Disregarded History

The Power of Nonviolent Action

**American colonial nonviolence, circa H776**

In the 18th century, here in this part of North America, the European settlers used a great deal of violence against indigenous Americans, and then against the Africans who were imported. Nevertheless, the European settlers conducted major campaigns of nonviolent struggle against English controls, particularly for the ten-year period from 1765 to 1775. This was on a scale and significance, which may require when it is more fully researched, a major reinterpretation of American history, which may lead to a reassessment of the relevance and importance of the War of Independence.

There were three separate Campaigns, each of which involved economic resistance. It is possible that this is the first major case of international economic sanctions on record.

Daniel Dulany, in the pamphlet he wrote on resistance to the Stamp Act in October of 1765, describes certain basic characteristics of political nonviolent struggle. (Now notice discussing on the political level, not on the religious or moral level.) Dulany said, "Instead of moping and whining to excite compassion, in such a situation we ought with spirit and vigor and alacrity to bid defiance to tyranny by exposing its impotence, by making it as contemptible as it would be detestable.” Here is the fundamental conception that you can make tyranny helpless by with it. So he advocated building up economic production within the colonies to make them self-reliant. They could then sever trade relations with England, which would hurt the English merchants, and consequently this would put leverage on the English government to repeal the Stamp Act.

**George Washington, nonviolent strategist**

Did you ever think of George Washington as a nonviolent strategist? During this Stamp Act struggle, courts were required to use stamps on official documents. The colonists had decided not to use the stamps. So the question became: “Do the courts remain open without using the stamps, or do the courts close? This was in the context of colonists conducting a massive campaign to refuse to pay debts they owed to the English merchants from whom the colonial merchants had purchased their products on credit. Walpole regarded this as the most effective weapon, which the colonists wielded. So George Washington advised that they should close down the courts, of course. Obeying the law was impossible. You close the courts, Washington reasoned, because if you close the courts, the courts cannot be used in an effort to collect the money, which the colonists were refusing to pay to the English merchants. Therefore, the English merchants would put pressure on their government to repeal the Stamp Act. Very sophisticated nonviolent strategy, calculating effects and counter-effects of specific types of noncooperation.

**Thomas Jefferson, Advocate of Fasting**

Did you know that Thomas Jefferson, with his colleagues, introduced fasting in the colonial struggle? When the spirit of the resistance was weakening at certain points and people were getting bored, he and his friends (who were known rather as playboys, always going out and dancing) got the very respected and staid chaplain of the Virginia House of Burgesses to propose as his own idea a day of fasting and prayer-for political resistance. It was passed by the House of Burgesses and all of Virginia had a day of fasting and prayer-for political resistance. It wasn’t Gandhi who introduced fasting as a political weapon at all.

Later during 1765, Governor Bernard of Massachusetts Bay said: “At this time I have no real authority in this place.” And Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts Bay said: “in the capital towns of several of the colonies and of this in particular, the authority is in the populace. No law can he carried into execution against their minds.” There were cases-significant cases-of the burning of buildings and destruction of property during the Stamp Act resistance. Men who had accepted appointments as stamp distributors were threatened with physical attack and even death and run out of town. But not one person was killed.

During the Townshend resistance, in January l769, for example, a London newspaper reported that because of the refusal of taxes and the refusal to import British goods, only 3,500 pounds sterling of revenue had been produced in the colonies. The American non-important and non-consumption campaign was established by the same newspaper at that point to have cost British business not a mere 3,500 pounds but 7,250,000 pounds in lost income. Those figures may not have been accurate, but they are significant of the perceptions of the time. The attempt to collect the tax against that kind of opposition was not worth the effort and futility of trying eventually became apparent.

Have you ever heard someone argue, “We’ve tried war. We know that’s bad. Now let’s try nonviolence. It’s never been tried. It’s worth a try.” Nonsense. There is a vast history of this type of action going back as far as we have records.

The abolition of war does not require an anti-war, anti-military lobby and demonstrations and protest, but the development of effective nonviolent alternatives to military struggle.

As the American movement developed, a radical fringe began to talk the rhetoric of violence. The militia, which the colonies had had for many, many decades, were deliberately developed. Some people began to foresee the movement shifting over to War. But this was not universal, and not preferred by even many radicals. The Suffolk Resolves, passed by the delegates of Suffolk County of Massachusetts Bay in 1774, recognized that violence was possible and the colonists should be ready for violence if it came. However, they recommended instead a different type of struggle-like they had been using: ”We would heartily recommend to all persons of this community not to engage in any routs, riots or licentious attacks upon the properties of any persons whatsoever, as being subversive of all order and government; but by a steady, many, uniform, and persevering opposition, to convince our enemies that in a contest so important-in a cause so solemn, our conduct shall be such as to merit the approbation of the wise, and the admiration of the brave and free of every age and of every country.”

On the basis of such thought and the Virginia Association, the First Continental Congress developed a sophisticated, phased program of economic and political cooperation. First, it began with a non-importation campaign, to be followed, if necessary, by a non-exportation campaign. The First Continental Congress program of resistance was called the "Continental Association.” It was a program of nonviolent resistance and the First Continental Congress was a nonviolent resistance organization. It was a program implemented throughout the colonies, so well developed, so sophisticated, that its equal was probably not seen until Gandhi’s work in India. Going along with this was a program of enforcement of these provisions in the colonies with such complete solidarity that the very enforcement organization in many cases gradually became instruments of local government. Development of parallel governmental institutions also occurred on a colony-wide basis, sometimes in deliberate defiance of British-appointed governors. It has been estimated that in 9 or l0 of the 13 colonies, British governmental power had already been effectively and illegally replaced by substitute governments before Lexington and Concord. The Continental Congress was known as "the Congress.” Its measures of resistance were known as “laws.” British power had de facto collapsed in most of the colonies before a shot was fired. In Maryland, for example, an entire substitute government had taken over.

Considering the de facto independence of most of the colonies by 1775, with the emergence of an inter-colonial confederation-type of government and the experience in the Stamp Act struggles and the Townshend resistance, it is very possible that British power might have totally collapsed de jure short of the eight years which it took for the War of Independence, it may very well have postponed it.

Governor Dunmore of Virginia suggested that the “laws of Congress,” as he put it, receive from Virginia "Marks of reverence they never bestowed on their legal Government, or the laws preceding from it.” He added: “I have discovered no incidence where the inner disposition of Government, in the feeble state to which it is reduced, could serve any other purpose than to suffer the disgrace of a disappointment, and thereby afford matter of great exultation to its enemies and increase their influence over the minds of the people.”

At the same time, there was significant support in England for the movement (though not as strong as during the Stamp Act resistance). The extent of the support, and the reasoning for it, should be researched and analyzed. Part of the Continental Association (the program of resistance of the Continental Congress) contained this phrase: “. . . We are of the opinion that a non-importation, non-consumption and non-exportation agreement, faithfully adhered to, will prove the most speedy, effectual, and peaceable measure . . .”

And in Massachusetts, already in early 1774, the Governor, Governor Gage, wrote that "All legislative, as well as all executive power, is gone . . . Governor Gage made a similar report later in the year. So we must remember that, disregarded as it is in present portrayals of America’s Revolution, the American colonials, too, have a highly important place in the history of nonviolent struggle.

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