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BY
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THERE’S A MILITANT, POWERFUL STRATEGY FOR PROTESTING POLICE INJUSTICE

By ANDREW LEVISON

Although the widespread Black Lives Matter protests of this summer have temporarily slowed, there is no question that new waves of protest will emerge as future cases of police shootings and mistreatment of African-Americans occur, as unfortunately they inevitably will.

As a result, there is a profoundly important, continuing debate about the correct choice of a protest strategy for the social movement that supports Black Lives Matter.

But right **now** it is a debate that is based on a false, simplistic dichotomy.

As the debate is conducted in the press today it is presented as a choice between two diametrically opposed options.

On the one hand there are the “good protests and good protesters”—the people who march, hold signs, listen to speeches and then politely disperse and go home.

On the other hand there are the “bad protests and bad protesters”—the “extremists” who riot, loot and vandalize.

As a result, given this simplistic way that the choice is framed, it presents a no-win situation. Protesters can engage in “proper” behavior which creates only minimal pressure for major reform or they can engage in “extreme” behavior which is universally dismissed as useless and condemned as counterproductive.

To repeat, this is a fundamentally false and simplistic choice. There is a powerful alternative, one that can best be understood by comparing the two major social movements of the 1960’s—The Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement which featured major student riots on college campuses across the country.

The “bad protests” of today are strikingly similar to the student riots of the 60’s. Again and again during the period from 1966 to 1971 campus based protests against the war would begin with very large peaceful demonstrations. At some point, however, a smaller group would break away from the larger protest and begin to break windows on major streets, “occupy” university buildings and trash administrative offices. When police arrived and began beating and arresting protesters,

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the student rioters would throw rocks and bottles, overturn trashcans and barricade streets. The sight of the police swinging nightsticks and arresting people would then inflame the larger group of protesters and amplify the disruption.

The recent Black Lives Matter protests have followed an extremely similar pattern. Massive peaceful protests during the day have, as nighttime falls, given way to actions by smaller groups among the remaining protesters who break windows and spray graffiti on government buildings, set fires in dumpsters, topple fences and, when police and other militarized groups respond with indiscriminate and excessively brutal force against all of the remaining demonstrators, then throw water bottles and heavier objects at them and launch commercial grade fireworks and other improvised projectiles.

(There are also some subtle differences between the student riots of the 60's and the riot activity during the Black Lives Matter protests of today. In the 60's the police did not have heavy duty, transparent shields, military-class riot gear, or the wide variety of tear gasses and non-lethal tools and munitions like rubber bullets, pepper balls and tasers to employ. Nightsticks were much more widely used (which is why photographs of student protesters in the 60's frequently show them with blood streaming down their face) and the students in the 60's did not have gas masks, homemade shields and leaf blowers or use commercial grade fireworks or laser pointers shined in policemen's eyes. These new innovations were developed during the modern protests and are now widely shared on the internet).

On the other hand, the actual tactics and strategy that were employed in the other major social movement of the 1960's—the Civil Rights Movement—are now almost completely forgotten as the history of that movement has been gradually buried under a mountain of superficial clichés and sentimental distortions.

For most people younger than 50, their knowledge of civil rights history is limited to the few paragraphs that they once read in superficial high school textbooks or saw in brief TV segments on Martin Luther King Day. If lucky they will remember the names “Montgomery Bus Boycott,” “Birmingham Campaign” and “Selma” and the buzzwords “Sit-in's” and “Freedom Riders” but will have absolutely no idea of the strategy that lay behind them. The recent, extensive coverage of John Lewis generally portrayed his role in the 1960's as that of being *“a guy who was very, very brave and got arrested a whole lot of times.”*

This erasure of the strategy of the civil rights movement reaches its nadir in the simpering schoolbook characterizations of Martin Luther King Jr. as a saintly, Mother Teresa/St. Francis of Assisi figure—a “peaceful warrior,” an “apostle of nonviolence” a “man of peace”—an idealistic preacher delivering his “I have a Dream” speech.

The level of ignorance about the tactics and strategy of the civil rights movement is appalling. A recent Washington Post commentary by an African American studies professor said the following:

Unlike [John] Lewis and other adherents to philosophical nonviolence, [Stokely] Carmichael did not believe that racism was principally a moral dilemma. Love, therefore, would not be enough to protect Black ballots, provide Black children with the education they deserved, lift Black people out of poverty or stop racial terrorism.

This is quite literally a comic book or fifth grade lesson plan description of what John Lewis and Martin Luther King actually believed—the idea that there was some vague ideal called “nonviolence” which was a sappy, sentimental “philosophy” (rather than a strategy) that believed that racism was merely a problem of individual bigotry and that the solution was therefore to respond to bigots with nonviolence and love.

This maudlin notion is so widespread that it would not be a surprise if most Americans actually believe that this elementary school conception of King and the Civil Rights Movement is basically accurate.

They have no idea that there was actually a complex and highly developed strategy for social change and a detailed tactical doctrine behind the civil rights protests—a multi-level strategic, operational and tactical doctrine that was documented in fifty page training manuals and taught by skilled instructors in workshops and role playing exercises that marchers were required to attend before participating in organized protest activities.

The social movement strategy that Martin Luther King, John Lewis and other leaders of the civil rights movement employed has an entirely clear and particular name. It is “**Organized Mass Civil Disobedience.**” This term has a precise definition and a specific and distinct relationship to other related concepts like Mahatma Gandhi’s strategy of “*Passive Resistance*” which Gandhi employed to force the British to grant independence to India.

King [defined the strategy](#) of organized mass civil disobedience quite clearly:¹

The higher level of the civil rights movement is *mass civil disobedience*. It is a concept well known in our struggle for justice. There must be more than a statement to the larger society—there must be a force that interrupts its functioning at some key point.

That interruption must, however, not be clandestine or surreptitious. It must be open. It is not necessary to invest it with guerrilla romanticism. It must be open and conducted by large masses without violence.

If the jails are filled to stop us, the meaning will become even clearer. The Negro will be saying, I am not avoiding penalties for breaking the law, I am willing to endure all your punishment because your society will not be able to endure the stigma of violently and publicly oppressing its minorities to preserve injustices.

Mass civil disobedience as a new stage of struggle can transmute the deep anger of the ghetto into a creative force. To dislocate the functioning of a city without destroying it can be more effective than a riot because it can be both longer lasting and more costly

¹https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/4960/_res/id=Attachments/index=0/4960_v15_i004_a002.pdf

to the larger society, but not wantonly destructive. It is a device of social action that is more difficult for the government to quell by superior force.

The limitation of riots, moral questions aside, is that they cannot win, and their participants know it...They offer an emotional catharsis, but they must be followed by a sense of futility. Civil disobedience in its mass application has the prospect of success. It is militant and defiant, but not destructive.

The key elements in a strategy of organized mass civil disobedience are the following:

The physical disruption of a city, area or enterprise by masses of protesters in order to make "business as usual" impossible.

Large scale passive resistance during arrest and a willingness to be jailed as an integral part of the protest process.

This was the underlying strategy that was employed in the "sit-ins" at segregated lunch counters and the "freedom rides" on interstate busses in the South. Rather than breaking the windows or setting fire to restaurants the protesters would enter the restaurant to violate the unjust law, disrupting its business, and then accept arrest and fill the jails in order to dramatize the evil laws or practices while refusing to engage in physical combat with the police.

Done on a mass level or as part of an extended campaign this strategy repeatedly made "business as usual" impossible in cities across the South.

It was recognized that this would easily frustrate the police to the point where they would explode in violence. But this was anticipated and accepted as part of the strategy. As King said:

When finally reaching for clubs, dogs and guns they found the world and the nation watching. *It was at this moment that the power of non-violent protest became manifest.* It dramatized the essential meaning and nature of the conflict and in magnified strokes made clear who was the evildoer and who was the undeserving and oppressed victim. The nation and the world were jarred awake...

King was in fact widely criticized for the cynicism of this strategy which did indeed consciously exploit police brutalization of the demonstrators in order to gain national attention and support. This was one reason why participants were required to attend training sessions—not only to learn specific defensive techniques (*make sure to protect your kidneys when you are on the ground and being kicked*, for example) but more important to insure that they fully understood what they were volunteering for and the deliberate sacrifices that were being demanded of them.

And beyond the use of civil disobedience as a tactic, it was also part of a larger, three pronged strategy.

In a presentation to the Institute for Nonviolent Social Change in the early 1970's, and in his later book *An Easy Burden* Andrew Young, who was one of King's chief lieutenants and the chief negotiator with the white power structure during the Birmingham campaign, delivered a unique explanation of this sophisticated three pronged strategy.

In the detailed planning that preceded the campaign three elements were defined.

First, a major boycott of downtown stores. Although this was little reported, this boycott was extensive and had a critical effect on the final outcome.

Second, the mass civil disobedience, which was modified and sharpened as negotiations with the city and business community proceeded.

Third, the behind the scenes operation of the "Freedom Schools" which trained organizers and activists in how to protest and challenge the barriers to voting. The freedom schools were replicated hundreds of times across the South and established the legal foundation and factual basis for the provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

King and his lieutenants carefully modulated these elements to gradually increase the pressure on the Birmingham business establishment and divide their interests from the police and political establishment while simultaneously applying maximum pressure on Congress and the Kennedy Administration to bring federal intervention to Birmingham and to push for passage of the Civil Rights bill.

The simple fact is that it is appalling that this complex and sophisticated strategy has been reduced to a mountain of simpering clichés about a vague philosophy of love, peace and "Dreams."

And it is equally appalling that the very substantial number of examples of successful campaigns of organized mass civil disobedience over the years have been equally ignored in the current discussion about strategy for the Black Lives Matter movement. For many years the most comprehensive study of mass civil disobedience campaigns was the work of Gene Sharp and his book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. In 2011 the comparative study of organized mass civil disobedience campaigns was given new depth and relevance with the publication of the book, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan. In a summary of her book, Chenoweth argues:

Our findings show that major nonviolent campaigns have achieved success 53 percent of the time, compared with 26 percent for violent resistance campaigns. There are two reasons for this success.

First, a campaign's commitment to nonviolent methods enhances its domestic and international legitimacy and encourages more broad-based participation in the resistance, which translates into increased pressure being brought to bear on the target.

Second, whereas governments easily justify violent counterattacks against armed insurgents, regime violence against nonviolent movements is more likely to backfire against the regime.

Our findings challenge the conventional wisdom that violent resistance against conventionally superior adversaries is the most effective way for resistance groups to achieve policy goals. Instead, we assert that nonviolent resistance is a forceful alternative to political violence that can pose effective challenges to democratic and nondemocratic opponents, and at times can do so more effectively than violent resistance.²

The best recent example of a major organized mass civil disobedience campaign has been the “extinction rebellion” environmental campaign in England that gained wide popular support within the country and tremendous international attention. Roger Hallam, the chief strategist of the campaign explained its strategy as follows:

Extinction Rebellion didn’t come out the blue. Two years ago a group of researchers and activists started to meet to seriously consider two questions—why has campaigning failed so catastrophically over the past generation and how can we make it work. Drawing on the groundbreaking research of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (*Why Civil Resistance Works*), we came to the conclusion that the only way to overcome entrenched political power is through extensive campaigns of large-scale nonviolent direct action. In January this year I produced a 30-page paper which formed the basis of the strategy of the past two weeks of mass disruption in London.

The strategy is based upon three observations. Firstly that only through disruption, the breaking of laws, do you get the attention you need. Secondly only through sacrifice—the willingness to be arrested and go to prison—do people take seriously what you are saying. And thirdly only through being respectful to ourselves, the public and the police, do we change the hearts and minds of our opponents, which makes it easier for them to negotiate with us.

Specifically the strategy—the “civil resistance model” as we call it—needs to involve several key elements in order for successful outcomes to be optimized. Firstly you need a lot of people—thousands need to be involved. You need to go to the capital city because that is where the rich and powerful are—the government, big business and the media. You need to break the law—sit in the road or glue yourself to the entrance of a building and such like. Unlike A to B marches this is what gets attention. You have to stay strictly nonviolent...Crucially it has to go on day after day. Like a labor strike you have to impose economic and reputational damage on the opponent over an extended period...

Nothing written here is new. Extinction Rebellion is following in the tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. We are simply rediscovering what people do when they have had enough of failure and really want to make a difference.³

Given this massive body of experience from history and other countries, it is startling that organized mass civil disobedience is so little understood in America and that there is virtually no serious consideration of its potential use as an alternative to a “1960’s student riot” strategy.

²https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/IS3301_pp007-044_Stephan_Chenoweth.pdf

³<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/01/extinction-rebellion-non-violent-civil-disobedience#:~:text=Now%20we%20know%3A%20conventional%20campaigning%20won't%20prevent%20our%20extinction,-This%20article%20is&text=The%20fact%20of%20the,was%20settled%20three%20decades%20ago.>

A major reason, it must be said, is that the advocates of the “1960’s student riot” approach carefully avoid directly comparing it with the strategy of organized mass civil disobedience.

The most widely discussed defense of the rioting strategy is Vicky Osterweil’s. *In Defense of Looting* which is simultaneously a defense of rioting as a profoundly effective and meaningful political strategy.

As she says:

In most instances,[riots] transform and build a nascent moment into a movement...riots are experienced as celebration, as joyous and cathartic release of emotion: police and politicians who enter riot zones often cite this atmosphere as the thing that terrifies them most .. one of the main after affects of riots is a sense of unity togetherness and joy not ordinarily experienced in the urban neighborhood, a unity that leads to the blossoming of dozens of political, social and economic projects.⁴

At no point are examples of this strategy directly compared with organized mass civil disobedience. Instead, Osterweil trivializes the strategy of the Civil Rights Movement as simply being based on the abstract notion of “nonviolence”

As she says:

The popular understanding of the Civil Rights Movement is that it was successful when it was nonviolent and less successful when it was focused on Black power. It’s a myth that we get taught over and over again from the first moment we learn about the Civil Rights Movement: that it was a nonviolent movement, and that that’s what matters about it. And it’s just not true.

Nonviolence emerged in the ‘50s and ‘60s during the Civil Rights Movement, [in part] as a way to appeal to Northern liberals. When it did work, like with the lunch counter sit-ins, it worked because Northern liberals could flatter themselves that racism was a Southern condition. This was also in the context of the Cold War and a mass anticolonial revolt going on all over Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America. Suddenly all these new independent nations had just won liberation from Europe, and the U.S. had to compete with the Soviet Union for influence over them. So it was really in the U.S.’ interests to not be the country of Jim Crow, segregation and fascism, because they had to appeal to all these new Black and brown nations all over the world.

And

We remember the Birmingham struggle of ‘63, with the famous photos of Bull Connor releasing the police dogs and fire hoses on teenagers, as nonviolent. But that actually turned into the first urban riot in the movement. Kids got up, threw rocks and smashed police cars and storefront windows in that combat. There was fear that that kind of rioting would spread. That created the pressure for Robert F. Kennedy to write the civil rights bill and force JFK to sign it.

⁴<https://wamu.org/story/20/08/31/one-authors-argument-in-defense-of-looting/>

It can safely be left to historians to debunk the not quite plausible or consistent theory that (1) the relative handful of teen-age rock throwers, rather than the hundreds of disciplined protesters, including schoolchildren, who filled the jails of Birmingham week after week (and who were widely covered on national TV while the rock throwers were ignored), were actually the key force that made Bobby Kennedy, John Kennedy and Congress pass the Civil Rights Act and (2) that the Kennedys and Congress were only moved to pass the bill because they were “terrified” by the threat of riots when they were also supposedly acting as the representatives of the American ruling class that really wanted an end to Southern segregation because it undermined America’s cold war propaganda.

But, historical accuracy aside, the important point to note is that this type of criticism manages to obscure and avoid the entire debate over *strategy*—of the choice between a “1960’s student riot” strategy and the strategy of “organized mass civil disobedience.”

In many if not most cases, advocates of the student riot strategy dismiss any civil disobedience strategy as certain to be useless and ineffective because of the overwhelming power of white racism.

For example, an article in the Nation presented the strategic choice as follows.

There are something like 70 BLM protests a week throughout America right now, but you don’t hear about them unless something burns or somebody gets shot.

... I would ask whites what they would have us do to secure their tepid and revocable support for the notion that we shouldn’t be gunned down by the police... Protest, but don’t be civilly disobedient when we do? We do that, and those protests are never covered. The only time the media shows our *daytime* protests is when Bill Barr gasses them so the president can take a photo-op. Engage in civil disobedience, but don’t be violent? We try that, and we are met with tear gas, flash bangs, rubber bullets, and armed vigilantes who shoot at us with their AR-15s and then get a drink of water from the police.

In the immediate aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, white people seemingly joined Black people in their calls for justice and change. But that support was always soft. It was entirely predictable that most white people would abandon the movement long before justice was done or change achieved.

Essentially, the months after Floyd’s murder have been a summer fling for a majority of white people. It’s like they went on safari in Ghana, saw some lions, had sex with a Black person who works there, and learned a lot about the transatlantic slave trade. But now play-time’s over, and the white majority has to get back to the serious work of enforcing white supremacy and privilege and reelecting a bigoted president. If you thought Floyd’s murder was going to lead to structural change, then you don’t know white people as well as I do.⁵

In short, as Osterweil argues, it is only “[riots that] transform and build a nascent moment into a movement...riots are experienced as celebration, as joyous and cathartic release of emotion...that leads to the blossoming of dozens of political, social and economic projects.”

⁵<https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/blake-white-people-backlash/>

Being realistic, then, there is little possibility that protesters who accept this view will change their minds and accept the serious sacrifice and self-discipline that is required to participate organized mass civil disobedience.

But the extraordinary outpouring of anger and support for BLM that emerged this Spring demonstrated that there are substantial numbers of people who would indeed be willing to engage in organized mass civil disobedience if they could be given the opportunity.

The challenge is difficult because the Civil Rights Movement had several advantages that the current Black Lives Matter movement does not.

First, the Civil Rights Movement had a substantial base for organization and operations across the South that was provided by the black church. The recruitment of volunteers was carried out during Sunday sermons, training sessions were held in Church basements and mass community support for boycotts and demonstrations was organized through the social networks of the congregation.

Black Lives Matter is a far more loose and informal collection of largely separate groups in different cities that does not have the same resources, internal cohesion or ability to coordinate mass action as the networks of the Southern Black Churches.

Second, the Civil Rights Movement could choose its targets and carefully plan its actions before launching a campaign. The Black Lives Matter protests, on the other hand, erupt suddenly and force organizers to respond to events that suddenly emerge quite literally overnight.

Third, the Civil Rights Movement had clear common objectives and demands in all the communities where they operated—repeal segregationist laws, allow the right to vote. The Black Lives Matter movement has not yet formulated a standard set of demands of this kind in large part because the issues and conditions vary from city to city.

All these are indeed serious difficulties that will have to be overcome but the massive size of the protests this spring and summer have demonstrated that the necessary energy, dedication and willingness to sacrifice exist if the new generation of young and dedicated organizers of Black Lives Matter can build the necessary alliances and the foundation for a massive campaign of organized mass civil disobedience. The example of the Civil Rights Movement shows that it can indeed be done and what it can achieve.