

The Importance of Strategic Planning in Nonviolent Struggle

by Gene Sharp

The use of strategy is best known in military conflict. For centuries military officers have engaged in strategic planning for military campaigns, and important thinkers such as Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and Liddell Hart have analyzed and refined military strategy. In conventional military warfare and in guerrilla warfare, the use of sophisticated strategy is a basic requirement for effectiveness.

Just as effective military struggle requires wise strategies, planning, and implementation, nonviolent action will be most effective when it also operates on the basis of sound strategic planning. The formulation and adoption of wise strategies can greatly increase the power of nonviolent struggle.

The importance of strategy

If one wishes to accomplish something, the chances of achieving that goal will be greatest if one uses one's available resources and leverage to maximum effectiveness. That means having a strategic plan which is designed to move from the present (in which the goal is not achieved) to the future (in which it is achieved). Strategy pertains to charting the course of action which makes it most likely to get from the present to a desired situation in the future.

For example, if one wants to travel from one place to another, one needs to plan in advance how to do so. Will one walk? Take a train? Drive a car? Fly? Even then the plan is far from complete. Does one have the money to pay for the cost of the trip and other expenses? If the trip is a long one, where will one sleep and eat? Are travel documents, passports, or visas required, and if so how will one obtain them? Are there matters to be arranged to cover one's absence during the trip?

This type of thinking and planning, which some individuals undertake for ordinary purposes in daily life, should be undertaken by leaders of social and political movements. Unfortunately, however, strategic planning is rarely given the attention it deserves with such movements.

Some people naively think that if they simply assert their goal strongly and firmly enough, long enough, it will somehow come to pass. Others assume that if they remain true to their principles and ideals, and witness to them in the face of adversity, then they are doing all they can to achieve them. Assertion of desirable goals and remaining loyal to ideals are admirable, but are in themselves grossly inadequate to change the status quo and bring into being designated goals.

Of course, seeking to change society, or prevent changes in society, or to remove a foreign occupation, or defend a society from attack, are all far more complicated than planning a trip. Yet only rarely do people seeking such objectives fully recognize the extreme importance of planning a comprehensive strategic plan before they act.

Very often in social and political movements, the individuals and groups involved recognize that they need to plan how they are to act, but do so only on a very limited, short-term, or tactical basis. They do not attempt to formulate a broader,

long-term, or strategic plan of action. They may not see it to be necessary. They may at the time be unable to think and analyze in those terms. Or, they may allow themselves to be repeatedly distracted from their larger goal by focusing continually on small issues, repeatedly responding to the opponents' initiatives, and acting feverishly on short-term activities. They may not allocate time and energy to planning a strategy, or exploring several alternative strategies, which could guide their overall efforts toward achieving their goal.

Sometimes, too, it must be admitted, people do not attempt to chart a strategy to achieve their goal, because deep down they do not really believe that achieving their goal is possible. They see themselves as weak, as helpless victims of overpowering forces, so the best they can do, they believe, is to assert and witness, or even die, in the faith that they are right. Consequently, they do not attempt to think and plan strategically to accomplish their objective.

The result of such failures to plan strategically is that the chances of success are drastically reduced, and at times, eliminated. One's strength is dissipated. One's actions are ineffective. Sacrifices are wasted and one's cause is not well served. The failure to plan strategically is likely to result in the failure to achieve one's objectives.

Without the formulation of a careful strategic plan of action,

- one's energy can be deflected to minor issues and applied ineffectively;
- opportunities for advancing one's cause will go unutilized;
- the opponents' initiatives will determine the course of events;
- the weakness of one's own side will grow and have detrimental effects on the attempt to achieve the goal; and
- the efforts to reach the goal will have very little chance of being successful.

On the contrary, the formulation and adoption of brilliant strategies increase the chances of success. Directed action in accordance with a strategic plan enables one to concentrate one's strengths and actions to move in a determined direction toward a desired goal. They can be focused to serve the main objectives and aggravate the opponents' weaknesses. Casualties and other costs may be reduced and the sacrifices may serve the main goal more effectively. The chances of the nonviolent campaign succeeding are increased.

Formulating wise strategies

The selection, or formulation, of a wise strategy requires:

- an accurate sense of the whole context in which struggle is to be waged;
- identification of the nature of the difference between where one is and where one wants to be;
- assessment of the impediments to achieving the goal and the factors which may facilitate the task;
- assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of one's opponents, of one's own group, and of third parties which may assist or hinder the campaign;

- evaluation of the merits and limitations of several potential courses of action one might follow;
- selection of a viable course among existing options or the charting of a completely new one; and
- identification of an overall plan of action which determines what smaller (tactical) plans and specific methods of action should be used in pursuit of the main goal (i.e., what specific localized or shorter-term activities or steps should be taken to implement the overall strategic plan).

Levels of planning and action

In developing a strategic plan one needs to understand that there are different levels of planning and action. At the highest level is grand strategy. Then there is strategy itself, followed by tactics and methods.

Grand strategy

Grand Strategy is the overall conception which serves to coordinate and direct all appropriate and available resources (economic, human, moral, political, organizational, etc.) of the nation or other group to attain its objectives in a conflict.

Grand strategy includes consideration of the rightness of the cause, assessment of other influences in the situation, and selection of the technique of action to be used (for example, nonviolent struggle, conventional politics, guerrilla warfare, or conventional warfare), how the objectives will be achieved, and the long-term consequences.

Grand strategy sets the basic framework for the selection of more limited strategies for waging struggle. Grand strategy also includes the allocation of general tasks to particular groups and the distribution of resources to them for use in the struggle.

Strategy

Strategy is the conception of how best to achieve objectives in a conflict (violent or nonviolent). Strategy is concerned with whether, when, or how to fight, and how to achieve maximum effectiveness in order to gain certain ends. Strategy is the plan for the practical distribution, adaptation, and application of the available means to attain desired objectives.

Strategy may also include efforts to develop a strategic situation so advantageous that it may bring success without open struggle. Applied to the struggle itself, strategy is the basic idea of how the campaign shall develop, and how its separate components shall be fitted together most advantageously to achieve its objectives.

Strategy involves:

- consideration of the results likely to follow from particular actions;
- the skillful determination of the deployment of conflict groups in smaller actions;
- consideration of the requirements for success in the operation of the chosen technique; and
- making good use of success.

Strategy operates within the scope of grand strategy. Tactics and methods of action are used to implement the strategy. To be most effective, the tactics and methods must be chosen and applied so that they really assist the application of the strategy and contribute to achieving the requirements for success.

In formulating strategy in nonviolent struggle, the following aspects are to be taken into account:

- one's own objectives, resources, and strength;
- the opponents' objectives, resources, and strength;
- the actual and possible roles of third parties;
- the opponents' various possible courses and means of action | both offensive and defensive;
- the requirements for success with this technique, its dynamics of action, and its mechanisms of change.

Tactic

A *tactic* is a limited plan of action, based on a conception of how best to utilize the available means of fighting to achieve a restricted objective as a part of the wider strategy. A tactic is concerned with a limited course of action which fits within the broad strategy, just as a strategy fits within the grand strategy. A particular tactic can only be understood as part of the overall strategy of a battle of campaign.

Tactics deal with how particular methods of action are applied, or how particular groups of combatants shall act in a specific situation. Tactics are applied for shorter periods of time than strategies, or in smaller areas (geographical, institutional, etc.), or by a more limited number of people, or for more limited objectives, or in some combination of these.

Method

Method refers to the specific means of action within the technique of nonviolent struggle. These include dozens of particular forms of action, such as the many kinds of strikes, boycotts, political noncooperation, and the like.

The development of a responsible and effective strategic plan for a nonviolent struggle depends upon the careful formulation and selection of grand strategy, strategies, tactics and methods.

Some Key Elements of Nonviolent Strategy

There is no single strategy for the use of nonviolent struggle that is appropriate for all occasions. Indeed, the technique of nonviolent action makes possible the development of a variety of strategies for meeting various types of conflict situations. Additionally, nonviolent struggle may often need to be combined in a grand strategy with the use of other means of action.

This does not mean that nonviolent struggle is compatible with all other techniques of action. For example, the use of violence along with nonviolent struggle destroys

various of the processes by which nonviolent struggle operates, and thereby contributes to its ineffectiveness at best and its collapse or defeat at worst.

However, it is fairly obvious that such means as fact-finding, publicity, public negotiations, and the like could be beneficially in many situations be used in connection with the use of nonviolent struggle. These means are often used in connection with economic boycotts and labor strikes, for example.

Essential to the planning of nonviolent struggle campaigns is a basic principle: Plan your struggle so that the success of the conflict becomes possible by reliance on yourselves alone. This was Charles Stewart Parnell's message to Irish peasants during a rent strike of 1879-1880: "rely on yourselves" and not on anyone else.

Assuming that a strong nonviolent struggle is planned and being waged, it is fine to seek limited and nonviolent assistance from others, but winning the struggle must depend on one's own group. Then, if no one else provides help, assuming that the strategic planning has been sound, one still has a chance to succeed. However, if the responsibility for success and failure has been given to others, when they do not come forward the struggle will fail. In any case, responsible external support is more likely to be forthcoming when a strong nonviolent struggle is being conducted by the aggrieved population, acting correctly as though success or failure will be determined by its own efforts.

The formulation of wise strategies and tactics for nonviolent struggles requires a thorough understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms of nonviolent struggle, such as presented in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. It is necessary to be attentive to the selection of those plans and actions which facilitate their operation and to the need to reject those which if implemented would disrupt the very factors which can contribute to effectiveness. The most advanced study of strategy in nonviolent struggle is *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*, by Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler.

Attention will also be needed to such additional factors as psychological elements and morale, geographical and physical elements, timing, numbers and strength, the maintenance of the initiative, and the choice of specific methods of action which can contribute to achieving the objectives of the strategy and tactics.

The importance of strategic planning for nonviolent struggle cannot be overemphasized. It is the key to making social and political movements more effective. It may not guarantee that a movement will achieve its objectives, but it will certainly make the possibility of success more likely.