

THE NEW NONVIOLENCE

BY DAVE DELLINGER

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THE SOUTHERN STUDENT ORGANIZING COMMITTEE is an association of young, concerned southerners dedicated to social change.

We wish to join with other individuals and groups in building a democratic society predicated on peace and racial equality; a society in which every person is guaranteed physical well-being and the opportunity to develop to the fullest extent his native abilities.

SSOC affirms the right of each individual to participate in the decision-making processes in those social, economic, and political areas which directly influence his life. We envision a world dedicated to free speech and unfettered inquiry; a community of love and cooperation in an economy of abundance.

SSOC was founded in the belief that the fulfillment of this vision will require radical changes in many of America's present institutions and prevailing attitudes. We will continually seek new avenues to encourage these transformations.

SSOC was founded in the belief that the South has special problems which create difficulties--and opportunities--for a southern movement for social change; SSOC will devote a substantial proportion of its resources to the solution of these problems. We also believe that the South possesses valuable traditions, in both black and white cultures, which will enable southerners to make a unique contribution to a truly democratic America,

--Preamble
SSOC Constitution

There's been a lot of talk in recent years about the New Negro emerging in the South, the new student after the silent generation, and the new left. If pacifism and nonviolence are to be relevant at all to our world, there must be a new nonviolence also.

Life is a process of change, but we happen to be in a period when things are changing much more rapidly than they did in the lifetimes of most of our predecessors. New ideas are emerging, and new interpretations of old truths. There's always a certain amount of resistance to the new ideas. I think organizations like FOR, the WRL, CNVA, are all in a sense holding back at the present time. They are nervous about the changes and trying to solidify and hold on to the old truths. And yet if there's any lesson of our time, it is that you can't hold on to the old truths. You have to reapply them; you have to reinterpret them. They must be continually reborn in forms so fresh that they become in a very real sense "new truths".

In addition to the normal resistance to change, the establishment tends to co-opt the most brilliant leaders of the opposition, usually around middle-age. People who have been pioneers are offered ways of working which seem to be just as significant, but which really mean a loss of independence and a shortening of vision. Now this is nothing new. It happened to the old socialist leaders in the labor movement in Great Britain, for example, as I'm sure we've all read in history if we didn't live through the period. Just last weekend an old Britisher told me that Lloyd George had started out as the outstanding pacifist in England, and look where he ended up. Well, coming along later we forget that; we forget that he was ever genuinely one of us.

I think one of the problems that we face today is that some of the people we have looked to for leadership in the past, people who have been and still are brilliant and dedicated, are, willy-nilly, in the process of being co-opted to some extent by the Establishment as the society takes on the myths and symbolism (without the reality) of a Great Society. Now, I don't think that they're always wrong or that we're always right, but I think that it's very important, in terms of the new nonviolence, that we realize what is happening to some of our old friends and former comrades. When some of them accuse you of being "alienated" from American society, think for a moment of all the victims of that society, at home and abroad, and consider whether your critic is not perhaps a little too conventionally integrated into American society.

We have to maintain a proper perspective toward all leaders, not just those who are in the process of succumbing to the enticements of the Establishment. We owe it to them, as well as ourselves, to preserve a skeptical, questioning, irreverent attitude which makes it possible to strike out independently and experimentally. One of the great evils that came to the Gandhian movement in India for example, was that Gandhi became so exalted that the next few generations didn't develop because they were all following Gandhi instead of challenging him, differing from him, doing their own things their own way and their own time. I have known and admired A.J. Muste for a long time, and it seems to me that one of his most productive traits is his ability to pick up new insights and understanding from younger persons, and from heretical comrades. He knows how to listen as well as to speak. But the moment that younger people stop criticizing and challenging him, or start deferring to him as an authority, he will be limited by this denial of the possibilities for creative interaction and so will they.

I think, too, that the new nonviolence must be existential or it is nothing. That is, it can't be abstract; it can't be a religion in the conventional sense of the word. It's got to be in the midst of life and struggle. This is the way nonviolence has always emerged. We read Gandhi's

religious insight and injunctions, and we forget that Gandhi stumbled upon nonviolence when he himself was not a pacifist at heart. He hardly knew about nonviolence, but as a poor lawyer in South Africa he suffered certain indignities and saw other Indians suffering indignities, and he set out to correct them. He didn't start out with a fully made philosophy. He gradually developed it.

I speak from my own experience. When I went to prison in World War II, I went both as a Gandhian pacifist and as a Christian pacifist--if the two can be related and I think they can. I hadn't been there a very long time before I realized that I had to throw the book away. None of the things I had read and discussed and argued about in nonviolent workshops quite applied. The prisoners around me, the prison system which was oppressing them and me, and my own integrity, if you will, required that I take an agnostic approach, not knowing even if I was a pacifist or whether I would always be nonviolent or not. I had to feel my way through explosive situations. And out of this experience, having thrown the book away, I gained the greatest conviction I've ever had that nonviolence is the most successful, the soundest method of operating in any conflict situation. But I think that one has to come to it this way, existentially.

Now, another thing that happened to me in prison was that I discovered that people with me who called themselves pacifists turned out in many cases not to be the ones who reacted the way I did to the specific conflict situations. I had more in common with some other fellows, like Ralph DiGia and David Wieck whom I doubted were real pacifists because they had certain philosophical reservations. I remember arguing with Dave Wieck outside prison when theoretical and theological distinctions seemed more important. I couldn't persuade him to be a pacifist and he couldn't persuade me not to be one. But in prison we found that we had more in common in our responses to conflict and violence than he did with some of the people who didn't call themselves pacifists or than I did with some of the people who did.

Now this approach, of course, is one of the things that developed the new left. People went into the South carrying with them old distinctions and antagonisms inherited from the old left. But when they were down there facing the Southern sheriff or mob, they didn't ask, "Is this man a communist-- if he is, he helped support the suppression of the people in Hungary or he carries the blood of the six million people who died in Soviet slave labor camps, so I'll have nothing to do with him." If the two men were facing the sheriff together in the right ways, then the whole anti-communist ideological hairsplitting that had developed in the past didn't matter any more. In the same way, whether you're a pacifist or a nonpacifist, what matters is how you react when the mob comes at you. That is the existential reality of it.

But there's more to it than that. Democracy as we know it was invented in the 18th century and basically it hasn't been improved since. At the time, parliamentary democracy was a definite step forward in the history of mankind, but since then there has been an industrial revolution, an urban revolution, and now a cybernetic revolution is in progress. But we have not altered the political structure (certainly not for the better) to meet these changing conditions.

I don't mean to suggest that American parliamentary democracy would have been a suitable stopping place, even if environmental conditions had not changed. I am reminded of the story of two Englishmen who were discussing PUNCH. One of them said: "You know, PUNCH is not as good as it used to be." The other replied: "It never was." If we think even of the exclusion of Afro-Americans from the 18th century democracy, let alone of other institutional shortcomings, perhaps we ought to say the same of American democracy: not only is it not as good as it used to be, but from the point of view of

man's ever-expanding dreams, it never was. In the 19th century Anatole France wrote:

The Law in its majestic equality forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to steal bread, and to beg.

Thinking about American society today, we might say:

Society, in its majestic democracy, permits the poor as well the rich to own the New York TIMES, to control NBC-TV, and to maintain slush funds and political lobbyists in Washington. It permits the poor as well as the rich to run for President.

I am sure that you could phrase it even better. But think how much money one has to have in order to throw one's democratic weight around. If you're interested in the Presidency, it helps a helluva lot if you're a Kennedy or a Rockefeller. And if, like Richard Nixon, you're not rich in your own right, you had better know how to get along politically with those who are. We have the myth of an honest, poor boy, Abe Lincoln, ending up in the White House. We have the myth of a free press, based on the relative absence of governmental censorship. But as editor of a radical publication, which lacks the money and other channels to acquaint most Americans with the fact that it even exists, I can tell you that the existential realities are somewhat different.

Another concept which has lost its original meaning is "private property." I have compared our situation with that of the white Southerner. Just as we can see some of his limitations, the peasants of Vietnam (or for that matter the disadvantaged people of most of the world) can see the limitations of the average patriotic American--even the average pacifist patriotic American, in his position of "loyal opposition." Now when the civil-rights law was being debated for public accomodation, the white Southerner said, "But this is Communistic. This is interferrin_g with private property." The man sincerely believed that the hotel or restaurant he owned was his private property and that it was an intollerable invasion of his private rights for the government or anybody to tell him whom he had to serve.

Now, we can tell the white Southerner that it's not really his private property, that there is a public responsibility that goes with "ownership," that there are human rights involved. But we have to begin to think about other things that we assume are private property. Manhattan Island, I suggest, is one of them. Basically, we cannot solve the segregation in schools because we can't solve the segregation in housing. And we can't solve the segregation in housing because the real estate in Manhattan is private property and people are making their livings--and more than their livings in many cases--out of their real estate. If the only way we can solve that problem, and prevent this generation from growin_g up in that kind of abysmal decay and the violence that goes with it, is to make all real estate in Manhattan public property, then I think we ought to do it.

With nonviolence you have to look at the world as a piece. You can't just look at Vietnam or the Dominican Republic, which are in the news. You've got to look at New York City, at the street you live on, at the schools you go to, at the place you work.

The question of private property has an international dimension, as well. From 1950 to 1954 the U.S. corporations in Latin America earned \$3.5 billion of profits. Two billion came back to the U.S. The other billion and a half was invested in Latin America. That means we took \$2 billion out and we now own as our private property a billion and a half more of other people's countries.

Now, the fact is, whenever you begin to take a new look at private property, you recognize the violence of the system--the violence imposed upon the Negroes in Watts, upon the workers in the gold mines of Africa and the worker for United Fruit. And when you begin to do something about that, it automatically becomes "communism." Anything good is do called communism--but communism is identified always with the most evil things that have happened under communist governments.

In school we learned about the poor, bumbling, noble, but stupid Englishman who really thought he carried the white man's burden. We can see through him, now. We know what he was doing in Africa. Yes, he built some hospitals and schools and sent missionaries in. But we know what happened to the African people and the African country. We know who worked in the gold mines and who got the gold, and what the death rate of the mine workers was. Well, I don't think we'll have to wait very long until people in other parts of the world can look upon us as poor, bumbling, lovable, stupid people carrying the Democratic Man's Burden. We're carrying it for Southeast Asia--the democracy invented in the 18th century which doesn't work very well at home. But we say to those people: You take our parliamentary democracy because it's better dead than red. We're almost prepared to have them all dead. Of course, we're really supporting dictators like Ky who admire Hitler and won't even tolerate parliamentary democracy. But we shouldn't be fooled by this into demanding the introduction of our forms of parliamentary democracy ("One man, one vote, in Selma, Saigon, and Hanoi.") as if this were the answer to their problems. We've got to let them experiment with new forms of human fulfillment. We've got to let them have the "democratic" right to make their own mistakes, if that's what happens.

So if we pacifists fall for the anticommunist line, we're in trouble. But you don't have to go very far to find a pacifist meeting where somebody stands up and says, "I think what it really comes down to is how can we get rid of communism by other methods?" And then he goes on to develop the thesis that our aims are the same as the State Department's, but their methods are wrong. This is an old chestnut in the pacifist movement, and it just isn't true.

Arnold Toynbee sums it up in a couple of sentences when he says that for the past twenty years the government and the people of the United States have been acting on the belief that communism is on the march for the conquest of the world, and that it is the manifest destiny of the United States to save the world from suffering this fate. America has believed that she has practically the whole human race on her side in her anti-communist stand. He goes on to say that this picture is not founded on facts. The revolt of the native majority of mankind against the domination of the western minority--this, and not the defense of freedom against communism, is the real major issue in the world today.

In light of all that I've said let me sum up now four or five characteristics I think the new nonviolence must have.

*Nonviolence has to be against the violence of the status quo. Consider this: According to the U.N. statistics, in 1958, just before the Castro revolution, 44 per cent of the children born in Latin America died before the age of five. Now it wasn't all because of our system of private property and international relations--but believe me, a hell of a lot of it was. A lot of it is directly attributable to poverty which is directly attributable to the paternalistic system which we have. Those 44 per cent of the people--two out of five--that die before the age of five, are just as dead as if they'd been shot through the head with a bullet. Any nonviolence that doesn't recognize that fact and isn't against that violence as much as the violence of the bullet, just isn't relevant, as far as I'm concerned.

*Nonviolence has to be on the side of the victims. Pacifists often have the idea that we're above the battle. My friend, if you're white and middle class and (at least until very recently) American, you can be above the battle. But I remember talking to a man when we were in jail in Albany, Georgia, a Negro, who said, "I am in the ditch, with a white man's foot on my throat,

and the reality for me is to get his foot off my throat." We have to be with him in his struggle to get that foot off his throat. In the same way, we must side with the Vietnamese people in their efforts to win their independence from the U.S. You cannot say, I'm a pacifist, and both sides are using violence, therefore I'm above their battle.

*Nonviolence must draw distinctions in types of violence. This is a very tricky and difficult concept, and I never make this statement without being misunderstood. But Gandhi said, "It is better to resist injustice violently than not to resist at all." Now, of course, he didn't stop there; he went on to say, "But the best method to resist is by nonviolence." So I think we have to be able to draw a distinction between the saturation bombing by the Americans attempting to impose American will and Weltanschauung on the Vietnamese people, and the violence the Vietnamese people use in their struggle against us for independence. We must do this without ourselves taking on their violence.

*Nonviolence must be developed as a method of liberation. We have to get in on the struggles for liberation, in solidarity with our brothers, not all of whom use our methods. We have to develop nonviolence to the point where it is really capable of fighting wars of liberation, nonviolent wars.

*Finally nonviolence must seek to liberate exploiter as well as exploited. For although we are on the side of their victims, we are not against the enemy--not as persons. It's the structure we're against, not the person who happens to be on the wrong side of the struggle right now. If we recognize the extent to which we (and many of our present comrades) have moved from former indefensible positions--and the extent to which our present positions and commitment are still inadequate, from the point of view of the most exploited and attacked (such as the Afro-American in the ghettos and the Vietnamese victims of napalm and "Search and Destroy") how can we hate, exclude from the human family or wish to destroy those who are presently trapped in the myths and illusions of free enterprise democracy? I should think that at the very least we should feel the same compassion for them that we expect for ourselves from the Afro-Americans and the Vietnamese, despite our failings. We should want to encourage them to grow out of their defective loyalties, much as we have grown out of some of ours and seek to keep on growing out of those in which we are still enmeshed.

All these are characteristics of the nonviolence we should be reaching for--a nonviolence involved with and relevant to the realities of the world we live in. The fact is that nonviolence can work. One of the realities of the world we live in, too seldom recognized, is the limitations of military power. A perfect example is the present situation in Vietnam. Let me quote from the Wall Street Journal:

"The U.S. is reduced to no more than looking on nervously while a massive American commitment of manpower and money to South Vietnam hangs on the outcome of Saigon's internecine political power struggle. 'I have never quite realized until now the limitations of our influence to order international events,' said one White House aide yesterday. Another one sees in the current Saigon turmoil the classic example of the impotency of a great power overwhelmingly committed to a weak political base."

Now I submit that the kind of new nonviolence we should be reaching for should be as aggressive in behalf of the exploited and disadvantaged as the Fidelistas in Cuba, the N.L.F. in South Vietnam, and S.N.C.C. in the South. If we develop nonviolence as a method of liberation on behalf of the victims, while not cutting ourselves off from the exploiters but seeing ourselves as

one human family, we will have the method that can make any political area a weak political base, from the point of view of the oppressor. Then all the power of the richest and most powerful country in the world, overwhelmingly committed to that weak political base, will not be able to avail against nonviolence. Not at home. Not abroad.

That's our challenge, that's our job. Thank you.

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Dave Dellinger is a well-known pacifist and editor of Liberation Magazine

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