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# Gene Sharp

## *The “Clausewitz of Nonviolent Warfare”*

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JOSHUA AMMONS AND CHRISTOPHER J. COYNE

**G**ene Sharp, a political scientist best known for his work on nonviolent action, passed away at the age of ninety on January 28, 2018. Sharp leaves a lasting impact on academia, practitioners of nonviolent action, and societies who have used his methods to create political and social change. Sharp developed a comprehensive theory of nonviolent action and provided practical guidelines for its implementation. At various times throughout his career, he was referred to as the “Clausewitz of nonviolent warfare,” “the Machiavelli of nonviolence,” “the dictator slayer,” and “a dictator’s worst nightmare.” Despite his contribution to the scholarship on nonviolence and his influence on political events around the world, Sharp remains unknown to many. In this paper, we provide a brief biography of Sharp, review the key themes in his research program, and discuss the continuing importance of his work for those concerned with the establishment and maintenance of free societies.

### **A Brief Biography**

Gene Sharp was born on January 21, 1928, in North Baltimore, Ohio, to Reverend Paul Sharp and Eva Sharp, a primary-education teacher. After receiving a bachelor of arts degree in social sciences in 1949, Sharp continued his education at Ohio State

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University, earning a master of arts degree in sociology in 1951. His thesis, “Non-violence: A Sociological Study,” foreshadowed the research he would pursue for the rest of his career. From 1958 to 1960, he continued to research the nuances of nonviolence, supported by a stipend from the Institute for Social Research in Oslo. Sharp worked with Arne Næss, a philosopher who shared Sharp’s interest in Mahatma Gandhi, at the Institute of Philosophy and the History of Ideas at the University of Oslo during 1964 and 1965. This research culminated in a doctor of philosophy degree in political theory from Oxford University in 1968. Later in his career, Sharp received two honorary degrees: doctor of laws from Manhattan College in 1983 and doctor of humanitarian service from Rivier College in 1996.

Sharp was a tenured professor at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth (known as Southeastern Massachusetts University until 1991) from 1972 to 1986, holding appointments in the Department of Political Science and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. In addition, he held research appointments at Harvard University from 1965 through 1997 at the Center for International Affairs. In 1983, Sharp founded the Albert Einstein Institution in Boston. Sharp and Einstein had corresponded through letters when Sharp was arrested and imprisoned for nine months in 1953 as a conscientious objector to the U.S. government’s draft during the Korean War. Einstein would later write the introduction to Sharp’s first book (Sharp 1960). The Albert Einstein Institution continues to operate with the goal of advancing Sharp’s work on nonviolence.

## Research Program on Nonviolent Action

Exploring the various aspects and methods of nonviolence motivated Sharp’s scholarship throughout his career. His early work focused on Mahatma Gandhi, a key influence on his thinking regarding nonviolence. Sharp’s first book, *Gandhi Wields the Weapon of Moral Power* (1960), provides an overview of Gandhi’s philosophy and three historical case studies of how Gandhi used his philosophy to bring about justice and peace. A year later Sharp published *Gandhi Faces the Storm* (1961). This short book focuses on the last two years of Gandhi’s life and his reflections on what worked and what failed in his effort to foster justice. Almost two decades later, in 1979, Sharp would publish a third book on Gandhi, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*. This volume explores the political strategies Gandhi used, including nonviolence, and their continuing relevance outside of India.

Sharp is best known for his three-part work *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973), which is a revised version of his doctoral thesis. The final year of revising the manuscript took place at Harvard University’s Center for International Affairs at the invitation of economist Thomas Schelling, a future Nobel Laureate. Schelling wrote the introduction to *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, noting that “[w]hat Gene Sharp’s book does at every step is to relate the methods of nonviolent action, and the organizational requirements, the logistics and the leadership and the discipline, the

recruitment of members and the choice of targets, to political purpose” (Schelling 1973, xxi).

Part one, *Power and Struggle*, explores the nature of political power, contrasting two views—the “monolith theory” and the “pluralistic-dependency theory.” The former holds that political power is given and constant and that people are dependent on their political rulers to wield that power in a benevolent fashion. Because power is treated as durable and self-reinforcing, the monolith theory holds that the only way to control or eradicate government power is through violent force or the threat thereof. The pluralistic-dependency theory, in contrast, holds that government power is derived from the consent of the people. In this view, power is not intrinsic to the political elite but rather is the result of several sources, which include (1) voluntary acceptance of authority; (2) the skills and knowledge of those who accept the ruler’s authority; (3) ideological factors, such as tolerance for obedience and submission; (4) material resources, such as the ruler’s control of wealth and infrastructure; and (5) sanctions that refer to the tools of control over citizens and other governments.

Sharp emphasizes that these sources of power ultimately depend on the consent of the citizenry. Citizens can choose to obey the power of the political authority and possess the power to withdraw their consent. Political power is not fixed and constant but rather variable, with citizens possessing significant influence over the degree to which political authority exists. It is the realization that citizen consent can be withdrawn that opens up the possibility for nonviolent action, which entails engaging in protest or resistance without resorting to physical violence.

One of the main reasons that the exercise of nonviolent action is so difficult is that the state has a comparative advantage in commanding obedience by the citizenry. Sharp identifies several factors underpinning citizen obedience, including (1) habituation of consent to political authority; (2) fear of sanctions by authorities; (3) a sense of moral obligation to obey one’s political masters; (4) self-interest with regard to such things as income and prestige bestowed by the state; (5) an emotional or psychological connection with political leaders, which sees them providing indispensable leadership; and (6) indifference, which creates a range of tolerance regarding the exertion of political power.

Nonviolent action requires citizens to overcome these factors in order to remove their obedience to their political rulers. If they are able to do so, they can weaken or remove the five sources of political power and potentially bring about social change. The specific manifestations of nonviolent action vary and may include some combination of acts of omission—refraining from doing what one would typically do—and acts of commission—engaging in acts, both legal and illegal, in which one would not normally partake.

Throughout his work, Sharp is careful to distinguish that nonviolent action is distinct from pacifism. Historically, most of the individuals engaged in nonviolent action were not committed to pacifism on religious or philosophical grounds. For Sharp, pacifism is an ethical position. Nonviolent action, in contrast, is a method of

waging war without resorting to physical violence. It is a technique for social change that, if practiced correctly, can be quite forceful and effective to control and combat powerful governments.

In *The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, part two of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp documents 198 methods of nonviolent action. These methods are broken into five main categories: (1) methods of nonviolent protests and persuasion—for example, public speeches, the distribution of leaflets and pamphlets, the wearing of symbols; (2) methods of social noncooperation—for example, boycotts, suspension of social and sports activities, withdrawal from social institutions; (3) methods of economic noncooperation—for example, economic boycotts and strikes by consumers and workers; (4) methods of political noncooperation—for example, refusing to provide public support, boycotting elections, refusing to dissolve existing, independent institutions; and (5) methods of nonviolent intervention—for example, fasting, sitting-in, establishing new social patterns and social institutions independent of government. For each of the 198 methods, Sharp provides short historical examples as illustrations.

Part three, *The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action*, focuses on the forces that lead to constant change in the process of carrying out nonviolent action. Sharp discusses issues of planning, organization, structure, and timing as each relates to nonviolent action. He also considers approaches that those engaged in nonviolent action can take to oppressive and often violent responses by political rulers.

Perhaps counterintuitively, Sharp argues that the best response to violent repression is to continue to engage in nonviolent resistance. The stark contrast between the violent acts of repression by the government and the nonviolent actions of the citizens can be used to delegitimize the state, both internally and externally. This type of “political jiu-jitsu” entails using the power of the state against those who wield it in order to undermine their legitimacy.

A theme that runs throughout this volume is the importance of leadership. In Sharp’s view, effective nonviolent action is not a random and chaotic affair. Instead, it requires thoughtful and effective leaders who understand the context-specific dynamics of the situation and who are capable of guiding their fellow citizens through the significant costs of combatting a repressive regime through nonviolent action. This insight is important because it counters the view that nonviolence is a passive, if not cowardly, act. In stark contrast to this view of it, nonviolence requires steadfast commitment, courage, and a dedication to the political jiu-jitsu necessary to bring about change in the face of brute force by those who seek to maintain their positions of power.

Finally, Sharp considers three types of success associated with nonviolent action. The first is “conversion,” whereby the enemy genuinely shifts their position and willingly wants to bring about the changes desired by nonviolent forces. The second is “accommodation,” which refers to situations where the opposition does not desire to change but nonetheless acquiesces to it due to the success of nonviolent actors and the implications for maintaining the status quo. Finally, “nonviolent coercion” refers to situations where the enemy wishes to continue the fight but is unable to do so because

nonviolent actors have successfully undermined the state's sources of political power to such an extent that the political elite cannot continue.

Sharp would summarize his insights in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* in two subsequent books, *From Dictatorship to Democracy* (1994) and *How Nonviolent Struggle Works* (2013). The purpose of these condensed versions was to make his scholarly ideas accessible to a global audience. *From Dictatorship to Democracy* was translated into thirty languages, and its influence has been noted in a variety of situations, including the Baltics, Burma, Egypt, Ukraine, and the Arab Spring. In 2012, an article in the *Financial Times* highlighted “the wildfire spread of systematically non-violent insurgency” and noted that it “owes a great deal to the strategic thinking of Gene Sharp, an American academic whose how-to-topple-your-tyrant manual, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, is the bible of activists from Belgrade to Rangoon” (Gardner 2012).

In subsequent work, Sharp continued to develop and extend his insights regarding nonviolent action. In *Making Europe Unconquerable* (1985), he makes the argument that instead of relying on military weaponry—for instance, nuclear armaments and conventional arms buildups—it is possible for European citizens to use the power they possess through advanced preparation to deter and defend against internal and external threats and invaders. In *Civilian-Based Defense* (1990), Sharp broadens these arguments beyond Europe, noting that “[m]ost people are unaware that . . . nonviolent forms of struggle have also been used as a major means of defense against foreign invaders or internal usurpers” (9). In both books, he offers a theoretical foundation, based on his earlier work on nonviolent action, as well as numerous historical examples to illustrate his central thesis. Political officials in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia appealed to the latter book after regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 (see Roberts 2018).

At more than five hundred pages in length, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (2005) brings together and updates Sharp's previous work on nonviolence. The volume is broken into four parts. The first part provides the theoretical foundation of nonviolent action based on his earlier writings. The second part provides numerous case studies throughout history and across geographic space to illustrate the nuances and workings of nonviolent action. In the third part, Sharp explores the dynamics of nonviolent struggles. Finally, the fourth part examines the move from theory to practice and considers how the ideas discussed in the previous parts can be applied and implemented through a series of strategic-planning guidelines. *Waging Nonviolent Struggle* can be seen as the culmination of Sharp's research program in that it integrates all of his previous writings on nonviolent action into one cohesive whole while demonstrating the program's relevance both in the past and for the future.

## Ongoing Relevance and Legacy

Gene Sharp's work remains relevant in two ways. The first is through activism to bring about social and political change. As noted, Sharp's work has already influenced numerous political events around the world. There is no reason to believe that this will

change in the future. Audrius Butkevicius, a former Lithuanian defense minister, succinctly captures the power of his work: “I would rather have this book [*Civilian-Based Defense*] than the nuclear bomb” (quoted in Roberts 2018). Sharp’s insights will continue to influence grassroots movements around the world. These movements serve as an important check on government power and are one engine of social and political change.

Sharp’s work also has ongoing relevance for scholarship. It has served as the foundation for a growing literature on the effectiveness of nonviolent action that finds that major nonviolent campaigns are more successful than violent alternatives (see Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). The nuances of nonviolent action—mechanisms for overcoming collective-action problems, the specifics of techniques for effective nonviolence, and so on—are an area ripe for future research.

Appreciating the role of nonviolent action is also relevant for research on state building and nation building. Nonviolent action offers a potential indigenous mechanism for institutional change. This method stands in strong contrast to the view that institutional change requires an exogenous shock in the form of external aid and military force to displace existing institutions. Understanding where and when nonviolence is feasible as a means of successful change has important implications for those working in international relations and development economics.

Sharp’s work offers a radical alternative to the widely accepted view that security and defense must be provided by the state. As he demonstrated, individual citizens possess the power to defend against internal and external threats. Understanding the potential for nonviolent action as a source of defense is an area open for future scholarship. Two broad sets of questions emerge.

One revolves around the ideology necessary for civilian-based defense to operate. George Kennan captures this point in his review of Sharp’s book *Making Europe Unconquerable*, noting that Sharp’s system of civilian-based defense requires “a rather basic change in the view hundreds of millions of people have been taught to take of the sources of national security and of the means by which it may be usefully promoted. The new view would be one that looks primarily inward—to the quality of the respective society, to the character of its institutions, to its social discipline and civic morale, rather than outward to the effectiveness of its armed forces—for the true sources of its strength and its security” (1986).

People are habituated from a young age to view the government as *the* one and only source of a nation’s security. Suggesting anything to the contrary is rejected as romantic idealism, if not sheer lunacy. Sharp’s research, however, provides both theoretical and empirical grounds for questioning the absolute necessity of the state for security. The beliefs and views necessary for citizen-based defense constitute a valuable avenue to explore.

Another set of questions relates to the mechanisms that allow for effective coordination and execution of civilian-based defense. How do people coordinate to combat internal and external threats? How do they prepare for future threats?

Answering these questions involves appreciating the incentives required for coordination and might draw on the research that identifies a range of “selective incentives” and other mechanisms to solve collective-action problems (see Tullock 1971; Lichbach 1994, 1995). Also relevant is the literature on polycentricity and people’s ability to find creative solutions to common-pool-resource problems. As Elinor Ostrom (1990) emphasizes, in reality people are not helpless prisoners trapped in a blackboard prisoner’s dilemma. Rather, they are choosing agents who can creatively shape, influence, and revise the circumstances within which they live and interact with others.

In a similar vein, Sharp’s research demonstrates that people are not trapped in a helpless situation where political power is fixed and constant. In stark contrast, citizens possess significant power over their own lives, including the scope of authority granted to political rulers. People have the potential to come together and improve the world. In the end, Gene Sharp’s life’s work is one of inspiring and empowering people to recognize their individual agency and their ability to shape for the better the world in which they live.

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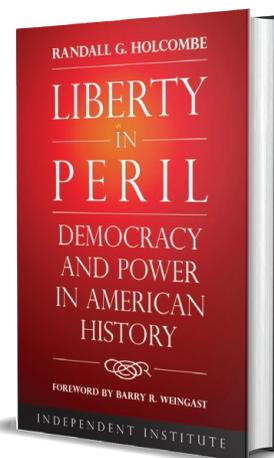
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