

NONVIOLENCE VS PACIFISM: A PSYCHIATRIST'S VIEW

E. James LIEBERMAN

Clinical Professor Emeritus, Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, George Washington University School of Medicine

Now 53 years old, this essay is newly revised. First published in Our Generation 2:4, 1962, it was cited in Nonviolence by Mark Kurlansky (2006) and gains new support from On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society (2nd. ed. 2009) by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, retired professor at West Point.

Abstract

This is a psychological analysis of threat, deterrence, war and nonviolence in human relations, mainly in international conflict. Gandhian principles lead to an anti-war strategy, with evidence that conflict resolution without war is both practical and principled. Research by D. Grossman confirms that war is neither normal nor necessary in the present epoch.

Key words: peace, war, conflict, nonviolence, Gandhi, psychology, pacifism

Corresponding author: E. James Lieberman; ejl@email.gwu.edu

Introduction

Thousands of years of exhortations, moralizing, and pacifist preaching have dramatically failed to prevent a series of increasingly destructive wars; neither have the wars themselves ever provided an effective close to the vicious cycle of human self-destruction. As ineffectual as traditional pacifism has been in bringing peace, so has traditional militarism shown its weakness as a means to national security. The present arms race makes all life on earth insecure, but we should not have to choose between peace at any price or war at any cost.

Nonviolence, though linked with pacifism, is a distinct alternative to „passive-ism,” and as we know from the civil rights movement, can be quite assertive, even aggressive. Most sit-in participants and Freedom Riders, though nonviolent, were not pacifists. Some fought nonviolently for integration while looking forward to military service. Nonviolence is a moral and psychological strategy, a technic of action — not necessarily pacifism or a particular theology. The action in the American South was not unique in this respect but typical. Most of Gandhi's followers in South Africa and India were not pacifists: they adopted his nonviolent strategy and constructive program for its effectiveness as moral suasion. Gandhian nonviolence requires „a firm holding to truth.” Everyone benefits when it can be applied in resolving conflict; most of us are nonviolent in conflict situations.

Psychiatry and Nonviolence

Gandhi was a good psychologist, saying, „only he who is capable of striking can be non-violent.” Neurotic inhibition is not nonviolence. And, “It is better to be violent and slay a tyrant than to run away or bow down as a coward.” Unconscious hostility cannot be disguised by nonviolent pantomime. Nonviolent action uses what is best in the opponent; one cannot achieve this from a stance of anger, fear, or as self-purification. Nonviolence uses (sublimates) aggression constructively whereas neurotic pacifism denies it. National traditions in war lead to an ironic paradox: priests and ministers bless the launch of new battleships and war planes.

Most psychiatrists are not pacifists, but our approach to patients has much in common with nonviolence. We accept the patient as a person, if not all of his or her behavior. We differentiate between unacceptable behavior and the person as a whole—between thoughts, feelings and acts. We support maturity and responsibility, working to change self-defeating behavior and resolve internal conflicts. We don't punish or bribe. We may agree or disagree, always in support of understanding and better relationships. We may be denounced or beseeched or propositioned. We respond seriously, but maintain objective, supportive neutrality.

Working with an over-aggressive young child, one helps the youngster control destructive impulses. We neither punish nor allow the child

to run wild. We work to understand the source and significance of behavior, speaking thoughtfully, addressing destructive and inappropriate behavior but never rejecting the whole person. If the therapist is provoked to anger by a kick in the shins, then acknowledging pain and anger is appropriate, along with a request for apology. That such extreme feelings and behavior are not taken personally by the therapist helps stabilize our nonviolent approach.

There is no psychotherapy for nations, but we can reflect on nonviolence in its social and political context. A technique for conflict resolution, nonviolence invites scientific study and experimentation. Military leaders might confer with experienced leaders of nonviolent action, train military and non-military volunteers in nonviolent techniques, and, when an opportunity presents itself, try the method. Drones and other new weapons invite retaliation and keep the tension high, so they only temporarily can be counted on to suppress adversaries. Undoubtedly there are many situations where a nonviolent contingent could play an important role, preventing both loss of face and war.

As Gandhi taught, means are ends-in-process. Noble ends are spoiled by evil means, and violence is the prime example. The nonviolent person refuses to use or yield to violence, but keeps an open mind respecting the person of friend or foe. Nonviolence can be active, to induce change, as in the segregated South; or it can be passive non-cooperation as in Denmark and elsewhere against the Nazis. Nonviolent people should be persuasive and open to persuasion, not coercive or coercible. As in psychotherapy the sustained integrity of nonviolent witness leads to and maintains reciprocal respect, based on empathic regard for others, friend and foe. Psychiatrists and nonviolent activists approach conflict as a constant, inevitable part of life that cannot be ignored or obliterated. Constructive resolution of conflict aims to benefit people on both sides of a conflict. This is not easy, since it requires honest self-appraisal for all concerned.

Psychiatry has not always been a nonviolent discipline, nor did it easily become so. Beginning in 1788 Drs. Vincent Chiarugi in Italy, Philippe Pinel in France and William Tuke in England abandoned chains and whips in favor of respectful understanding in what became "moral treatment." Skeptics argued that non-restraint worked in England because the English are docile, and thought vigorous pioneer spirit of immigrants

to America would yield only to forcible restraint. This is precisely the argument used by some against Gandhi's nonviolence: it worked against the British because they are decent people with a sense of fair play, but it wouldn't work against Germans, Russians or Chinese. What would these skeptics have predicted about how nonviolence would work in the segregated South? Would our sense of decency, democracy and fair play override the deep-seated, forcibly maintained establishment of racial prejudice? This question is still being answered now, in some quarters, long after the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Is there a difference between the hostility dealt with by Gandhi in the British colonies, Martin Luther King in the U.S., and that which exists between our land and Russia or China, and between Arabs and Israelis? The enemy is characterized as inhuman, ruthless, and unreachable, our own history is cleansed, so on Memorial Day we have only good things to say about wars in Vietnam and Iraq that many, perhaps most, Americans regard as unnecessary or worse. We need to check ourselves lest we become the mirror image of the enemy.

Neurotic vs. Mature Pacifism

Nonviolence is practiced normally by ordinary people, mostly not pacifists. Conversely, not all pacifists are nonviolent. Violent impulses can operate behind a pacifist facade. Some pacifists maintain their position to control impulses, which are best controlled when recognized and understood. If pacifism is a neurotic defense, it will likely fail. Of course militarism, too, can mask opposing impulses: belligerence, toughness and ruthlessness may cover passive tendencies and feelings that are hidden because they are „weak“. Militarists emphasize credibility, i.e. that we are willing to use nuclear weapons if necessary. Any glimmer of human compassion—even willingness to negotiate—may represent weakness. This attempt at self-dehumanization is as likely to backfire as is pacifism that is neurotically determined. (Since the publication of *On Killing* by Dave Grossman [1] we understand that in World War II and before, less than 20 percent of our troops fired their weapons at an oncoming enemy in battle. With modernized training and conditioning the percent rose to over 90. Perhaps the high incidence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is related to this process).

Nonviolence reflects many facets of military training: courage, devotion and

loyalty, discipline, a willingness to make sacrifices, self-control. But nonviolence intends to psychologically reduce violent conflict, not to provoke it as military action usually does. Nonviolence, skillfully and appropriately used, often deters violence; since the global strategy of great powers today is based on deterrence—a psychological concept—it behooves us to investigate nonviolence as an alternative when the supposed deterrent includes mutual destruction. What was defense is now retaliation with greater violence. Nonviolence as policy at various levels and circumstances fills a psychosocial and moral gap in strategy. It deserves study in theory and practice. Meanwhile, we should remove incentives to war, e.g., defense contractors should be paid for actual costs but not profits. They do not risk life and limb on the battlefield and should not be dependent on war for ongoing income. Let their patriotic contribution be modest salaries, not enrichment of the top echelon.

Animal Behavior: Deterrence

We can learn from ethology, the science of animal behavior. Konrad Lorenz observed that animals capable of destroying others of their own species 1) are isolated, leading solitary lives except at mating time or, more often 2) have an instinctual inhibition against intra-species destruction. When two wolves fight, the loser exposes its neck to the victor, who is inhibited from attacking and cannot strike, thus conserving the species. Similarly, dogs will roll over in defeat to inhibit an aggressor.

Z. Y. Kuo, who studied animal fighting in group situations, found that inhibition fails to work when the aggressor dog is a trained fighter: in such cases the underdog may be seriously injured or killed. This supports a Biblical precept; “turn the other cheek.” Skeptics may argue that nonviolence won’t work against trained fighters, but its purpose is to undo the brutalization imposed by training and indoctrination. The Hungarian revolution of 1956 provides an example: Russian troops had to be imported from Mongolia because those in Budapest were not firing on the Freedom Fighters.

Military deterrence threatens capital punishment for nations. We need deterrents not based on superior physical force. Ultimately, reliable deterrence means self-control, social cohesiveness, and the establishment of conditions compatible with peace and progress. Not only is it sadistic, it is unreliable as an inhibitor. There are many

examples of failed deterrence in international affairs. Russia’s threat to destroy Japan because of her alliance with the U.S. resulted only in a stronger declaration of alliance. Similarly, antagonism of the U.S. towards Castro’s Cuba helped unify that country further to the left.

Conclusion

Psychiatrists, diplomats, the military and advocates of nonviolence all want to control disruptive tendencies that make social living difficult. Violence and other anti-social impulses are more noticed in others than in ourselves, even to the point that „badness”—including our own—is projected onto others whom we then attack. Nonviolence requires both strength and humility. A pacifist unaware of his own hostility cannot be nonviolent. The good news is that most of us, like most social animals, are by nature inhibited against killing our own species.

Volunteers from within and outside the military should train in nonviolent techniques so they can be tested. They should be mature people, but needn’t be saints or mystics. They would be no more masochistic than soldiers are expected to be; although unarmed, they would be acting to prevent violence.

The Freedom Riders would clearly rather be dead than be slaves; moreover, they would rather die than kill. They rejected violence despite abundant excuses for it. Super-patriots, however, would rather everybody be dead than have to empathize with the designated enemy. In fear, to appear strong, they adopt means which sacrifice our sacred and humanitarian values. They would not put so much emphasis on armaments if they themselves were not cowed by the threat of force. We must consider the possibility that dying in behalf of principles is better than killing.

Human conflict is here to stay. Ultimately, nonviolent approaches to conflict must be used if we are to survive. Besides its moral weight, this is a practical necessity in an age of overkill, when technical ingenuity combined with reliance on military deterrence of “evil” makes possible the end of civilized human—and perhaps all—life on earth.

Resumo

Tiu eseo estas psikologia analizo de minaco, fortimigo, milito kaj neperforteco en homoj rilatoj, precipe en internacia konflikto. La principoj de Gandhi kondukos al strategio kontraŭmilita, kun pruvoj, ke resolvo de konflikto sen milito

estas kaj praktika kaj principa. Esploroj de D. Grossman konfirmas, ke milito estas nek normala, nek necesa en la nuna epoko.

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