

Dr. Martin King and the Myth of the Nonviolent Tradition

The nonviolent tradition is often presented as a linear connection from Henry Thoreau to Mohandas Gandhi and then eventually to Martin Luther King. They are hailed as iconic symbols of nonviolent leadership, but this hardly presents the full story. The only accurate connection between these three activists concerning *civil disobedience* is that Thoreau used this strategy to protest against the U.S. government’s slavery and its expansion, and later both Gandhi and King also used civil disobedience to challenge their respective governments. Non-cooperation and challenging an unjust or oppressive government through various forms of protests (such as demonstrations and boycotts) to disrupt “business as usual” is the basis of civil disobedience, but this is not equated with being an absolute *pacifist* who is unalterable committed to nonviolence as a way of life. Civil disobedience is a strategy that can be used by any person or group regardless of their objectives, whether they are life-long pacifists or insurrectionists planning to overthrow a government through armed struggle.

In the case of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King they each used civil disobedience, and all publicly supported the use of armed struggle when necessary, which is in direct conflict with the position of an absolute pacifist and also contradicts the popular narrative of them as iconic *nonviolent* leaders. Gandhi went a step further and willingly participated in three armed conflicts. Calling for the support of an armed struggle is not a contradiction in either of their positions, because **neither Thoreau, Gandhi, nor King ever claimed that they were pacifists who rejected all forms of political violence**. Unfortunately, this pacifist position has been erroneously assigned to them by others in narratives of the nonviolent tradition which are inconsistent with the primary sources and historical facts.

Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862)

Thoreau was an American author who published two books and various poems and essays.



In protest against the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848) and the extension of slavery, he refused to pay his taxes and thus was incarcerated by the Concord, Massachusetts authorities. He wrote about this event in his best known essay, “Resistance to Civil Government” (later called “Essay on Civil Disobedience” or “Duty of Civil Disobedience”). He was one of the first defenders of John Brown, who along with twenty-two men raided Harpers Ferry, Virginia in October 1859 in an effort to overthrow the system of slavery by force.

On October 30, two weeks after the raid, Thoreau called a meeting at the Concord Town Hall, where he delivered the first of a series of speeches entitled, “Plea for Captain John Brown.” The fact that Thoreau believed in the use of violence to liberate the slave is plainly stated in his speech:

*...It was his [John Brown's] peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by **force** with the slaveholder, in order to secure the slave. **I agree with him.** ...I shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his method who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave. I speak for the slave when I say, that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain John Brown to that philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me.*

He continued,

*I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable. I know that the mass of my countrymen think that the only righteous use that can be made of Sharpe's rifles and revolvers is to fight duels with them, when we are insulted by other nations, or to hunt Indians, or shoot fugitive slaves with them or the like. I think that for once Sharpe's rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them. ...**The question is not about the weapon, but the spirit in which you use it.** [All emphasis added].*

It is clear from this reference that Henry Thoreau believed in the righteousness of revolutionary violence to overthrow an oppressive social system, and that this use of violence was complementary, rather than antithetical, to nonviolent civil disobedience. According to Thoreau, then, there were two different but legitimate means to resist an unjust order, including the means of violence.

Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948)

Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi was an activist from India who fought for Indian rights and independence from Britain. Gandhi is often credited with popularizing the nonviolent civil disobedience technique or passive resistance against injustice. He developed this technique of passive resistance against injustice (*satyagraha*, meaning "truth force") after he moved to South Africa in 1893 to help improve the rights and conditions of Indian immigrants. While in South Africa until 1914, Gandhi led many protests, was frequently jailed, and also participated in armed conflicts.



Gandhi wrote in the Autobiography that his

"loyalty to the British rule drove me to participation with the British in the war [the Boer War, 1899–1902]. I felt that, if I demanded rights as a British citizen, it was also my duty, as such, to participate in the defence of the British Empire. ... "So I collected together as many comrades as possible, and with very great difficulty got their services accepted as an ambulance corps."

Gandhi also took the initiative to form Indian Ambulance Corps to help the British in both the Zulu rebellion in 1906 and in World War I (1914-1918). Gandhi made no distinction

between combatants and non-combatants; neither could “be absolved from the guilt of war.”

In his later writings, Gandhi made it absolutely clear what his position is on violence and nonviolence. In his book entitled, *Nonviolence in War and Peace* (1942), he explains his rationale:

I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. ...I took part in the Boer War, the so-called Zulu Rebellion and the late War [WWI]. Hence, also do I advocate training in arms for those who believe in the method of violence. I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she would, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour.” [emphasis added].

Gandhi also stated that in regards to cowardice, he told his eldest son that if he would have been present when Gandhi was almost fatally assaulted in 1908 that “it was his duty to defend me even by using violence.”

Gandhi did believe that “nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence,” but he like Thoreau whom Gandhi called his “teacher,” felt that armed resistance was a legitimate method of struggle against injustice. As late as in his 1942 book, Gandhi continued to justify his voluntary participation in three armed conflicts and the advocating of using arms in a political situation. Finally, Gandhi stated that he introduced nonviolent tactics in South Africa and India “as an expedient” strategy as opposed to an unalterable way of life.

Dr. Martin L. King (1929-1968)

Martin King is arguably the most misrepresented and misunderstood leader of the twentieth century. His political work and activism over the final 12 ½ years of his life (1955-1968) represent one of the most significant chapters in U.S. history in the fight against the forces of American racism. In this struggle, Dr. King developed a vision of what America could become if it abandoned the blatant racism that, he argued, “the largest



portion of white America is still poisoned by.” King further argued that racism was so endemic in America that it is “as native to our soil as pine trees, sagebrush and buffalo grass.” In searching for a solution to the problems in America and eventually around the world, King developed an economic and political vision for a just and humane America. In this search, King addressed a number of critical issues: nonviolence and armed struggle; civil rights and human rights; moral issues and structural problems; reform and revolution; and protest and power. Unfortunately, on each of these issues King’s ideas, strategies, and political activism are consistently misrepresented to the public through the omission and distortion of the *primary sources* on Dr. King.

At an SCLC staff retreat in Frogmore, South Carolina in November 1966, Dr. King gave some remarks on nonviolence protest:

Now, I want to assure you that I am still searching myself. I don't have all of the answers, and as I have said so often I have no pretense to omniscience, I don't know everything – so you can feel free after I finish my informal statement to question me and we can question each other because if there is anything about nonviolence that I accept absolutely and that is the fact that it is an experiment with truth; and I simply engaged in the truth searching process...even in the movement in a real sense we are in this constant search for truth.

In 1967, King explains that people have a right to defend themselves when attacked, and the debate was about the *tactical* use of nonviolence:

I contended that the debate over the question of self-defense was unnecessary since few people suggested that Negroes should not defend themselves as individuals when attacked. The question was not whether one should use his gun when his home was attacked, but whether it was tactically wise to use a gun while participating in an organized demonstration. (Where Do We Go From Here, p. 27).

King stated a number of times in April 1967 that although he as a “pacifist,” if he had been called to military service against Hitler that

“I believe I would have probably temporarily sacrificed my pacifism because Hitler was such an evil force in history.” He added, *“I would willingly have fought against the Nazi menace of the 1940s.”* (King speech, “Why I Oppose the War in Vietnam,” 4/30/67; and Los Angeles Herald-Examiner, 4/12/67, p. B1).

Here is direct Evidence of Dr. King’s public support of armed liberation struggles in Africa and Asia:

*These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression and out of the wombs of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the world are rising up as never before. ... **We in the West must support these revolutions.*** (King speech, “Beyond Vietnam,” 4/4/67).

[Regarding a universal war against poverty] *The West must enter into the program with humility and penitence and a sober realization that everything will not always ‘go our way.’ It cannot be forgotten that the Western powers were but yesterday the colonial masters. The house of the West is far from in order, and its hands are far from clean. We must have patience. **We must be willing to understand why many of the young nations will have to pass through the same extremism, revolution, and aggression that formed our history.*** (Where Do We Go, pp. 178-79).

*[O]ne cannot hope to keep people locked out of the earthly kingdom of wealth, health, and happiness. **Either they share in the blessings of the world or they organize to break down and overthrow those structures of governments which stand in the way of their goals.*** (*Where Do We Go.*, p. 176.)

King often quoted Pres. John F. Kennedy's statement that "those who make peaceful revolution impossible, will make violent revolution inevitable." King believed this statement and thus took a great interest in the decolonization of the African continent, and worked and called for the support of those liberation struggles.

ANLCA

In the 1960s, Dr. King and other leaders called for the support of armed liberation struggles in Africa through two organizations, the *American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa* (ANLCA) and the *American Committee on Africa*. For example, King was a co-founder and co-chair of ANLCA, which was formed in 1962 to address the important issue of African Americans assuming a greater responsibility for the formation of U.S. policy in sub-Saharan Africa.

In its first conference in November 1962, ANLCA indicated in the preamble from the conference that the liberation struggle in Africa had reached a critical stage and that the organization "rejoice[s] with those nations of Africa who have recently achieved independence and who have taken their place in the community of free nations." Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria had all recently achieved their independence from France **through armed struggle**.

Further, in the conference resolutions ANLCA stated, "We support the Nationals of Angola and Mozambique in their struggle for freedom and independence." The support of the "Nationals of Angola and Mozambique" statement was made while both countries were fighting wars of liberation against Portugal.

Also, at its September 1964 conference, ANLCA repeated its call for the unconditional support of liberation movements in Africa, and that "every support" should be given to their attempts to achieve self-government in the Portuguese territories in Africa. African revolutionaries were fighting liberation wars against Portugal in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau. Martin King explained that these were winnable wars to kick out the oppressor, and support should be given.

Finally, Dr. King's public statements, writings, and his prominent role in organizations such as the ANLCA severely discredits the popular assertion that his nonviolent position was one of complete opposition to armed struggle against oppression.