

## Non-Violence: from Sparta to Selma, by Jim McKeown

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### I. Introduction

I want to thank the fellowship for this wonderful opportunity to talk to you – yet again -- about a subject close to my heart: non-violent protests. Protests have a long and varied history dating back to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, written about 3600 bce. Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, had become a tyrant, and the people marched and prayed to Anu their principle deity, to deliver them from horrible oppression. Anu sent his daughter, Ishtar, the goddess of passion, to seduce Enkidu, a wild man, and then bring him to the palace. Enkidu fought Gilgamesh to a standoff, and they became fast friends. Enkidu was the opposite of Gilgamesh, and together they transformed Gilgamesh into a compassionate and empathetic figure. When Enkidu dies, he mourns the death of Enkidu and risks his life to bring him back from the dead. Unsuccessfully, I might add. About 65 versions of this story exist in 10s of thousands of clay tablets. Nearly every excavated city in the Ancient Near East contained a copy attesting to its popularity. As far as I know, this was the first known, successful non-violent protest.

### II. **Aristophanes and *Lysistrata***

Aristophanes, who lived from circa 446 – circa 386 bce), was comic playwright of ancient Greece. Eleven of his thirty plays survive virtually complete. These, together with fragments of some of his other plays, provide the only real examples of a genre of comic drama known as "Old Comedy," and they are used to define the genre. He was also known as the "Father of Comedy" and the "Prince of Ancient Comedy." Aristophanes has been said to recreate the life of his period more convincingly than any other author. One of his most famous plays is *Lysistrata*, which some critics label as a really funny play even by modern standards. Written and first performed about 411 bce, at a time when Aristophanes had begun to despair of altering the course of events in Greece.

In the play, he proposes a conspiracy of women to refuse sex to their men until the men agree to make peace and end the interminable Peloponnesian Wars. In order for this to work, however, it must be world-wide in the Greek world. The priestess of Athena, who seems based on a real person, has organized it. The characterization of women from all over Greece is hilariously funny, and so are the details of the plot. *Lysistrata* is not the first play about women, but it certainly is the first play with women heroes. The play deals with impossibilities as if they were entirely possible. This seems to be Aristophanes final attempt to make changes in society and end the war, which continued on and off from 460 bce to about 404 bce.

In the play, the women seize the Acropolis, which holds the treasury, thus preventing the men from funding the war. First, a chorus of old men arise, but they are too tired and weak to burn down the gates, especially after a group of old women douse the fire with pitchers of water. Then a constable arrives with the local police force to burn the gates, but they are foiled by a group of unruly women with impossibly ridiculous names containing more than 30 letters, such as, σπερμαγοραιολεκιθολαχανοπώλιδες (**seed-market-porridge-vegetable-sellers**) and σκοροδοπανδοκευτριαρτοπώλιδες (**garlic-inn-keeping-bread-sellers**).

*Lysistrata* restores order and she allows the constable to question her. She explains to him the frustrations women feel at a time of war when the men make stupid decisions that affect everyone, and they do not listen to their wives' opinions. She drapes her headdress over him, gives him a basket of wool, and tells him that war will be a woman's business from now on.

The women begin to waiver, and try to desert with flimsy excuses. One man appears, desperate to possess his wife, and they torture him in a rather comic manner. After they solicit a promise to end the war, they prepare for bed business, one slow step at a time, and at the last minute, his wife flees to the Acropolis.

Finally, a herald arrives from Sparta, with a large burden (use your imagination here), and asks to begin peace talks. The Athenian constable also “burdened” (imagination again) arrives, and peace talks commence. Lysistrata introduces the Spartan and Athenian delegates to a gorgeous young woman called “Reconciliation.” The delegates cannot take their eyes off the young woman; and meanwhile, Lysistrata scolds both sides for past errors of judgment. The delegates briefly squabble over the peace terms; but, with Reconciliation before them and the “burden” of deprivation still heavy upon them, they quickly overcome their differences and retire to the Acropolis for celebrations. The play ends with the women and men dancing and singing together.

A wonderful story, so I am entirely unapologetic for going into so much detail.

### **III. Gandhi and the Birth of Modern Non-Violence**

Mahatma Gandhi did not claim to be a prophet or even a philosopher. "There is no such thing as Gandhism," he warned, "and I do not want to leave any sect after me." There was only one Gandhian, he said, “an imperfect one at that: himself.” The real significance of the Indian freedom movement in Gandhi’s eyes was that it was waged nonviolently. He objected to violence not only because an unarmed people had little chance of success in an armed rebellion, but because he considered violence a clumsy weapon which created more problems than it solved, and left a trail of hatred and bitterness in which genuine reconciliation was almost impossible.

Ghandi’s allegiance to non-violence created a breach between him and the educated and wealthy elite of India at the time. Once again, money and power trump common sense, compassion, and empathy for the poor and oppressed. Even his closest associates, Nehru, Patel and others, who were trying to organize the administration of independent, India did not question the superiority of the principle of nonviolence as enunciated by their leader, but they did not consider it practical politics.

Unfortunately, in a country with so many competing social and political forces -- a land estimated to have between 120 (the “official” count) and 780 languages. Many scholars suspect that 220 have been lost in the last 50 years, and another hundred may exist. Let’s not forget to mention India was the birthplace of four of the world’s major religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Buddhism and Jainism both have traditions of non-violence.

Religious violence has periodically inflamed the country. Ghandi’s associates were right. The fracturing of India into three parts – West Pakistan, India Proper, and East Pakistan -- later Bangladesh -- was a violent and inevitable result of freedom from British rule. To this day, Pakistan and India still eye their respective borders with a great deal of fear and suspicion. The fact that both possess nuclear weapons makes the need for non-violence even more urgent. They have not learned the lessons of their own history.

### **IV. The Civil Rights Movement in America**

Perhaps the best known example – to us -- of non-violent protest is the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s. Sparked by the horrific kidnapping, torture, and murder of Emmett Till, which bolstered the resolve of Rosa Parks, these events led to the arrival on the scene of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His economic boycotts and peaceful marches struck the country to the core. The scenes of violence in the

form of fire hoses, tear gas, and vicious guard dogs turned on the non-violent, swayed the president to begin pushing through the Congress the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s.

Unfortunately, our Supreme Court has seen fit to begin gutting some of those laws – particularly the “Voting Rights Act of 1965” -- which protected the right of all citizens to register to vote. I heard on NPR – just the other day – of an as then, unexplained hanging of a 54-year old black man in Claiborne County, Mississippi. A sheriff said that “the man did not appear to have stepped off of anything before he died.” Few other details were provided, however the FBI, the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, and the U.S. Attorney’s office are all investigating. The Mississippi Bureau of Investigation is also involved.

## **V. Vietnam and Beyond**

As the Viet Nam war dragged on, protests movements grew and grew until hundreds of thousands of protestors marched and sang and chanted. As occurred in the 50s during the Civil Rights protests, the police and National Guard Units, in several instances, turned from protecting citizens to committing acts of violence. The events at Kent State University in Ohio shocked the nation. Yet the grisly war machine continued to grind its victims. Unfortunately, a small radical group of anti-war activists turned to violence. In the several acts they perpetrated, no one was hurt, but three members of the Weather Underground died while assembling a bomb in a Greenwich Village townhouse in New York. As Jesus reputedly said, if you live by the sword, you will die by the sword.

However, compared to Congress during the presidency of George W. Bush, the Vietnam-era legislature compiled an impressive record in challenging flawed presidential decisions. Between 1964 and 1975, many legislators forced discussion of difficult questions about the mission, publicly challenged the administration's core arguments, and used budgetary mechanisms to create pressure on the Pentagon to bring the war to a halt.

George Santayana, philosopher, essayist, poet and novelist, wrote in his oft quoted and as often misquoted statement, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Clearly we have not heeded the call of history, not learned the lessons of the past, not learned from our terrible, misguided, fruitless mistakes. Will we ever?

## **VI. Middle East Wars**

Why were the Middle East Wars of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries so devoid of protests? Largely because -- unlike Viet Nam – we had no draft. No one was forced into the military, except for a disproportionate number of men of color, driven into the military because of poverty, lack of education, and, I believe in many cases, an attempt to prove their loyalty to America. How we have treated the veterans of these wars is unbelievably shameful, despicable, and down-right immoral manner. Less than three-quarters of one percent of the population had direct involvement in Desert Storm and George W. Bush’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This compares with roughly 10 percent during World War II. I lost several friends to the Viet Nam conflict. I cannot recall I had a single friend or family member involved in the Bush Wars, aside from a few students – some seriously damaged – who are trying to put their lives back together.

## **VII. Common Threads**

Until recently, women have not played any significant role in war. World War II saw women by the thousands leave their homes to take clerical and construction jobs normally filled by men now off to fight the war. Of course, when the men returned, they got their jobs back, and the women were sent home to their kitchens and nurseries. Only within the past decade or so, have women been recognized and lauded

for their contributions in World War II for the roles they played. Nearly 350,000 American women served in uniform, both at home and abroad, volunteering for the newly formed Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs, later renamed the Women's Army Corps), the Navy Women's Reserve (WAVES), the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, the Coast Guard Women's Reserve (SPARS), the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPS), the Army Nurses Corps, and the Navy Nurse Corps. General Eisenhower felt that he could not win the war without the aid of the women in uniform. "The contribution of the women of America, whether on the farm or in the factory or in uniform, to D-Day was a sine qua non of the invasion effort." (Ambrose, *D-Day*, 489). The Chinese have a proverb, "Women hold up half the sky." I believe that might be a shade over 50%. However, dating back to the ancient Greeks, women have played a role in non-violent protests.

More often than not, peaceful protestors become the victims of violence. Protesting in large numbers is a risky activity. Without the bravery of many men and women – willing to put their lives on the line – none of these protests would ever have any long lasting effect. The beatings on bloody Sunday in Alabama, the beatings of protestors with Ghandi, the deaths at Kent State, the deaths and injuries in Ferguson, Missouri, and at countless other protests around the world are actually hopeful – albeit terribly tragic signs that men and women will rise to fight oppression.

It seems most wars stem from greed – for power, money, oil, land. From Hitler's phony pretense of need for "lebensraum" to the oil wars in the Middle East. What will cause the next wars to break out? I believe it will be food and water. President Eisenhower's Cassandra-like warning of the dangers of the military-industrial complex, are now the tail wagging the dogs of war.

But the idea of withholding something – be it sex, money, or willing participation – can be an effective tool for turning the tide away from war, poverty, injustice, prejudice, and inequality. President Obama's attempt at a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Iran can be considered a form of non-violent protest of their nuclear ambitions – especially when counterpoised by some of the less than sane members of Congress calling for dangerous saber-rattling and threats of attack.

## **IX. Conclusion**

I recently heard Representative John Lewis interviewed, and he said, "The most powerful non-violent protest is the vote." We all hold that power in our hands. Some will use that power to further entrench the status quo: favoring corporations over employees, billionaires over middle class families, profits over the environment, men over women, the wealthy over the poor. How will **you** use that awesome power of non-violent protest?

Thank you.

## References

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**\*\*\*For a more extensive "Rationalist Bookshelf," please see my blog at [www.RabbitReader.blogspot.com](http://www.RabbitReader.blogspot.com). The list appears in a sidebar on the left side of the page.**