

The Political Objective and Strategic Goal of Nonviolent Actions

By Robert J. Burrowes

All nonviolent struggles are conducted simultaneously in the political and strategic spheres, and these spheres, which are distinct, interact throughout. I have discussed this at length elsewhere.¹ Despite this, only rarely have nonviolent struggles been conducted with a conscious awareness of this vitally important relationship. Gandhi's campaigns were very effective partly because he understood the distinction and relationship between politics and strategy in nonviolent struggle. And the failure of many campaigns can be attributed, in part, to the fact that most activists do not. To illustrate the distinction and the relationship between these two spheres, and to highlight their vital importance, this article discusses them within the simpler context of nonviolent actions.

Every nonviolent action has a political objective and a strategic goal. When planning an action, it is vitally important to distinguish between its objective and its goal. The political objective of the action is a statement of what the group wants to do: to demonstrate in the city square, to hang a peace sign on the nuclear warship, to picket a factory, to blockade the bulldozer, to occupy the embassy, to go on strike. But why does the group want to do this? Usually, it is to persuade one or more sections of the community to act differently in relation to the campaign issue. So the strategic goal identifies, first, who the group wants to influence, and second, what they want them to do. For example, if the political objective is to demonstrate in the city square, one possible strategic goal might be to cause members of the public to speak out in support of the activist perspective. If the political objective is to picket a factory, the strategic goal might be to cause workers (through persuasion) not to enter it. If the political objective is to blockade a bulldozer, the strategic goal might be to cause workers to stop logging, or, if the media is present, to cause television viewers to not buy old-growth timber from a particular company.

As can be seen from these simple examples, it makes more sense to decide the strategic goal first, and to then design an action to ensure that the goal is achieved. In other words, it is superior strategy to 1. decide who you want to influence AND what you want them to do (derived from the political and strategic assessment that guides your struggle), 2. decide on a tactic that will do this, and 3. design the action so that it will do this most effectively. Thus, a strategic goal should be stated using this form: to cause a specified group of people to act in a specified way. Further examples of strategic goals that conform to this formula include: to cause trade unionists to place work-bans on ships carrying uranium, to cause more men to speak out publicly against domestic violence, to cause builders to stop using old-growth timber.

Once the strategic goal has been carefully and specifically defined, equally careful thought should be put into working out what tactic (at this stage of

the strategy) will most likely achieve this goal and how it should be designed (so that it will cause the specified audience to act in the specified way). Of course, good action design requires an awareness of what makes nonviolent action work in the first place.

Nonviolent action works because of its capacity to create a favourable political atmosphere (because of, for example, the way in which activist honesty builds trust); its capacity to create a non-threatening physical environment (because of the nonviolent discipline of the activists); and its capacity to alter the human psychological conditions (both innate and learned) that make people resist new ideas in the first place. This includes its capacity to reduce or eliminate fear and its capacity to 'humanise' activists in the eyes of more conservative sections of the community. In essence, nonviolent activists precipitate change because people are inspired by the honesty, discipline, integrity, courage and determination of the activists - despite arrests, beatings or imprisonment - and are thus inclined to identify with them. Moreover, as an extension of this, they are inclined to act in solidarity.

To summarise and illustrate the argument so far, consider a nonviolent struggle in which the activists are working to end sexual violence in a local community. One strategic goal of the group might be: to cause the men in a specified group (perhaps those in a particular organisation) to take specified action (sign a personal pledge to not use pornography? put a sign in their front window saying they abhor sexual violence? undertake to speak out publicly against all forms of sexual violence? join a group that organises counselling for male perpetrators?) to help halt sexual violence in that community. The strategic goal will be achieved, at least in part, if some men respond by doing the specified act(s). So what should be the political objective of the action; that is, what nonviolent action will best cause the specified men to act in this way? To 'out' known perpetrators by putting their photograph in public places? To conduct a street rally involving local women? To repaint a billboard that objectifies women? To picket the local hotel or brothel every Saturday night? To organise an exhibition of artwork by survivors of sexual violence? Or something else? For the action to be strategically effective, it must be planned to achieve the strategic goal.

And how might the action be designed to maximise its effectiveness? What qualities (truthfulness? dignity? respectfulness?) can the activists demonstrate that will most influence these men? How can the action be carried out in a way that engages these men? For example, human needs theory suggests that if you want people to change their behaviour, activists must provide opportunities for involvement that allow people to enhance their self-esteem and/or security, at least.

If the strategic goal of a nonviolent action is achieved, then the action was strategically effective; this does not mean or require, however, that its political objective was achieved. In fact, it might not have been. This is because strategic effectiveness is unrelated to the achievement of the political objective. For example, the political objective of activists might be to blockade a bulldozer. However, the (usually unspecified) strategic goal

of the bulldozer blockade should be something like this: to cause consumers to stop buying (the specified) paper products that are made from woodchips taken from old-growth forest (by a specified company). In this case, as long as the action is well-designed, it does not matter if the activists are arrested before the blockade takes place, because the message of their truthfulness, commitment, discipline, courage and sacrifice, together with the solidarity action they are calling for (which will undermine the power of their opponent), will still go out to their audience. In short, the failure to physically stop the bulldozer is strategically irrelevant.

It is the failure to distinguish between the political objective and the strategic goal that often causes a great deal of confusion, particularly around such questions as the role of secrecy and sabotage, in planning nonviolent actions. Many groups attach great importance to the political objective of their action, and use secrecy to improve their prospects of being able to carry it out. But this is invariably counterproductive, in the strategic sense, and is based on a flawed understanding of how and why nonviolence works. This is because, as explained above, achievement of the political objective is not equivalent to achievement of the strategic goal. And while many activists achieve their (secret) political objective, they fail to achieve (what should be) their strategic goal (to cause specified people to act in the specified way) because the qualities (such as honesty and integrity) of activists that inspire their audience are not allowed into play. (There are, of course, many other reasons why the use of secrecy is strategically counterproductive.)

For some types of action - such as a rally, a picket or a strike - no one would even suggest using secrecy. But whatever the action, as explained above, strategic effectiveness is unrelated to whether the action is successfully carried out or not (provided it is strategically selected, well-designed and sincerely attempted). This point was classically illustrated by the Indian satyagrahis who attempted to nonviolently invade the Dharasana salt works in 1930.² Despite repeated attempts by many hundreds of activists to walk into the salt works during a three week period, not one activist got a pinch of salt! But an account of the activists' nonviolent discipline, commitment and courage - under the baton blows of the police - was reported in 1,350 newspapers around the world. As a result, this action - which failed to achieve the political objective of seizing salt - functionally undermined support for British imperialism in India.³ If the activists had resorted to the use of secrecy, there would have been no chance to demonstrate their honesty, integrity and determination - and to thus inspire empathy for their cause - although they might have got some salt!⁴

For essentially the same reason (as well as many others not discussed here), sabotage is strategically counterproductive when employed as part of a nonviolent struggle. If the important aspect of a nonviolent action is its strategic goal, then activists who plan acts of sabotage (that is, for example, their political objective is to disable a bulldozer or to destroy the nose cone of a nuclear missile) must be able to identify how this act will cause their specified audience(s) to act on the issue in the specified way(s). If they cannot, the action might well be strategically ineffective or even counterproductive, no matter how much media attention is gained if the

political objective (damaging the equipment) is achieved. Thus, although this act might mobilise some people (and recent conflict theory provides several thorough explanations of why it will be few), the fact remains that activists who use sabotage (and the secrecy that almost invariably accompanies it) are placing too much emphasis on their political objective (the act of sabotage itself) rather than their (unidentified) strategic goal. As explained above, this limits the possibility of activist qualities that inspire the audience being allowed into play.

Whether or not activists achieve their political objective is strategically irrelevant. This is because an effective nonviolent action is designed to achieve its strategic goal, irrespective of the response of opponents or the authorities to the political objective of the action. Whether or not activists achieve their strategic goal, however, is always strategically determinative.

References

1. Robert J. Burrowes. *The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
2. Because it illustrates the point so effectively, I have simply repeated the example that I cited in an earlier article. See Robert J. Burrowes. 'Nonviolent Activism and [the] Police'. *Nonviolence Today* #37, March/April 1994. pp. 10-12.
3. For an account of the salt raids at Dharasana, see Thomas Weber. "'The Marchers Simply Walked Forward Until Struck Down': Nonviolent Suffering and Conversion'. *Peace & Change* 18, 3, July 1993. pp. 267-289.
4. If salt had been removed secretly, the British government could, if they had chosen, ignored it (after all, who would have known or cared?). However, they could not afford to let the satyagrahis take salt openly because salt removal was illegal and failure to react would have shown the salt law - a law that represented the antithesis of Indian independence - to be ineffective.

Nonviolence Today 48, Jan/Feb 1996

*Robert Burrowes is an Australian scholar and practitioner of non-violence, both as a tool for social change and as a way of life. His book, **The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach**, was published by the State University of New York Press in 1996.*