

Chapitre/Chapter 7

The American Tradition of Nonviolence

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Violence is so much a part of American culture that one is likely to think of it as the dominant characteristic. H. Rap Brown's observation in 1960 that "violence is as American as apple pie" is underscored by the annual U.S. military budget, roughly \$500 billion; that amount of money, according to a UN estimate, would feed, clothe, educate, and provide health care for every person in the world for several years.

There is considerable evidence, however, that violence is abhorrent to American culture, as indicated by the rich tradition of poems, essays, sermons, novels, and songs about nonviolent movements for justice and peace dating from early 17th century European settlements, as well as among Native American nations, such as the Hopi. This discussion focuses on nonviolence as a means, method, philosophy, and strategy for resisting injustice and humiliation, resolving conflict, and bringing about social change without killing or harming people. This is to distinguish it from pacifism, a somewhat more theoretical and abstract term associated with opposition to war.

Only occasionally recognized in standard histories of American culture, the history of nonviolence over three centuries dramatizes the search for alternatives to the present, that is, to an imperial nation dominating much of the world economically and militarily. This effort to project alternatives involved members of peace churches in the 17th and 18th century, larger Protestant denominations in the 19th and 20th century, and Catholic clergy and laity since that time. Similarly, the War Resister League, whose members have no formal religious affiliation has been central to war resistance and nonviolent action over the past century.¹ Literature informed by the experience of activists and agitators includes essays, sermons, poems, novels, and songs, from the pamphlets of William Penn in the 17th century to the songs of Joe Hill and Woody Guthrie in the early 20th century, as well as poems by Denise Levertov and William Stafford and recent work by Tim O'Brien and Bruce Weigl.²

Reclaiming its place in the history of the U.S. is a recent victory for the nonviolent tradition, over formidable academic opposition. Military history and the glorification of heroes of violence still dominate most history textbooks, but the heroes of nonviolence gradually make their way into books and courses of study. That effort was greatly enhanced by people's history, particularly the writings of Howard Zinn³, as well as women's history and African American history. It owes a great deal, as well, to Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights movement, which re-invigorated a tradition with deep roots in the American experience. Over the past thirty decades Gene Sharp, the major theorist and scholar of nonviolence since Gandhi, has clarified and extended our understanding of "the politics of nonviolence" through a series of films, books, and pamphlets now translated into forty languages.⁴

The Colonial and Revolutionary Periods.

A vivid image of nonviolence at work in the 17th century colonies is Edward Hicks's painting, "The Peaceable Kingdom." Inspired by a text from Isaiah, about a time when the lion will lie down with the lamb and all of nature will live in harmony. The canvas, in various versions of

the painting, shows children at play surrounded by various animals. A section of the canvas, with political implications, shows William Penn, for whom the state of Pennsylvania was ultimately named. Circled by Native Americans, he regards them as equals. Indeed, before coming to the colonies, Penn had written to the natives that Quakers were coming to live with them in peace. For several decades, Quakers served as administrators of the region, living out what they referred to as “the Holy Experiment.” Their attitude contrasted with that of other English settlers, such as the Puritans in Massachusetts, who were more aggressive and often hostile to native peoples.

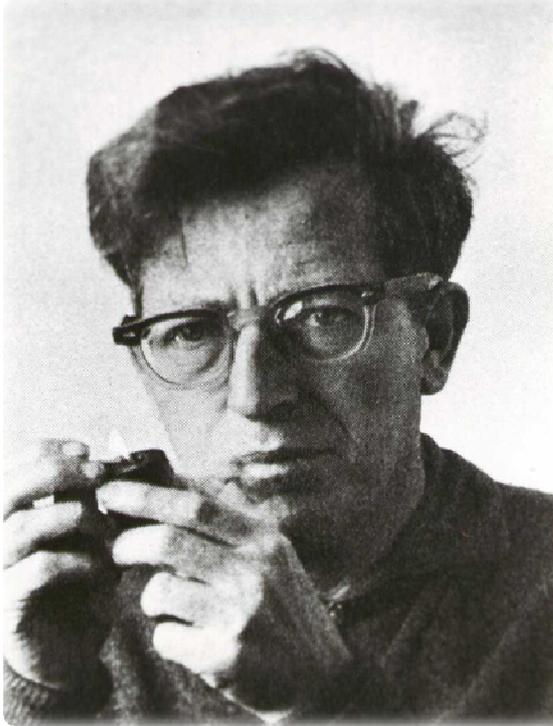
John Woolman (1720-70), a later Quaker, wrote of his work among the Native Americans: “Love was the first notion, and thence arose a concern to spend more time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and spirit they live in, if happily I might receive some instruction from them.” He eventually traveled widely encouraging Quakers to give up their slaves, long before the wider abolitionist movement began.⁵

During the Revolutionary period, many people throughout the colonies engaged in nonviolent resistance to British rule, the most famous incident known as the Boston Tea Party. Agitators, disguised as Native Americans, forced their way on ships in Boston and dumped tea, heavily taxed by the British, into the harbor. Nonviolent strategies against the British included civil disobedience, petitions, and election campaigns employed by the North Carolina regulation and Boston crowds in the late 1760s.⁶

Thomas Paine (1737-1809), a great pamphleteer, later involved in the French Revolution, called himself “a citizen of the world.” That commitment to the welfare of people not only in one’s own country, but also in countries throughout the world was embraced by advocates for women’s rights, worker’s rights, and civil rights, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Civil War and After.

By the 1840s, activists who referred to themselves as “passive resisters” or “non-resisters” initiated a formidable movement against slavery. In addition to various slave rebellions, white Southerners disobeyed the law by teaching African Americans to read and write, and New Englanders disobeyed national laws requiring that escaped slaves be returned to their slave-owners. William Lloyd Garrison (1805-79), through his courage, skillful organizing, and fiery speeches drew many others into the movement. The motto under the masthead of his newspaper, *The Liberator*, circulated and often banned in the South, was “My country is the world; my countrymen are all mankind.” His follower, Abigail Kelly Foster scandalized her contemporaries by traveling not only with black women, but also with black men, including Frederick Douglass. Through her long life Kelly remained faithful to her motto: “Go where you are least wanted, for there you are most needed.” Other members of the Anti-Slavery Society included Lucretia Mott and Lucy Stone, editor and a major force in the women’s movement.



Henry David Thoreau went to jail for refusing to pay a tax imposed to fund the Mexican War (1846-48), the first major imperialist war of the U.S., with the Massachusetts congressional delegation voting against it. Although not philosophically committed to nonviolence, Thoreau wrote one of the major texts in the history of nonviolence, “Civil Disobedience,” which inspired many war resisters, including Danes who resisted persecution of Jews during World War II.

In 1846, Adin Ballou (1801-90), a Universalist minister, published what may be the first extended discourse on nonviolence, called *Christian Non-Resistance*. The title of his book reflects the difficulty activists have had in naming a concept only partially understood. Other words sometimes associated with the concept include “pacifism,” which entered the language only about 1910 and nonviolence, about 1920. Gandhi invented his own word, satyagraha (“truth force”) to suggest the power and depth of “nonviolence,” a concept new to political discourse.

While a number of abolitionists eventually justified violence and embraced the Civil War as a holy war, Adin Ballou remained faithful to his commitment, his work later quoted by Tolstoy in *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1893) and perhaps known by Gandhi as well. Ballou and Elihu Burritt co-founded one of the first international peace societies, in 1854, in Central Massachusetts, and Burritt gathered tens of thousands of signatures of people in the U.S. and Western Europe who pledged never to take up arms against their brothers and sisters.

Following the Civil War, workers employed various strategies of nonviolence in their campaigns to achieve decent wages and working conditions. The effort to end child labor involved the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) and the popular anarchist, Emma Goldman, who was appalled by the status of workers when she arrived in the U.S. from Russia in 1890. Initially approving of violent acts to bring on “the revolution,” she eventually

turned toward nonviolence. The militant I.W. W., co-founded by Big Bill Haywood, Eugene Victor Debs, and Mother Jones in 1905. won an important victory in the so-called Bread and Roses Strike of 1910 and opposed U.S. entrance into World War I.

Early 20th Century.

The Spanish American war in 1898, during which the U.S. seized the Philippines and other islands in the Pacific, alerted concerned Americans to the danger of the expanding empire. Mark Twain, whose verses and essays excoriated American policy in the Philippines, served as vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League until his death in 1910. Its membership included major writers such as Henry James and William Dean Howells, as well as Jane Addams, founder of Hull House, and William James, philosopher and author of “The Moral Equivalent of War.”

After World War I broke out in Europe in 1914, members of the historic peace churches, Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren and other Protestant denominations began to organize against U.S. participation in that war. Important nonviolent organizations dating from this period include Fellowship of Reconciliation (1914-15), Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (1915), and American Friends Service Committee (1917).

As the U.S. entered the war in 1917, thousands of men went to prison as draft and war resisters, often suffering brutal harassment and even death. Socialists advocated the motto, “Don’t be a Soldier; be a Man.” Eugene Victor Debs, nominated for president on the Socialist ticket five times between 1900 and 1920, advocated draft resistance out of loyalty to the workers of the world. In 1918, he was arrested and sent to federal prison for advocating draft resistance; he was finally released by President Warren Harding in 1921.

During the Red Scare of 1919, under sedition laws passed earlier, the government suppressed and willfully destroyed both the socialist and the worker’s movement. Sacco and Vanzetti, an anarchist fish peddler and shoemaker imprisoned in 1920, were eventually executed by the State of Massachusetts. Protests evoked by their tragedy involved thousands of people throughout the U.S., including writers such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Katherine Ann Porter, and John Dos Passos.

By 1930, the labor movement had revived, and began to develop new strategies for nonviolent social change. Workers initiated sit-down strikes, following the example of French workers, and won important victories, as in the United Auto Workers strike against the automobile industry in Flint, Michigan, in 1935. Two years earlier, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker movement, feeding the hungry and housing the homeless during the Great Depression. Christian anarchists (or “personalists,” as they preferred to call themselves, after Emmanuel Mounier), they opposed war of any kind, and refused to pay income tax to the war-making state. By 1940, the Catholic Worker newspaper had a circulation of 100,000, and by the year 2000, there were over 150 Houses of Hospitality in the U.S., Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, many of them involved in campaigns for justice and peace.

A draft law passed in 1940, on the eve of the Second World War, granted conscientious objection to members of peace churches and some others who objected to killing. That right had been a hard won battle by pacifists, dating back to the early years of the nation. During the Second World War, men who later became central to nonviolence spent years in prison as war resisters or in civilian public service camps as conscientious objectors. They included

Gordon Zahn, a major figure in Catholic social thought, Mulford Sibley, one of the first major historians of nonviolence, and David Dellinger, author, editor, and organizer of anti-war demonstrations during the Vietnam war. James Farmer and Bayard Rustin, leaders in the Civil Rights movement and close advisers of Martin Luther King, Jr., were also conscientious objectors.

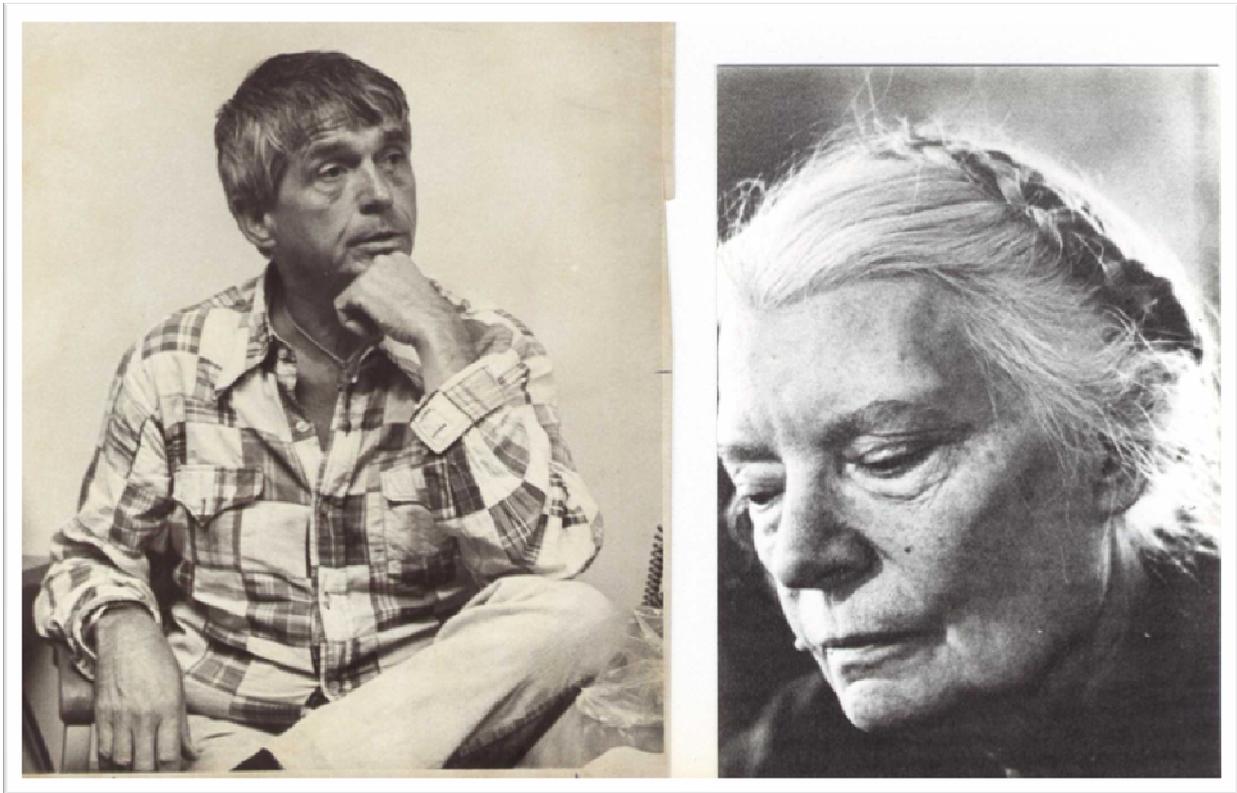


Later 20th Century to the Present.

The Civil Rights movement, the great teacher of nonviolence to a generation, under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and other talented African Americans, revived a tradition with roots in the American past. The first Freedom Ride, in 1947, an interracial

group rode buses throughout the South to test a 1946 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation on interstate travel. As with many who integrated schools and lunch counters, they were arrested, several served on chain gangs, as thousands of others were jailed and a number of people killed in voter registration campaigns. In December 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man, as Alabama state law required, dramatizing for people around the world the discrimination that African Americans had endured for centuries.

In 1958, Albert Bigelow sailed his 30-foot boat, the *Golden Rule*, into the forbidden nuclear testing area in the Pacific Ocean, and in 1961, the San Francisco to Moscow Peace Walk brought Americans and Russians together in personal and public testimony against Cold War policies. Important writings in the history of nonviolence over the next two decades included essays by Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk;⁷ a play, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, by Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest imprisoned for civil disobedience on many occasion;⁸ and treatises by Gordon Zahn comparing German Catholics' failure to resist Hitler and American Catholics' failure to resist segregation, nuclear weapons, and the Vietnam war.



Since 1980, there have been over eighty incidents of people “disarming” nuclear weapons, initially at a General Electric plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. These nonviolent resisters, including Philip Berrigan, Tom Lewis, Molly Rush, as well as a number of Catholic priests and nuns, have served years in prison, as persistent witnesses against the making and deployment of weapons of mass destruction. A formidable campaign involving a million demonstrators in New York City, as well as millions more in major cities throughout Western Europe, led President Reagan and Premier Gorbachev to sign an anti-nuclear treaty in Greenland in 1983.

Among recent nonviolent campaigns, School of Americas Watch has organized an imaginative and extensive legislative and direct action campaign to close the School of Americas, Ft. Benning, Georgia, where the U.S. has trained thousands of Latin American military leaders, in torture, for several decades. Initiated by Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest, after his seven years among the poor in Peru and Bolivia, SOA Watch gathers tens of thousands of people of many ages and backgrounds each November at the gates of Ft. Benning, some resisting arrest and serving jail sentences for civil disobedience. Renamed the Western Hemispheric Institute for Security Cooperation, ("Like pouring perfume on a nuclear waster dump," according to the late U.S. Congressman Moakley from Massachusetts), the "school of assassins" trained members of death squads that murdered four American women, Archbishop Oscar Romero, six Jesuit priests and their housekeepers, and thousands of other people in Latin America.⁹

Since the first Gulf War and during the war on Iraq, nonviolent resistance to violence and injustice continues, as an increasing number of Americans advocate "bringing the troops home" and prosecuting leaders responsible for the lies that misled the U.S. and other nations into the war. Examples include the effective protests of Cindy Sheehan and her co-workers near President Bush's home in Crawford, Texas, sit-ins in the offices of congressional leaders, and long marches connecting the violence of warmakers and war manufacturers with the pitiful neglect of the victims of Katrina in the region around New Orleans.

Since this broad survey was meant to accompany a slide presentation, it obviously says little about the subtler implications of the numerous memoirs, novels, and poems by pacifists, non-pacifists, and other resisters related to the nonviolent tradition. But perhaps it suggests the richness of the people's lives and writings, including imaginative works such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1926) and Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night* (1970). Poets have also offered a "new," more precise language for peacemakers and nonviolent resisters, as in Denise Levertov's, "Making Peace," Muriel Rukeyser's "Waking This Morning," and Marge Piercy's "The 184th Demonstration." The latter poem ends with someone asking the speaker: "Tomorrow is the 185th Demonstration/ Will you be there?" She answers, "Of course."

History and scholarship on the nonviolent tradition is one of the priorities of the International Peace Research Association, founded in 1965, and its North American affiliate, Peace and Justice Studies Association. These academic associations have founded programs and courses in peace, conflict, and nonviolent studies in over 300 American colleges and universities. Programs and research centers around the world, including England, Norway, Sweden, and Australia, have increased dramatically in the last ten years.¹⁰ As a consequence, there is more cooperation between academics and activists, particularly as a result of the scholarly research by Gene Sharp and his associates at the Albert Einstein Institution in Boston. The need remains however, for direct action and thoughtful research on nonviolent social change—to protect people and to sustain the planet, including the country that Martin Luther King, in 1967, called "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world."¹¹

END NOTES.

1. Indispensable guides to this history are Peter Brock, *Pacifism in the United States: From the Colonial Era to the First World War*, Princeton University Press, 1968; *Power of the People: Active Nonviolence in the United States*, ed. Robert Cooney and Helen Michalowski. Culver City, CA: Peace Press, 1977; Staughton Lynd, *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995; and *Civil Disobedience in America: A Documentary History*, ed. David R. Wilber. Cornell University Press, 1978.

2. Michael True, *An Energy Field More Intense Than War: The Nonviolent Tradition and American Literature*. Syracuse University Press, 1995.

3. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*. NY: Harper and Row, 1980, and: *Protest, Power, and Change: An Encyclopedia of Nonviolence from ACT-UP to Women's Suffrage*, ed. Roger S. Powers and William Vogel. NY: Garland Publishing Co., 1997.

4. Gene Sharp, various works, most recently, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*. Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 2005.

5. Quoted in Brock, p. 191.

6. "The North Carolina Regulation, 1766-1776: A Class Conflict" and "Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776," in *American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred Young. Northern Illinois University Press, 1976.

7. Introduction to *Thomas Merton on Peace*, ed. Gordon Zahn. NY: Saturday Review Press, 1971, republished as *The Nonviolent Alternative*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.

8. *Daniel Berrigan: Poetry, Drama, Prose*, ed. Michael True. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.

9. James Hodge and Linda Cooper, *Disturbing the Peace: The Story of Father Roy Bourgeois and the Movement to Close the School of the Americas*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.

10. *Global Directory of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution Programs: 2000 Edition*. Consortium on Peace Research, Education and Development/Peace and Justice Studies Association, University of San Francisco.

11. "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington. NY: Harper and Row, 1986, p. 233.