

# Nonviolent Action: Answering Critics with a Heritage

## Rooted in Colonial America

### **Excerpts from two books on the history of colonial non-violent struggle follow these introductory paragraphs:**

Nonviolent Action – and especially one of its forms, nonviolent civil disobedience – is commonly viewed with apprehension. Participants encounter people who question their fundamental respect for law and order and their loyalty to country. However, America's first patriots, in the years between 1765 and 1775, used nonviolent actions and nonviolent civil disobedience in their struggle for colonial rights and later for independence.

At critical moments since then, nonviolent action has assisted our complex governmental system to fulfill its promise. For instance, with the help of nonviolent action, the rights of democracy have been extended to African Americans, women, the disabled, employees, and other groups. Nonviolent action continues to help Americans enter the public dialogue when media do not give adequate or proportionate information about citizen concerns.

*Therefore nonviolent action - both within the law and civil disobedience - is best described as a "paralegal" American institution which has helped to maintain the spirit of the Constitution for over 200 years.*

This is our heritage. It has been part of our developing nation since at least 1765 with the passage of the stamp act. Nonviolent action had helped obtain major characteristics of independence (legislative, executive and judicial powers, the power to tax, and the power to have a militia) for almost three-fourths of the thirteen colonies before the war broke out against the British (personal communication Gene Sharp, Albert Einstein Institution).

Various methods of nonviolent action and nonviolent civil disobedience were used by our colonial ancestors. One called for parades and large public gatherings in town squares, streets and other locations. This method is still common today. Organized boycotts on various consumer goods are also familiar to us. Less obvious, perhaps, is the economic noncooperation/nonconsumption practiced extensively by the colonists and now practiced spontaneously by seniors and others who obtain their medications from Canada, the United Kingdom and other countries.

Critics express concern that participants in nonviolent action may become violent. Training against any use of violence regardless of provocation is essential to nonviolent preparations. Over the years, the counterproductivity of mixing violence into nonviolent methods has become well-understood:

Nonviolent discipline is not an alien emphasis introduced by moralists or pacifists. Nonviolent behavior is a requirement for the successful operation of this technique....Resistance violence shifts attention to the violence itself, away from the issues, the courage of the resisters...."[A]cts of demolition and destruction of property" [are] *not* compatible with nonviolent struggle (Sharp, Gene, et. al. Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Practice and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Potential. Boston: Extending Horizons Books, Porter Sargent Publishing, Inc., 2005, pp. 390-391).

Even in colonial times, violence played a minor role in prewar resistance (see Walter H. Conser below). However, it was the colonists' limited understanding of the dynamics of nonviolent action that in part failed to stem the movement toward war.

Today whatever acts of violence occur at a nonviolent action almost always are committed by intruders who may have very different agendas, or are directed against nonviolent participants by those openly opposed to the objectives of the nonviolent action.

In a post 9/11 world, the role of nonviolent action as a civic "safety net" has become even more important. To the degree that it addresses inadequate governmental policies, it helps *prevent* violent reactions, including homegrown terrorism by distressed sections of the population.

The passages that follow, describing nonviolent resistance in colonial America, are taken from two books. First, there are paragraphs from an article by Walter Conser, Jr., "United States, Independence Movement, 1765-1775" in Protest, Power, and Change: an Encyclopedia of Nonviolent Action..., edited by Roger S. Powers and William B. Vogele. While the entire article provides an excellent overview and understanding of the nonviolent methods used for the ten years preceding the outbreak of war in 1776, I have selected parts that give a basic context with some precedents for the nonviolent methods still being used in the United States. Second, there are excerpts totaling approximately ten pages from a book that is now out of print, Resistance, Politics and the American Struggle for Independence, 1765-1775, edited by Walter Conser, Jr., Ronald McCarthy, David Toscano and Gene Sharp.

May this information assist and encourage you, as I have been encouraged by thoughts of my own family's colonial American forebears.

--Elsa Sabath, February, 2006.

I thank the many friends who have encouraged and sustained me with their editorial and computer support. The work above, "Nonviolent Action: Answering Critics with a Heritage Rooted in Colonial America" is for download, and is otherwise licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA. Exceptions may be granted by Elsa Sabath or her assigns. [elsa.sabath@gmail.com](mailto:elsa.sabath@gmail.com)