Title of Lesson: Non-Violence Means “Doing Nothing”

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Grade Level/Subject Areas: High School History/Social Studies
Class Size: Any
Time/Duration of Lesson: 30-80

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Goals/Objectives of Lesson:</th>
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<td>• To express why some people think being non-violent means to do nothing and others believe that it is just as active and effective as war.</td>
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<td>• To analyze primary sources with opposing viewpoints to better understand Gandhian non-violence.</td>
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<td>• To evaluate alternatives to armed conflict.</td>
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Lesson Abstract:
In this lesson, students will enter into a discourse between M.K Gandhi and former U.S. Senator Fred Thompson. Like many critics of non-violence, Thompson used the argument that non-violence means to do “doing nothing”, but this lesson attempts to correct that misconception. World War II will serve as the context for this study, but the intent is to see non-violence as timeless.

Lesson Content:
Many critics of non-violence echo the words of Fred Thompson in the article “Gandhi’s Way Is Not America’s Way”, when he states “At what point is it okay to fight dictators like Saddam or the al Qaeda terrorists who want to take his place? It turns out that the answer, according to Gandhi, is NEVER.” Although former Senator and potential Presidential candidate Fred Thompson is not an authority on M.K. Gandhi, his comments about Gandhi in the public sphere do draw peoples’ attention and interest in Gandhi. High school students are just as likely to come in contact with Gandhi through mentions of him in the media than they are to encounter him in historical context. This can often lead to a misconception of Gandhi and non-violence such as Thompson’s comments.

This common misperception comes from the idea that people who are non-violent do not “fight.” M.K. Gandhi completely contradicts this assertion; in fact he uses “fight”, “soldier”, and “army” quite often when describing Satyagraha, or civil disobedience. (See my other lesson on this website titled “The Militarization of Language”, for a full lesson on this topic.) He even distinguished “non-violence of the weak” versus “non-violence of the strong.” Non-violence of the weak would include running away from violence, whereas non-violence of the strong would include offering up your life to the barrel of a soldier’s gun rather than using a gun yourself to take the life of the soldier. Non-violence of the strong demands the self-control to not harm and the willingness to die for a just cause. This is quite different from the willingness
to harm or kill for a just cause.

Additionally, Gandhi’s non-violence included intensive organization and planning. The following is an example of this type of organizing as it relates to non-violent resistance of an invading army. This excerpt is taken from “How To Meet A Japanese Invasion” in Homer Jack’s The Gandhi Reader, and could be used in addition to the primary sources included with this lesson.

“In 1942 the Japanese occupied Burma and it was feared that they would soon land on the coast of India. At Gandhi’s suggestion one of his trusted co-workers, Miss Madeleine Slade, went to Orissa, a province on India’s east coast, to prepare the people for non-violent resistance to the invaders.”

Madeleine Slade was the daughter of British Admiral Sir Edmund Slade. She became a member of Gandhi’s ashram, or farm community in India, and lived there for nine years as a trusted advisor. You may also come across her as Miraben, the name that Gandhi gave her.

What follows in Madeleine Slade’s letter to Gandhi: (See citation in the bibliography.)

“I feel we have got to try and gauge the maximum resistance which the average inhabitants may be expected to put up and maintain, and make that our definite stand. A steady, long, sustained stand, though no cent per cent resistance, will be more effective in the long run than a stiff stand, which quickly breaks. This maximum sustainable stand which we may expect from the average people is probably:

1. To resist firmly, and mostly non-violently, the commandeering by the Japanese of any land, houses, or movable property.
2. To render no forced labor to the Japanese.
3. Not to take up any sort of administrative service under the Japanese.
4. To buy nothing from the Japanese.”

Gandhi replies to her letter stating: “Remember that our attitude is that of complete non-cooperation with [the] Japanese army, therefore we may not help them in any way, nor may we profit by any dealing with them. … One thing they should never do- to yield submission to the Japanese.”

This example alone is enough to dispute Thompson’s point that Gandhi would “never fight dictators like Saddam or the al Qaeda terrorists who want to take his place?” It does this by showing that Gandhi was preparing Indians for a potential Japanese attack. They were going to fight, but in a non-violent and active way, or Gandhi put it with “complete non-cooperation.”
The other writings by Gandhi included in this lesson are used to show that he believed the moral force of non-violent resistance could be used to oppose the immoral force of violence. In particular it will be helpful to point out to your students the courage and strength it would take to participate in these actions of non-violence. Gandhi’s own words from the first primary source demonstrate these two points: “An army that dares to pass over the corpses of innocent men and women would not be able to repeat that experiment. You may, if you wish, refuse to believe in such courage on the party of the masses of men and women; but then you would have to admit that non-violence is made of sterner stuff.” In other words, non-violent resistance takes more courage and is just as active as violent resistance.

Gandhi’s commitment to non-violence was one of action rather than inaction. His satyagraha movements in South Africa and India used boycotts, marches, civil disobedience, and even an attempted non-violent take-over of a salt mine. These actions are certainly examples of people doing something quite extraordinary and in no way could be called “doing nothing.”

**Minnesota Content Standards:**

- **U.S. History, The Great Depression and WWII 1929-1945**, The student will understand the origins of WWII, the causes of the war, and its impact on American society.

- **World History, Global Conflict**, The student will demonstrate knowledge of the worldwide impact of WWII.

- **Historical Skills, Historical Inquiry**, The student will analyze historical evidence and draw conclusions.

- **Government and Citizenship**: The student will analyze various methods of civic engagement needed to fulfill responsibilities of a citizen of a republic, including civil disobedience.

- **Language Arts: Subp. 3. Speaking, listening, and viewing.** The student will speak clearly and effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences and actively listen to, view, and evaluate oral communication and media.

- **Language Arts: A. Speaking and listening.** The student will demonstrate understanding and communicate effectively through listening and speaking.

**Guiding Questions:**

- Does non-violence mean “doing nothing”?

- What is your reaction to M.K. Gandhi’s response to possible invasion of India by Japan during WWII?

- What is M.K. Gandhi’s suggestion to other world powers about how to resist foreign
invasions?

• What impact does the misconception about non-violence have on the world’s understanding of WWII and war in general?

• Is the theory of non-violence still relevant today?

• Do you think “Gandhi’s way” could ever become “The American Way”?

Materials Needed:

The only materials needed for this lesson are the article critiquing non-violence and the primary source examples of M.K. Gandhi’s responses.

Lesson Context:

This lesson would ideally serve as a supplement to a unit on World War II or global military conflicts. It could also be used a supplement to a unit on M.K. Gandhi or the history of India. Originally it was created as part of a course on the philosophies of non-violence.

Teaching Activities:

Students will read the article critical of Gandhian non-violence. You may choose to solicit initial responses to the critique in order to gauge the impact of M.K. Gandhi’s response.

Next, students will read Gandhi’s words on how he suggested India and other nations could respond to foreign invasion non-violently.

Students will then enter into a class discussion about these two views on non-violence:

If class discussions are not common in your classroom, it is important to spend time setting the ground rules as a class for what a good conversation looks and sounds like.

I strongly suggest the following:

• Arrange your seating in a circle.
• Encourage the students to do the majority of the speaking.
• The teacher should speak only as a moderator.
• Encourage students to build on each other’s comments before moving on to a new topic.

It can also be helpful to have students write a short journal of their reactions to an initial question you place to the group. This journal response can be used to help students who are not comfortable speaking off the cuff or in front of their peers.

• For larger classes:
If you feel your class is too large, I suggest splitting the class in half by making an inner circle and an outer circle. This is known as a fishbowl. The students in the inner circle discuss while the outer circle listens. The outer circle can also assess the group or individual students on the quality and participation of the inner circle.

**Assessment/ Evaluation:**

- Students could write a two-part short-answer-essay with one section explaining why some people believe that Gandhi’s non-violence basically means doing nothing and another section explaining why others believe that is a misconception.

- Assessment can also come from teacher observations of the quality of questions asked and answered during the discussion.

**Extension Activities/ Enrichment:**

This lesson could easily move into a lesson about Gandhi’s use of civil disobedience or satyagraha and how “passive resistance is a misnomer due to the active nature of Gandhian resistance.

This lesson could also be extended by studying successful non-violent actions around the world. These can be found in the book and DVD *A Force More Powerful*, listed below.

**Bibliography:**


A Force More Powerful. [www.aforcemorepowerful.org](http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org)

**Fred Thompson: Gandhi’s Way Isn’t the American Way.**

Q. How could a disarmed neutral country allow other nations to be destroyed?

At the risk of being considered a visionary or a fool I must answer this question in the only manner I know. It would be cowardly of a neutral country to allow an army to devastate a neighbouring country. But there are two ways in common between soldiers of war and soldiers of non-violence, and if I had been a citizen of Switzerland and a President of the Federal State what I would have done would be to refuse passage to the invading army by refusing all supplies.

[Y]ou would have presented a living wall of men and women and children and inviting the invaders to walk over your corpses. You may say that such a thing is beyond human experience and endurance. I say that it is not so. It was quite possible. Last year in Gujarat, women stood lathi charges unflinchingly and in Peshawar thousands stood hails of bullets without resorting to violence. Imagine these men and women staying in front of an army requiring a safe passage to another country. The army would be brutal enough to walk over them, you might say. I would then say you will still have done your duty by allowing yourselves to be annihilated. An army that dares to pass over the corpses of innocent men and women would not be able to repeat that experiment. You may, if you wish, refuse to believe in such courage on the party of the masses of men and women; but then you would have to admit that non-violence is made of sterner stuff. It was never conceived as a weapon of the weak, but of the stoutest hearts.

From: 427. “HOW TO COMBAT HITLERISM”, Collected Words, V.78 p.345

[I]magine the state of Europe today if the Czechs, the Poles, the Norwegians, the French and the English had all said to Hitler: ‘You need not make your scientific preparation for destruction. We will meet your violence with non-violence. You will therefore be able to destroy our non-violent army without tanks, battleships and airships.’ It may be retorted that the only difference would be that Hitler would have got without fighting what he has gained after a bloody fight. Exactly. The history of Europe would then have been written differently. Possession might (but only might) have been taken under non-violent resistance, as it has been taken now after perpetration of untold barbarities.

Under non-violence, only those would have been killed who had trained themselves to be killed, if need be, but without killing anyone and without bearing malice towards anybody. I dare say that in that case Europe would have added several inches to its moral stature. And in the end I expect it is moral worth that will count. All else is dross.

I have written these lines for the European Powers. But they are meant for ourselves. If my argument has gone home, is it not time for us to declare our changeless faith in non-violence of the strong and say we do not seek to defend our liberty with the force of arms but we will defend it with the force of non-violence?