Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Lesson Plan

Nonviolent Protesters- Criminals or Heroes?

By: Nick Molander
Grade Level/ Subject Area: High School/ Civics
Class Size: Any
Suggested Time: 90 minutes

Guiding Questions:
- In what ways do citizens exercise their voice in calling for political and social change?
- How have nonviolent methods been a force of change?
- What is a just and unjust law? Is it criminal to break a rule or law you feel is wrong?

Lesson Abstract
Students in this lesson examine how citizens and non-governmental groups, specifically ones practicing nonviolence, can influence governments. By looking at the role and function of nonviolent protests, students examine the role of the citizen in democratically based societies in forcing social and political change. Students look at examples of protest from the United States, South Africa, and India, and critique the methodology and motivation of nonviolence as a means to instigate social and political change. Part of this lesson asks students to consider the nature of “criminal behavior” and analyze what constitutes a “criminal” act.

Vermont Vital Results Standards
6.10 Students compare and evaluate the philosophical underpinnings and the workings of different types of governments, including constitutional governments, in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations worldwide.

6.12 Students identify and evaluate the concept of human rights in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations worldwide.

6.14 Students understand the tensions between the forces of unity and those of disunity in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations worldwide.

Introduction
Constitutional governments derive their political power from the consent of the governed. In both constitutional monarchies and democratic-republics, a monopoly on power is kept in check by allowing citizens a right to participate in their government. Both the English Bill of Rights and the United States Bill of Rights makes mention of the rights of citizens to petition and question their governments. How citizens transform their governments, and specifically the role nonviolence plays, is crucial in understanding the workings of modern democratic societies. Quite often, governments and even communities deem people who refuse to follow unjust laws as wrong and misguided. These lawbreakers may be branded as criminals under the established order, but are actually calling in to question what is truly criminal in their society by refusing to follow unjust laws or rules.
Gandhi and Nonviolence
By reasoning that people had a right to resist laws that were unjust and went against the good of the community, Mohandas Gandhi created a way of thinking that revolutionized social and movements. Gandhi had many influences, both secular and spiritual. He culled from philosophers and writers like John Rushkin, Leo Tolstoy, and Henry David Thoreau a worldview that citizens had a right to fully question the legality and moral grounding of legislative actions and laws. His admiration for all world religions, including Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, fostered an appreciation for justice and acts of compassion. Imbed in Gandhi’s vision of nonviolent resistance was a sense of righteousness and adherence to a deep understanding of satya, or truth, and the duty one has to living a moral and good life (Parel, 1997, p.82). In this way, he sought to infuse a moral framework in his belief that unjust laws held no sway, but in challenging these laws, one must abide by a code of right action and avoid violent thoughts and actions. In describing this philosophy of nonviolence, Gandhi wrote that “Truth (satya) implies love, and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement Satyagraha, that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or nonviolence, and gave up the use of the phrase “passive resistance”, in connection with it, so much so that even in English writing we often avoided it and used instead the word “satyagraha” (Johnson, 2006, p.73).

Gandhi took his successful nonviolent movement to his home country of India in 1915, after successfully working to mitigate the oppressive laws that denied Indians their rights in South Africa. The British had for many years exercised and supported a monopoly over salt production. Given the tropical environment of India, salt was a crucial nutrient needed to survive. No Indian could manufacture salt, and it was a criminal offense to do so. This was one example of the oppression leveled upon Indians in their own country by the colonial British government. By using satyagraha, Gandhi sought not to “humiliate or defeat the whites in South Africa or the British in India” but instead sought to “convert them” to see the error of their ways (Fischer, 1982, p.35).

In 1917, now back in India, Gandhi was arrested for refusing to leave an area called Champaran. British landlords heavily taxed farmers there for not growing indigo, a crop used to dye cloth. Germany had perfected a chemical means to make indigo and the world market for organic indigo had collapsed. Farmers were bound by legal contracts to grow and give proceeds to their landowners. Insisting that they abide by the law, and also by raising rents, the British were exercising their legal right to bleed dry the farmers of the Champaran area. After persistent appealing to Gandhi for help, he went to visit Champaran and support the farmers. He openly and nonviolently defied the order to leave, claiming as an Indian he had every right to go where he wished in India. Brought before the judge. Gandhi pleaded guilty and refused to pay any bail. This criminal act was done to cause a tension for the judge, forcing him to punish Gandhi if he truly felt a wrong was committed. The charges were dropped and “civil disobedience had triumphed, Gandhi asserted, for the first time in India.” (Fischer, 1982, p.59)

It was in this spirit that Gandhi decided in 1930 to focus on the salt tax to challenge the British and force them to analyze the democratic principles of fairness and justice they claimed to represent in India. He sent letters to the Viceroy in charge of India, stating his intentions to walk to the Indian Ocean, a journey that would take over twenty-four days, and make salt. Upon
leaving his ashram, or spiritual community, Gandhi and seventy-eight others started their journey to use satyagraha and force a confrontation with the British. Once there, Gandhi knelt down in the water and made salt; no arrest was made. As Louise Fischer writes, “all along India’s long seacoast and in her numerous bays and inlets, peasants waded into the water with pans and produced salt illegally (1982 p.99). The police quickly started arresting thousands of people, including members of the Indian National Congress, the organization made up of Hindus and Muslims dedicated to getting self-rule for India. On May 4, 1930, Gandhi was arrested and sentenced to jail. Before his arrest, he had informed the Viceroy that he intended to lead a nonviolent march and take over the Dharsana Salt works. Unable to do so from jail, Mrs. Sarjoini Nadiu, an Indian poet, organized over twenty-five hundred volunteers to march in columns to the gate and take the skull-breaking blows inflicted by steel-tipped staves. The sight of hundreds of people falling to ground in pain without fighting back inspired the American news reporter Webb Miller to write “although everyone knew that within a few minutes he would be beaten down, perhaps killed, I could detect no sign of wavering or fear.” (Fischer, 1982, p 101). The beatings continued for several more days. From that moment on, it was clear the marchers were not the criminals; the followers of Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance had shown the world the brutality of British control of India. As Fischer notes “when the Indians allowed themselves to be beaten…and did not cringe they showed the world that England was powerless and India invincible.” (p.102) The question of independence was no longer an “if” but “when.”

**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Birmingham, Alabama**

During the 1950’s and 1960’s, the Civil Rights Movement incorporated Gandhi’s nonviolent approach as the preferred method to force dilemmas and instigate desegregation. One such example was the movement to end segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Dr. Martin Luther King saw Birmingham in the 1960’s as one of the most segregated and hostile places to African Americans in the United States. Its police commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor was, in the words of Dr. King, “a racist who prided himself on knowing how to handle the Negro and keep him in his ‘place’” (Carson, 1998, p.172). King wrote that in Birmingham brutality toward African Americans “was an unquestioned and unchallenged reality.” (Carson, 1998, p.172) and therefore was the target of civil rights activists in April of 1963. The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, and the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, along with Dr. King, organized the black citizens of Birmingham to boycott stores, march on city hall, and ignored court injunctions against public gatherings.

In the end, thousands of citizens, young and old, men and women, were arrested, attacked by police dogs, pined against walls with fire hoses, and threatened on a daily basis with violence. The protestors, using nonviolence as their tool, withstood all these blows and indignities without fighting back with fists. A document called the *Public Statement from the Eight Alabama Clergymen* appealed to African Americans in Birmingham “to withdraw support from these demonstrations” and “urged that the decision of those courts should be peacefully obeyed.” In the letter, the Bishops and other clergy “appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principals of law and order.” King challenged the idea of peace, one that Connor’s and others believed existed in Birmingham because “its Negroses were ‘satisfied’” (Carson, 1998, p.172), by showing that no real peace could exist so long as oppression and terror were used to keep people from exercising and realizing their full rights as citizens. This negative peace was built upon a one-sided view that the laws were serving the interests of all citizens equally. Peace existed
mostly because the African-American population lived under an oppressive government whose unjust laws were enforced through terror and denial of rights.

Dr. King was eventually jailed as a demonstrator while leading the Birmingham campaign. During his solitary confinement, he wrote what would become called *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*. In it, he writes to the eight clergy and challenges their notion of what constitutes just and unjust laws. King supported the resistance of laws that do not meet the moral standard of serving the best interests of a community; “You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws,” King writes, “One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” (Carson, 1998, p.193) His selflessness made him a criminal in the eyes of the Birmingham’s oppressive government, but elevated his status as a hero for his willingness to suffer, like Gandhi, to illuminate an injustice. King and Gandhi shared a visceral motivation to cause a tension and dilemma in the legal system by asking for and accepting punishment for breaking what they believed were unjust laws. Throughout the 1960’s, nonviolent resistance and protest was a standard of many in the Civil Rights Movement.

**Nonviolent Protest in the American Colonies and The Mexican-American War**

American colonists viewed themselves as English citizens, and therefore had a right to protest what many felt were unfair and oppressive policies by Great Britain. Before 1763, an economic philosophy of allowing the colonies to prosper with little oversight, called statutory neglect, encouraged a thriving economy among the thirteen colonies. After 1763, legislative acts, such as the Stamp Act prompted the formation of organized groups to oversee concerted efforts to oppose the new-felt oppression. The Stamp Act Congress was one such example. Up and down the eastern seaboard people actively encouraged colonists to boycott British goods. Committees of Correspondence formed in each colony to share information about the non-importation or boycott, which served as a precursor to the creation of the Continental Congress in early 1770’s. Its job was to keep alive the spirit of challenging British policies throughout the thirteen colonies. Parliament responded to a violent attack against a British merchant ship (better known as the Boston Tea Party). It sent troops to the port city of Boston, Massachusetts, closing the port city to all trade and placed its colonial government under direct royal control. Spurred by this and other events, the colonists convened their Continental Congress and issue a specific indictment of British violations of colonial rights. In 1776, Thomas Jefferson put forth in *The Declaration of Independence*, a belief in laws and rights that supersede Parliament and King George III, citing that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” The colonists made a last-ditch attempt with the ill-fated Olive Branch Petition to avoid full-scale violent conflict. The British were unresponsive, and the American Revolution was soon at hand.

During the 1800’s, many citizens supported the inevitable expansion of the United States across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. Mexico controlled most of what today we call the American Southwest, as well as present-day California up to and past the San Francisco Bay area. The United States’ border with Mexico was contentious, primarily because of border violations by U.S citizens crossing into Mexican territory. Some felt western expansion would mean an expansion of slavery, a simmering cause for sectional division among the loosely united states. Subsequent skirmishes between American citizens and the Mexican military gave an excuse for
President Polk to lead a call for war, a war that was seen as a reason to acquire land and power and eliminate Mexico’s challenge to American supremacy. To fund the war, a tax on voting (a poll tax) was instituted. Those opposed to the war, including writers like David Thoreau, who refused to pay the tax, were imprisoned. His rational was that he did not want his tax money going toward the war, and “believed in the ability of the determined moral minority to correct the evils of the majority”. (Fischer, 1982, p.39) For activists like Thoreau, the belief in a constitutional democracy was under threat by the declaration of war, and to support the war meant relinquishing the rights and responsibilities to question the intentions of the government. Thoreau, as a writer, knew his actions may have seemed inconsequential at the moment, but had the power to compel others to contemplate their complacency or failure to take action against an unjust war.

In the above examples, the use of nonviolent actions called into question the legitimacy of governmental actions. These early examples of resistance provide a historical step in what would become the direction of nonviolent resistance in the 20th century. The early colonial examples occurred in part because citizens felt empowered by a tradition of political rights and checks on absolute power. The colonists did not seek to end their connection to the British Empire, but to fully actualize their standing as equal citizens. Of course, acts of violence did occur, and the American Revolution was the ultimate outcome of the resistance movement. However, the call for independence came only after it was clear that nonviolent methods (assemblies, petitions, boycotts) and appeals to Parliament for a representative voice were ignored. In Thoreau’s case, his lone action built on the colonial legacy of challenging the government by appealing to people’s intellect and inherent sense of justice. His nonviolent action challenged friends and others to reflect on their own passive agreement with a war that Thoreau contended was unjust and profited a privileged few. While the early history of the United States is often portrayed as one built upon violence, it is essential that examples of nonviolent actions be appreciated and given their due as means to affect change.

**Conclusion**

The history of organized, nonviolent struggle as means to influence governmental policies and laws shows that citizens can have an active role in being a positive force of change within their societies. Each generation learns and builds on previous activists, drawing on ideals that can be applied universally. The nonviolent methods developed by Gandhi used by Dr. King and others in the Civil Rights Movement, built upon ideas and actions from people throughout the world. The actions of nonviolent practitioners are intentional to cause their community to question the legitimacy of making criminals out of heroes, and therefore challenge citizens to think and feel beyond the parameters of the laws imposed upon a society. It was this nonviolent resistance that had provided India with the moral high ground in its struggle to be free of British rule in 1947. In the United States, the struggle to secure equal rights for all its citizens was enacted not by lawmakers or judges originally, but by people organizing and exercising their will to be treated equally that goes back to colonial times, championed in the 19th century by abolitionists and other activists, and continued on throughout the 20 and 21st centuries. The use of nonviolence specifically called into question who was a criminal and who was a hero when challenging social and political injustice.
Bibliography


Suggested Teaching Activities
- Ask students to write a definition of what a criminal is and how society views criminals. Have them pair-share, and then record student thoughts on an overhead or board during a short group sharing session. Next, ask them to write again, this time identifying and describing any times when it is ok to break a rule or law. Repeat the sharing activity or go straight to group sharing.

- Ask students to quietly list times when violence solved a conflict or problem. Then do the same for nonviolence. Next, put the terms “Non-Violence” and “Nonviolence” on the board or overhead. Ask students to write down what he/she thinks is the difference between the two terms. Have them pair-share their lists with four other people and see what is the same and different on other people’s lists. Do the same for the definitions, and then debrief as group what people collected in their notes from partners.

- Explain “Non-Violence” is simply the lack of violence, either because someone could not be violent (restrained, fearful, weak). “Non-violence” does not erase hatred or the want to use violence.

“Nonviolent”, on the other hand, encompasses courage, compassion, trust, fearlessness, forgiveness, selflessness, and self-restraint. It is a term that is grounded on moral strength to not fight back with violence. It does not mean to run-away or to cower; rather, nonviolence is about standing firm to a sense of justice and truth without lashing out in hatred or emotion.

- Provide students with excerpts from the content essay (you can choose based on time and level of the students). Have them read and identify examples of how people determined if a law was just or unjust, and what actions were taken to challenge unjust laws. Ask them what parts included violent, non-violent, and nonviolent actions. Compare and contrast outcomes, both short and long term.

- Lead a Socratic discussion on the Guiding Questions, paying attention to how nonviolence could be applied to current political, social, and economic problems.

- Ask students why nonviolence was a choice for Gandhi, King, and others in promoting social and political change. When might these methods be difficult to apply? Why?
As an extension, students can research examples of nonviolence from around the world. These include: “the Frontier Gandhi” Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan a Muslim contemporary of Gandhi’s who fought for citizen rights in India; Tenzin Gyatso/The Dali Lama, fighting for the preservation of Tibet; Corazon Aquino in the Philippines and Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar (Burma), two women fighting oppressive political governments; resistance to Nazi-rule in 1940’s Norway and Denmark; the creation of the Polish Solidarity movement under Lech Walesa to fight communism in the 1980’s; Vaclav Havel and the ‘Velvet Revolution” of Czechoslovakia in the late 1980’s; the United Farm Workers and Cesar Chavez’s fight for Mexican-American farm workers in 1960’s and 1970’s; protests against oppressive regimes in Argentina and Chile; South Africa’s struggle against racial segregation called apartheid; Mubarak Awad and nonviolent parts of the first intifada in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Materials Needed
- Content Essay copies (excerpts or the entire essay)
- Background information on constitutional monarchies and republican democracies
- optional-Textbooks on American and World history (for clarification or research on historical examples in the content essay)