

# The Power of Nonviolent Direct Action

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Nonviolent direct action is known by many names. Gandhi called it *satyagraha* (truth or soul force). Henry Thoreau called it *civil disobedience*. Activists in North Philadelphia sometimes call it *street heat*. In the Philippines, democracy activists call it *people power*.

Underneath all of these definitions are similar themes such as a use of tactics outside of normal institutions (e.g. use of the street or fasting) and a commitment to refraining from violence. But even more core to all of these is that direct action is about *power* – bringing together people to make a united change.

## A DEFINITION OF NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION

I use this definition of nonviolent action:

*Nonviolent action are techniques outside of institutionalized behavior for social change that challenges an unjust power dynamic using methods of protest, noncooperation, and intervention without the use or threat of injurious force.*

In essence, people turn to nonviolent direct action after the institutionalized ways of settling disagreements are unsuccessful. In the civil rights movement, black people turned to nonviolent action after years of fighting in the courts to end institutionalized segregation. The courts did not provide the relief needed, and so nonviolent action was born. The methods of nonviolent action lie outside institutionalized behavior.

In using these methods people either do the unexpected or what they're forbidden to do, for example demanding coffee at a segregated lunch counter if they're African American. Or nonviolent action can be refusing to do what they are expected or required to do, like pay a special tax to the English king for the tea they drink.

In the Philadelphia struggle against casinos, Casino-Free Philadelphia (CFP) turned to nonviolent action after it became obvious the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board (PGCB) and then-elected officials had no interest in protecting the rights of residents and city taxpayers regarding the ills of casinos. The actions included *noncooperation* such as refusing to cooperate with the PGCB's demands that the public not speak at "public" meetings. Other tactics were what we were not expected to do, such as the Citizens' Document Search to get public documents made secret by the PGCB by a nonviolent "search and seizure" to liberate the plans from their offices.<sup>1</sup> All of those tactics put pressure on institutions, like the PGCB, but were actions which, of themselves, were outside tradition.

Nonviolent action, therefore, can be distinguished from other forms of doing conflict which are *within* current institutions and traditions, like going to court or competing in an election. They are *not* considered nonviolent action. It was not nonviolent action when CFP collected 27,000 signatures to give citizens a vote on the question of if casinos should be built within 1,500-feet of homes, places of worship, and schools. Getting petitions to place a referendum on the ballot is within the City's rules and therefore institutionalized.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Duhamel writes more about the search and seizure tactic, which has been used by unions and anti-globalization activists: <http://www.newtactics.org/TheDilemmaDemonstration>.

But when the Supreme Court stripped the question from the ballot and CFP ran Philly's Ballot Box – running our own election – it was nonviolent direct action.

When the courts, elected officials, and official institutions, like the City Planning Commission, abandon their roles to protect citizens and instead act corruptly, where to turn? People turn to nonviolent direct action after the institutional modes fail.

So why does nonviolent action work? Aren't institutions like the Supreme Court imbued with more power than frustrated citizens? The answer, surprisingly, is no – not when people use their power.

## IT'S ALL ABOUT POWER

Traditionally politics is seen as flowing from the top downwards. Those on top have power. A janitor takes orders from their supervisor who takes orders from the district head and so on – all the way up to the President of the United States.

Most institutions in our society are viewed this way: corporations have at their top the CEO, cities have Mayors at the top, and our legal system has a federal Supreme Court. In that view of society everyone below has to follow orders or face consequences: such as being fired, facing political retribution, or being placed in jail.

But that is not the only type of power.

Power also flows up. The CEO is helpless if employees refuse to take their orders. The Mayor is helpless if the citizens withhold their financial support for his initiatives (e.g. refuse to pay taxes), undermine his policies, and collectively refuse to go along with her orders. The Supreme Court is disabled if cities refuse to implement their interpretation of laws.

Direct action uses this form of power: power flowing *from* the bottom upwards. *People power*. A group in Serbia fighting against a dictator wrote:

*By themselves, rulers cannot collect taxes, enforce repressive laws and regulations, keep trains running on time, prepare national budgets, direct traffic, manage ports, print money, repair roads, keep food supplied to the markets, make steel, build rockets, train the police and the army, issue postage stamps or even milk a cow. People provide these services to the ruler through a variety of organizations and institutions. If the people stop providing these skills, the ruler cannot rule.*

From the Centre for Applied NonViolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) a training organization started by trainers from Otpor. Their website is: <http://www.canvasopedia.org>

Casino-Free Philadelphia has regularly used this type of power to change policies. For example, the public was not allowed to testify at the PGCB meetings for most of its existence. Rather than accept orders from the PGCB chair that said they could not testify, members decided to testify *anyway*.

At a meeting in fall 2007, several members of Casino-Free Philadelphia stood up, one at a time, during the PGCB board meeting. and started testifying. Each one was gavelled down and told to be quiet by the chairwoman. A recess was immediately called. The three members who spoke – unfortunately all the designated spokespeople – were escorted out of the building and told they would not be allowed to return.

When the board reconvened after recess, the chairwoman warned the group not to continue to interrupt. The remainder of the group immediately stood up and attempted to testify. Another recess was called.

When the PGCB reconvened again, the group again attempted to speak up. Finally, the chairwoman shut down the entire PGCB meeting rather than allow people to speak.

The result: rather than risk another engagement like that, she allowed the public to speak at the next hearing. Moreover, she initiated a larger shift in policy and now gives time for citizens to speak at several meetings throughout the year.

Mohandas Gandhi said that ultimately the power of people lies in their choice to either cooperate or not cooperate. *Noncooperation* with unjust or wrong authority is the heart of nonviolent direct action.

This flies in the face of the old notion of power which says it flows downwards. Instead, the theory of nonviolent action is that power flows upwards. It's a democratic way of viewing power by seeing that unjust authority is only in place because of the cooperation of all of the layers below it.

That's why people who are oppressed and disenfranchised turn to nonviolent action: it's a step towards empowerment to see how *we* have power – even if we are not powerful politicians, judges, or mayors of a city.

## **NONVIOLENT ACTION REQUIRES DISCIPLINE**

Members of Casino-Free Philadelphia could not have been successful in that action if they did not carry themselves with respect, show respect to the humanity of the chairwoman while disobeying her orders to be silent, and stay focused on their goals during the action. The *action* is the message in nonviolent action.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. laid out four principles that he used during the civil rights movement. We offer them because when we use *people power* it does require that we act civilly, respectfully, and modeling the highest integrity we can muster:

- 1) **Define your objectives.** Injustice and violence are everywhere around us. A single campaign or action will not remove it all. One must begin by focusing on a specific injustice; it should be possible to discuss it in fairly simple and clear-cut terms. Decision-making and negotiations during a campaign will be helped immensely if you have defined clearly your short-range objective and your long-range goal.
- 2) **Be honest and listen well.** Part of your goal is to win your opponent's respect. Conduct yourself in a way which encourages that respect by showing your scrupulous care for truth and justice. A crucial part of nonviolent direct action is the understanding that no one knows the complete truth about the issues at hand. Listening with openness to what your opponents have to say about your campaign is very important in your pursuit of the whole truth. Similarly, listening carefully to those who are struggling at your side helps ensure that the oppression which you are fighting is not replaced by another oppression.
- 3) **Love your enemies.** No matter how deeply involved in unjust and violent systems some people are, your goal is to break down those systems, not to punish others for wrong-doing. Real justice is established when people refuse to maintain oppressive systems, not when the people in those systems are destroyed. Nonviolence requires a

steadfast and conscious willingness to mentally separate respect for all people from disrespect for what some people are doing in a given situation.

**4) Give your opponents a way out.** By using nonviolence, you are showing a kind of strength that overcomes injustice. Avoid self-righteousness with opponents. Recognize their weaknesses, embarrassments and fears. In specific confrontations, as well as in the larger campaign, find a way to let them participate in finding a solution. Give them options to respond to, not non-negotiable demands.

*[These principles were first developed in the context of the struggle for civil rights in the U.S. at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King. The present version has been slightly revised for international use by the International Fellowship of Reconciliation]*

While many would never even consider *violent* actions, the purpose of clarifying *nonviolent* action is to limit the actions of participants to only those within a framework of disciplined, unified action. Casino-Free Philadelphia uses the following Nonviolent Action Guidelines in all of its direct actions, which are agreed upon by all participants.

*In our actions, we will...*

- ◆ bring humor;
- ◆ adopt a dignified, open and friendly attitude towards anybody we encounter;
- ◆ demonstrate our creativity in the use of new slogans, songs, and props;
- ◆ keep our calm, and our eyes on the prize.

*In our actions, we will not...*

- ◆ bring weapons;
- ◆ use verbal or physical violence;
- ◆ damage property;
- ◆ use drugs or alcohol;
- ◆ hide our identity behind hoods or masks;
- ◆ risk arrest without the required training;
- ◆ run, as it contributes to heightening tensions for everybody.

By setting clear agreed upon guidelines we ensure mutual respect. We know what people around us will and will not do. No provocation will get us off our message.

## **THE ACTION IS THE MESSAGE**

Nonviolent action differs from other forms of protest that are fundamentally about asking for our rights. Strategic nonviolent action is about acting for our rights.

Strategic nonviolent action gives us a basis for mutual trust, greater public support, and a focused channel to highlight injustice.

In strategic nonviolent action our action is our message. For example, Casino-Free Philadelphia ran a direct action campaign called Operation Transparency in the fall of 2007. The PGCB refused to make public their documents, such as updated site plans and traffic plans. No meaningful public input could be made without access to such basic documents.

The goal was to get the PGCB to stop violating our right to know and release the hidden documents. If they did not release the documents by our December 1 deadline, we vowed to go to their offices in Harrisburg to carry out a "citizens' document search" to make the documents public ourselves. The citizens' document search is a direct action tactic first designed in Ottawa, which we had learned about and brought to our work.

Operation Transparency lasted for two-months, with small media-friendly actions like washing the PGCB's windows to help them become more transparent. After the deadline passed, the documents still had not been released.

Fourteen people carried out the citizens' document search. Two at a time, people stepped forward. They read a "citizens' search warrant" and asked the PGCB to release the documents. They walked forward and were promptly arrested.

All were later found to be "Not Guilty" by a judge who scolded the PGCB's behavior. The judge virtually invited us to return to Harrisburg and do it again if the PGCB did not release the documents and become transparent. Public pressure mounted.

The power of direct action was that our refusal – our noncooperation – resulted in new allies coming to our sides, an increase in dramatic tension for the PGCB, and shed light on the clarity of the wrongfulness of their position.

Without direct action, most pundits would not be citing how bad the PGCB's behavior has been. They would ignore it, just like most ignore most forms of public abuse.

(In fact, while we are on the topic of the media, you can see in their reporting how the media is biased towards a top-down view of power. Their insistence that the casinos are inevitable is because they believe power flows from the top. Like politicians, they are not used to power flowing from the bottom. Without us exerting it often enough, why should they see it flow any other way?)

Instead, though, the press consistently reported the action: citizens attempting to get documents that the PGCB was hiding. Several reporters got very involved and began asking the PGCB what was their reason for hiding the documents and why weren't they releasing them.

Asking the PGCB for the documents via a public request would not have done that. (We previously did public requests and were consistently rejected.) Even a rally would not have that result. We needed a media-friendly, savvy way to *highlight the injustice*. The strategic value: *show, don't tell*.

Unlike a strategy which merely asks the government to do the right thing, nonviolent action sees that when people withdraw their consent from an unjust system, it can be forced to give them what they want. The citizens' document search is a classic tactic for that: use our power as citizens to apply power and pressure to our institutions.

It is not reliant upon the current system to give us what we want. It is about using our political power to get it.

In that way, nonviolent direct action is much more powerful than traditional *marches* or *rallies*, which are merely protests asking the government to do the right thing. Nonviolent direct action highlights the injustice by acting in congruence with what we want: we believe we have a right to the documents. Then we won't be satisfied when our rights are denied – we will go take them ourselves.

Nonviolence is thus more than protesting and more than a philosophy of not harming people.

Now that's power to the people.