

Dr. Gene Sharp: Prophet of Nonviolent Struggle

by Jim Price

“Dictators are never as strong as they tell you they are. People are never as weak as they think they are.”
- Dr. Gene Sharp

Dr. Gene Sharp will best be remembered for his extensive writings on nonviolent struggle. He recently died, on January 28, 2018, at age 90. For almost five decades, Sharp assisted leaders of numerous popular resistance organizations throughout the world as they sought to overthrow dictatorial regimes. Sometimes characterized as the “Machiavelli of Nonviolence” and the “Clausewitz of Nonviolent Warfare,” Gene Sharp was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on at least three occasions. He argued that nonviolent resistance draws its strength, not from the capacity of people to “love one another and turn the other cheek,” but from “people’s capacity to be stubborn and cussed, and we’re all good at that”.

After serving nine months in jail for refusing to submit to the draft of soldiers for the Korean War, Sharp, the son of a Protestant minister, came to question the effectiveness of his initial moral pacifism. Having learned the distinction between pacifism and the use of tactics of nonviolent struggle, he wrote his first book *Gandhi Wields the Weapon of*

Moral Power (1960) on the life and works of Mohandas Gandhi. He later studied at the University of Oslo and at Oxford, where he earned a doctorate in 1968.

In the process of honing his philosophy, Sharp corresponded regularly with Albert Einstein. Their collaboration led Einstein to write the preface for his most famous book, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (1993). In 1983, Sharp founded his research organization and named it The Albert Einstein Institution. For many years, the Institution has operated out of a small office in Sharp’s house in Boston, Massachusetts. In addition to publishing a number of significant books and articles on nonviolent struggle, he consulted with leaders of democratic resistance organizations on strategic nonviolent struggles in numerous conflict situations.

Sharp’s philosophy

Gene Sharp outlined his philosophy of nonviolent action in 1973 in a three-part series of books published under the title of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, (1973). In *Part One: Power and Struggle*, he explained that political power is not derived from violence but from the people. *The power of the ruling person or*

governmental regime relies upon the willing or coerced obedience of those people. If the subjects do not obey, the ruler’s power will crumble. He once said that understanding that concept became his “eureka moment.” Sharp asserted that certain groups constitute vital pillars supporting governmental regimes. Examples would vary from culture to culture but would frequently include the police, the military, political officials, the religious leadership, and wealthy business people. They can also include such groups labor unionists, educators, the press, senior citizens, and young people. The job of the resistance is to pull these pillars out from under an oppressive dictator or regime.

In his writings, Sharp provided credible evidence that *in most circumstances nonviolent struggle is not only effective, it is superior to armed struggle.* Nonviolent tactics are not an appeal to a dictator’s higher conscience but constitute actions in a war fought without military weapons. In his *Part Two: The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp explained in detail his 198 recommended tactics to be used in nonviolent struggles. They can be generally characterized as nonviolent protest and persuasion; social, economic and political noncooperation; and nonviolent intervention.

Finally, in *Part Three: The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp explained how to apply tactics of nonviolent action against a violent, repressive dictator or junta. He approached his writings and counsel to resistance leaders generically because he felt they knew best about the unique factors characterizing their political, economic, and social environments. He also emphasized the need for planning by the resistance organizations prior to the struggle. They cannot just improvise and expect to be successful.

The leaders of the resistance were also taught to realize that the regime in power will want to make individuals feel isolated. Sharp recommended initiating a nonviolent struggle with low risk activities to enable the participants to become more comfortable with the concept of “we, not I”.

He also counseled that resistance leaders should expect to confront attempts at repression by the foe in power and to use tactics of “political jiu-jitsu” to turn an opponent’s violent actions against it. The idea should be to not only overthrow the oppressive tyrant but to strengthen the non-governmental institutions which contribute to the long-term social good by redistributing the political power.

In addition, Sharp emphasized the need for discipline to resist the impulse to use violence. He taught that as soon as the leaders of resistance movements choose to fight with violence they would be choosing to fight against an authoritarian regime’s best weapons.

Finally, he stressed that resistance organizations cannot lose if they do not give up. Eventually, the people will win.

The Guidebook

In response to a request from a friend, Gene Sharp wrote his most famous publication, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (1993). This little book, comprising less than 100 pages, has helped democratic resistance organizations throughout the world overthrow repressive regimes. Originally published in Bangkok, Thailand by the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma, it has since been translated into at least 31 other languages and has been published in Serbia, Indonesia, and Thailand, among other countries. It served as the guidebook for nonviolent popular campaigns by democratic resistance groups in such nations as Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Egypt. The book describes Sharp’s recommended 198 nonviolent weapons of protest and noncooperation to disrupt or even paralyze oppressive governments. The tactics range from adopting a singular color (orange in Ukraine, green in Iran) to economic boycotts, work slowdowns, guerrilla theater, hunger strikes, and nonviolent intervention, such as sit-ins. He drew heavily from the effective nonviolent tactics utilized by such leaders as Mohandas Ghandi in India and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States.

Criticisms of Sharp’s Work

The work of the Albert Einstein Institution, including its Founder and Senior Scholar Dr. Gene Sharp and its Executive Director Jamila Raqib, has been criticized from a number of fronts. The dictatorial regimes in Iran and Venezuela accused the Institution of being a CIA front organization. Both Sharp and Raqib have strongly denied that charge and have been defended by such progressives as

Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. Russian operatives burned down a print shop in Moscow where copies of his guidebook were being printed. Some leaders of the “Arab Spring” uprising have said that too much credit has been given to Sharp’s work in guiding their movement.

However, for every critic of Sharp there are fervent supporters of his publications and counsel, such as Srdja Popovic, the leader of the Otpor democratic resistance movement in Serbia that overthrew Slobodan Milosevic. After the successful Serbian revolution, Popovic continued to direct the Centre for Applied Non-Violence (CANVAS) in Belgrade, which has collaborated with Dr. Sharp for years in supporting numerous democratic movements throughout the world.

Applying Sharp’s Tactics to the U.S. in the Era of Trump

Some have asked how Gene Sharp’s tactics can work effectively in the United States in the era of Donald Trump? Many civic protest groups formed since the 2016 election appear to pursue one of two goals. Some aim to win elections in 2018 while others seek to influence members of Congress. Groups such as Indivisible advocate for the use of “haunting visits,” personal visits to see members of Congress with a focus on a controversial issue on which he or she will be voting. This tactic is thought to be especially important in confronting Congressional Republicans whose support for the Trump agenda might threaten their re-election.

Local and national marches are also thought to be effective if timed for pivotal moments. For example, MoveOn.org is asking people to pledge to go into the streets and march if Trump fires Special Counsel Robert Mueller or

Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. Rev. William Barber's "Poor Peoples Campaign" will be having a series of rallies at over 30 state capitols in 2018 leading up to a massive march in Washington, D.C. This is a similar tactic to that used in the "Women's March," the "March for Our Lives," and the "March for Science," which have led to the formation of grassroots social movements centered around confronting different elements of the Trump administration's agenda. These movements can produce momentum that keep the resistance before the public.

Sharp advised resistance movement leaders to be on the alert for a "moment of the whirlwind" like that experienced by the leaders of the "Arab Spring" in Tunisia when a man immolated himself to protest the oppression by the ruling regime. That action by a single person has been seen by many as igniting the "Arab Spring" revolution within several countries in the Middle East. The February 14, 2018, massacre of students and faculty at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida provided such a "whirlwind moment" for U.S. gun-control advocates. The #Me-Too movement and the Time's Up campaign have also received continuing surges of energy by playing off of incidents reflecting the sexual harassment of women by such powerful men as Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, and Donald Trump. Finally, the frequent cases of police brutality toward People of Color, especially toward Black males, have also provided continuing energy and momentum to the Black Lives Matter movement.

In Conclusion

The work of Dr. Gene Sharp stands as the foremost treatise on how to use tactics of nonviolent struggle to overthrow tyrannical, undemocratic regimes. To learn more about Dr. Sharp's work, the reader is referred to the publications cited in this article and to a feature documentary film "How to Start a Revolution" (2011) by Scottish Director Ruaridh Arrow. This enlightening documentary film from the Media Education Foundation examines the global influence of his work.

Dr. Sharp never abandoned his early life commitment to work to leave the world a better place. His body of work is a testament to his intractable will and focus to accomplish that goal. In all of his writings, workshops, and counsel to leaders of resistance organizations, Sharp remained true to his expressed dream that, "The oppressed people of the world will be able to learn, from the available records and new experiences, that this type of nonviolent struggle can be used to liberate all oppression and replace military and violent conflicts. You won't have to carry on struggles against terrorism anymore because the people who might have become terrorists have instead chosen to use this kind of struggle to help out the oppressed people. This can change political systems throughout the world." Dr. Gene Sharp is indeed owed a planetary debt of gratitude for his contributions of articulate writings, workshops, and advice to equip leaders of resistance movements in numerous crisis struggles worldwide with a palette of effective nonviolent tactics to successfully overthrow oppressive,

authoritarian regimes and foster popular democracy.

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