While many people laud the principle of nonviolence, popular belief holds that nonviolence cannot succeed if one of the parties involved in the conflict chooses to use violence. This view is incorrect and reflects an all too common misconception.

Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers during the civil rights movement advocated strict adherence to nonviolence. Yet, they were often attacked by police using dogs and fire hoses. The Freedom Riders, when traveling from northern states into the south, intentionally violated the segregation laws at bus terminals. Many were beaten and their buses were bombed and burned. Many black citizens were subject to lynching by the Ku Klux Klan, and several white activists were killed in drive-by shootings. Rosa Parks and others were jailed, and King’s house was firebombed.

In the women’s rights movement, Alice Paul and other activists were arrested, persecuted, and imprisoned in their efforts to secure the passage of the suffrage amendment. The British didn’t play by nonviolent rules either, particularly in 1919 when General Reginald Dyer massacred hundreds of Indian civilians at Amritsar. Yet all three of these nonviolent movements succeeded in exposing injustice and instigating reforms with far less loss of life and financial cost than would have resulted from a violent revolution.

Another misconception regarding nonviolent activism is that military action and nonviolence are incompatible and cannot coexist. There are, in fact, times when social justice activists and the military find themselves fighting the same enemy.

Collective nonviolence works best where government institutions are capable of responding to the injustice being addressed by activists. This was the political environment in America in the 1960s during the civil rights era and in the first half of the twentieth century during the labor movement. But when the political environment is not responsive, or during times of war, nonviolent resistance takes the form of noncooperation and underground movements that work to subvert the
power structure the military may be called upon to fight.

During World War II, the Danish Resistance Movement thwarted Nazi efforts to round up Jewish families living in Denmark. Their efforts included hiding Jews in private homes and ferrying them to Sweden where over 7000, almost the entire Jewish population of Denmark, were given refuge. In the Netherlands, Dutch resisters provided counterintelligence and communications support to allied forces, and in France, an underground movement worked to hide Jewish families and Jewish children who had become separated from their parents.

What we learn from the struggles during World War II is that nonviolent resistance at the grassroots level, and military action at the governmental level, can pursue a common goal in their efforts to bring an end to extreme aggression and persecution. It is a mistake to think that military action makes grassroots nonviolent resistance irrelevant.

Is nonviolence always successful? No, but neither is violence or military action always successful. Violence may succeed in forcing reform, but it rarely results in reconciliation and often sows the seeds for future violent conflict.

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