

# The Problem with Protesting Violence with Violence

By John Horgan

Not long ago, I found myself among young, masked protesters smashing the windows of shops and cars and battling mace-spraying, club-swinging police. A young woman near me hurled a trash can at a cop on a motorcycle, knocking him down. When a beefy man in a red Trump cap confronted her, she punched him in the face and escaped with the help of her masked buddies.

That was January 21, 2017, when I traveled to Washington, D.C., to protest Trump's inauguration. In a column on my experience, I acknowledged the activists' courage but deplored their violence. "Like the Weatherman and other deadly activists of my generation," I wrote, the protesters "have been seduced by the macho glamour of violence and by the rough justice of combating state oppression with brutality of their own."

I'm having flashbacks now as I watch videos of protesters—masked once again—confronting police and causing mayhem in cities across the U.S. In New York City, where I've been staying recently, you can hear helicopters and police sirens throughout the night. Someone dear to me participated in a rally in Brooklyn last weekend, where she was shoved by a cop and trampled by panicking protesters.

I understand, as much as an old white professor can, the despair and rage underlying recent mass protests. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare, and exacerbated, gross injustices in this country. As National Public Radio has reported, minorities are being sickened and economically devastated by the pandemic at a disproportionately high rate. When police in Minneapolis killed George Floyd, an unarmed black man, that was just one of many last straws.

But I'm troubled by the violence of some protesters, which threatens their righteous cause. I wish they would emulate the

tactics of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who demonstrated the power of nonviolence. They should also check out the writings of Gene Sharp, a scholar and activist who was inspired by Gandhi and King and died two years ago at the age of 90.

Beginning in the 1970s, Sharp churned out a stream of books, papers and pamphlets on nonviolent resistance, its history, theoretical underpinnings and practical realities. His writings, translated into dozens of languages, have inspired social movements around the world. They are available through the Albert Einstein Institution, a non-profit that Sharp founded.

Sharp, whom I interviewed in 2003, advocated nonviolence for practical rather than spiritual reasons. He rejected religious doctrines that urge us to love our enemies. People in power often deserve to be despised and fought, Sharp contended, but violence, even in the service of a just cause, usually causes more problems than it solves, leading to greater injustice and suffering.

Erica Chenoweth, a political scientist at Harvard, has confirmed Sharp's claim. Her 2011 book *Why Civil Resistance Works*, co-written with Maria Stephan, examines nonviolent resistance campaigns carried out between 1900 and 2006. Chenoweth and Stephan found that nonviolent movements "were more than twice as effective as their violent counterparts." Nonviolent resistance "presents fewer obstacles to moral and physical involvement, information and education, and participator commitment."

After I mentioned Chenoweth's research on Facebook yesterday, I got pushback from a friend I greatly admire, an historian, who suggested that violent protests can be morally justified and effective. She cited the example of British suffragettes such as Winifred Jones, who was famous for throwing rocks through windows.

My friend also pointed me toward a 2019 study in *American Political Science Review* of rioting triggered in Los Angeles in 1992 by the acquittal of officers who beat Rodney King, a black man. The riot "caused a marked liberal shift in policy support at the polls," the researchers conclude, brought about by "increased mobilization of both African American and white voters."

That's interesting, but I'm more impressed by Chenoweth's larger dataset. Moreover, a new study by Princeton political scientist Omar Wasow concludes that nonviolent black protests in the 1960s boosted Democratic voter turnout, whereas violent protests helped Republican candidates, notably Richard Nixon. These findings mirror Martin Luther King's warning that riots would help right-wing candidates.

Of course, I'm biased, and perhaps naive. I'm a peacenik, who clings to the hope that someday war will become obsolete. But I fear that if protesters keep resorting to violence, they will hurt themselves and empower their oppressors—and make it more likely that Trump will be inaugurated once again.

**Postscript:** I need to add a few points in response to feedback I've gotten to this column on Facebook and elsewhere. First of all, as I should have emphasized above, the vast majority of those protesting the murder of George Floyd have been peaceful, exercising their right to assembly and free speech. And yet police have often attacked them. As a *New York Times* editorial notes, "all too often, facing peaceful demonstrations against police violence, the police responded with more violence—against protesters, journalists and bystanders."

Second, of those protesters who have acted violently, some seem to have done so for sheer cathartic pleasure or because they want to destroy our current political and economic system (those on the extreme right and left share this goal). I'm not writing for these people, they're unreachable, and they represent a tiny fringe, fortunately. I'm writing for the majority, those who have progressive goals, who want to see this country live up to its ideals of equality and justice. And my message is simple, that if you seek positive change, then you should resist turning to violence, or expressing support for it, because nonviolent activism is more effective.

Some scholars argue that violence, strategically applied, has helped advance rights for workers, women, racial minorities and other groups. Yes, and violence helped create the United States of America, end slavery here, overcome the Nazis, and so on. I get that. Violence can be just, and even necessary, for example, if it seeks to

overcome greater violence. But this reasoning has perpetuated war and other forms of large-scale, institutional, sanctioned violence, including the military-style policing now plaguing the U.S. That's why I want my fellow progressives to renounce all forms of violence, small-scale and large-scale. That's our best hope for creating a truly just, free peaceful world.

### About the Author

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