistance and the steps that go into it. This was one of the main books that I used for the writing of my senior thesis in college and I still find myself picking it up to refresh myself in this area. If you are at all interested in strategic nonviolence, you won't regret reading this book!

Hadrian says

This book builds upon the themes of the authors' 2008 article of the same title in the journal International Security. This continues their research into the theme that non-violent political campaigns are more likely to achieve their intended goals compared to violent campaigns. This is based upon a comparative study of some 323 campaigns from 1900-2006, aggregated in the NAVCO 2.0 dataset, found [here](#). There are also four

detailed case studies: The Islamic Revolution in Iran, the First Infatada, the People Power protests in the Philippines, and the ongoing dissent in Burma.

The main reason for their greater rate of success, says Chenoweth, is that non-violent campaigns can more easily encourage more mass participation and from multiple additional demographics, and can achieve greater foreign support. When more groups are involved, the targeted regime loses its ability to govern effectively, whereas violence against a totalitarian regime can cause a 'rally round the flag' effect for its supporters.

It is, of course, difficult to quantify such hazy phenomenon as regime change, and the listed categories might not list all possible factors which could affect the outcomes of such a political campaign. (Not to mention the categories of 'success' and 'failure'). Still, this is a compelling book, which merits much further study.

Ed says

On the nonviolent/civil disobedience side we have Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Aung San Suu Kyi, Desmond Tutu and Vaclav Havel; lining up with the armed struggle/revolutionary violence folks are George Washington, Ho Chi Minh, Emiliano Zapata, Simon Bolivar and Michael Collins. Whether one picks up the gun or sits-in at the presidential palace will depend on moral, intellectual and emotional judgments informed by religious training and convictions, social class and political ambition. Plus a survival instinct—whether you have a better chance of remaining alive with the rebels in the jungle or the protesters in the streets. Chenoweth and Stephan look at a broad range of civil conflict, both violent and nonviolent, and come up with a non-intuitive but very well argued reason for choosing the road that leads to the Oslo City Hall on December 10.

Put very simply, nonviolence works better. They identify a number of reasons: lower barriers to active participation in nonviolent resistance by the population in general (easier to convince someone to carry a picket sign than throw a bomb), the disruptive effects of mass nonviolent noncooperation and the greater likelihood of shifting loyalties among regime loyalists and security forces. Additionally there are significantly fewer moral issues in civil resistance to a repressive regime than using weapons and killing to overthrow it.

“Why Civil Resistance Works” seems to be a model of social science investigation of political phenomena. “Seems” because, since I am neither a scientist nor particularly social, I can’t judge their methodology. My only criticism is their sometimes artificial decision of when a campaign against an authoritarian government ends and therefore which of them succeeded and which failed. Myanmar/Burma is an example. The Saffron Revolution ended in repression and bloodshed in late 1997; monks and civilians were in the streets again in 2007; free elections which swept the inept, brutal generals from power happened this year. Chenoweth and Stephan call the 1997 events a failed nonviolent campaign and taken in isolation it was, as were the 2007 demonstrations. In order to gather data, measure it and draw conclusions investigators look at events as separate and isolated from their environment—if one is comparing two disparate things in this case violent and nonviolent resistance then it is necessary to strip away everything that isn’t comparable. Or at least one must attempt to.

Another way of looking at the last 20 years in Myanmar, though, is as a continuum with opposition to the generals going underground, possibly gaining strength from the growing international condemnation of their dictatorial rule (although the authors do a good job of showing that outside assistance isn’t of much help) and

strengthening their resolve.

“Why Civil Resistance Works” has been praised by political scientists for its analytical rigor; I don’t have the quantitative or technical knowledge to know if they are right but will assume they are. However whether Chenoweth and Stephan prove their case isn’t as important as is their very lucid and polished style. Their deep immersion in the sources, critical reading and broad knowledge of the social, military and political causes and results of nonviolent resistance shows through.

Tim says

Excellent and well laid-out research on the facts surrounding the efficacy of nonviolence in social movements ranging from national revolutions to small-scale worker's strikes. There were times though where I had disagreements with the exact reasons used to name a particular movement as a "success" or "failure". However, researchers looking for empirical evidence to back up theories on nonviolent vs. violent change will find much to use here.

Antti Rasinen says

What a fascinating book. A short confession: I am against political violence. The rating I've given might be in part due to the book agreeing with my views.

Now that I've said that, the book is wonderful. It presents the idea that non-violent mass movements are the most effective way to topple repressive governments or acquire concessions from them. The researches have a data set of two hundred and some insurgencies, which they analyze from multiple angles. The first part of the book covers the theory, the second part goes through four case studies to illustrate the points.

The biggest lesson for me was how non-violent campaigns produce more stable outcomes than violent campaigns. Failed violent campaigns reduce the probability of a country remaining a democratic country five years after the campaign ends. In short, live by the sword, die by the sword.

Insurgents who claim that violent resistance is necessary are probably always wrong. In fact, we conjecture that many of the groups that claim violence as a last resort may have never attempted strategic non-violent action, judging it to be too difficult at the outset.

The book, as are any books that deal with tyrannies, a good antidote against first-world problems. Things could be so much worse, and still are, in many places around the world.

Rus Funk says

Very good examination of why nonviolence succeeds, by multiple indicators, over violence.

It is a text book and written for scholars and students but is still worth adding to your library.

Rodger says

This book was named the winner of the 2013 Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order. It is an excellent example of policy-relevant social science research using multiple methodologies. They utilize a large N-database to test the effectiveness of violent and nonviolent resistance (the latter succeed far more often) and they examine 4 case studies: Burma, Iran, Palestine, and the Philippines. The book is quite readable even for non-specialists.

Boxofdelights says

Chenoweth and Stephan argue that nonviolent resistance movements are more likely to succeed than violent resistance movements. They analyze 323 violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns between 1900 and 2006, for regime change, territorial goals such as secession or evicting occupying forces, and other goals such as antiapartheid. They discuss how they sorted campaigns into violent and nonviolent categories, given that some groups may have violent and nonviolent phases or subgroups. They discuss how they classify campaigns as successes, failures, or partial successes. "The most striking finding is that between 1900 and 2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts."

They argue that nonviolent campaigns are more successful because they attract more, and more diverse, participants, because they have lower barriers to join the campaign. Violent campaigns require physical health, strength, agility, and weapons skills in their participants. Nonviolent campaigns attract more participation by communicating more information about their activities, intentions, and participants. Many potential participants have moral barriers to participation in violent campaigns. Violent campaigns require a much greater degree of commitment from any participant who participates at all.

As well as greater numbers, nonviolent campaigns also benefit from greater diversity of participants, and participants' connections to the rest of the society, including military and police forces and the elite.

"To summarize, rather than effectiveness resulting from a supposed threat of violence, nonviolent campaigns achieve success through sustained pressure derived from mass mobilization that withdraws the regime's economic, political, social, and even military support from domestic populations and third parties. Leverage is achieved when the adversary's most important supporting organizations and institutions are systematically pulled away through mass noncooperation."

"Violent campaigns, we suggest, are more likely to reinforce the adversary's main pillars of support and increase their loyalty and obedience to the regime, as opposed to pulling apart and reducing their loyalties to the regime. A 'rally around the flag' effect is more likely to occur when the adversary is confronted with violent resistance than with a disciplined nonviolent campaign that makes its commitment to nonviolent means known."

Meg says

Great book. A little dry, but I liked some of the stories, especially about mass protesters in the Philippines who surrounded soldiers, offering them flowers and chocolate and inviting the soldiers to join them. Oh also the "confetti demonstrations" in the business district of Manila where 100,000 office workers marched in the streets as protesters threw down yellow pieces of shredded phone books from the skyscrapers. That's awesome.

Basic take-away from the book: Nonviolent campaigns usually work better than violent ones, because:

- They are able to mobilize greater numbers of people (because the physical and moral barriers to participation are lower).
- They are able to mobilize more diverse segments of society (e.g. students, workers, families, clerics...).
- A nonviolent mobilization has more potential to create loyalty shifts on the part of the regime in power (e.g. military or other forces refusing to obey orders) because participants are not using violence against them. Also since it is large and diverse, protesters are more likely to have connections to those in the military which can help lead to loyalty shifts.
- Regime repression against large, nonviolent campaigns is more likely to backfire which can lead to greater mobilization, loyalty shifts in the regime, and international pressure.
- Large nonviolent campaigns are more likely to get international support
- Large nonviolent campaigns are usually better at "evading and remaining resilient in the face of regime repression" and develop more tactical, adaptive innovations than small campaigns

Jenevieve says

Review first published on My Blog.

An in-depth study and analysis of how successful nonviolent and violent campaigns are historically. The thesis is that non-violent campaigns are more successful at achieving their results long-term and since they were looking mostly at regime changes, ending up in a more democratic government as well. They reviewed campaigns going back to 1900 and wrote about 4 specific case studies in the book to illustrate specific points (Iran, Philippines, Burma, and Israel/Palestine). Their conclusion is that non-violent campaigns are more successful for a variety of reasons (which they do go into fairly deeply) than violent ones and have a better outcome over 5-10 years after.

I read this for book club but admit to this being something I'm interested in for a variety of reasons. Most of which have to do with learning more history about other countries around the world and how different types of governments work and don't work and how the people react to them when they don't work for the people. That being said, this is definitely a text book and reads like I would imagine a doctoral thesis paper would, especially the first several chapters. It was dry and very difficult for a layperson like myself to get through. Once we got to the case studies, it was much more approachable and I really enjoyed seeing how these events unfolded especially since they either happened before I was born or when I was young enough to not really be paying attention to the world outside my neighborhood. I vaguely remember something happening in the Philippines and the talk about Imelda Marcos's shoes but that's really it. I know a little about what is going on in Israel and Palestine and I have a very basic understanding of the root issues and while this didn't go much into all that, it was interesting to see some of what has happened there over the years.

Alexandra Lehmann says

This book's concept is pretty huge and its case studies work to prove it.

It lacked, however, mention of the Czech resistance which successfully dealt with Heinrich Himmler, the chief architect of the Final Solution. It also did not mention Sophie Scholl's led student resistance in Munich, which history has proven a success - if only for its courage and timeless example of what is possible under a dictatorship. When I attempted to reach the author to ask why she did not include both of these movements (I suppose she did not include the Czech resistance because it was quite violent), she did not reply. This was too bad, because I would have liked to use some of her ideas in my seminars on German civil disobedience during World War II.

yaelaed says

I tried to like this book. I tried to READ this book. I didn't finish it, I didn't even get through the third chapter. I am a huge fan of civil resistance and nonviolence and thus really wanted to like this book. But I just couldn't. It reads like a college essay. The whole first chapter is the authors quipping about how their research is better than any other research on the subject. And what I did read appeared to be them saying the same things over and over again while simply rearranging the words. I'm not disagreeing with the research itself, simply the manner in which it was presented. I feel like all the information they gave could have been presented in less than fifty pages, but they tried to stretch it out and that, to me, gave it an air of being mostly filler content.

Sabrina Williams says

Excellent book! Chenoweth and Stephan do a superb job of showing the reader how and why nonviolent movements are superior vis-a-vis violent movements. It's clear that they painstakingly went through years of resistance movements and their idiosyncrasies and tried to figure out if they were successful in achieving their goals and why this was so. The book is filled with data, analysis, examples and case studies. Perfect read for folks wanting to understand WHY nonviolence works and why is often a better path when groups want social or political change.
