

Getting Gene Sharp Wrong

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In an article at [Waging Nonviolence](#), George Lakey, friend and mentee of the late founding theorist of nonviolent action Gene Sharp, [took issue](#) with my article “[Change Agent: Gene Sharp’s Neoliberal Nonviolence](#),” and my follow up [interview in Jacobin](#).

In “Change Agent,” I show that Sharp had lifelong connections to the US defense establishment, associations with US regime change operations, and neoliberal politics that shaped his revolutionary theory. Lakey says I miss Sharp “by a mile” and suggests my conclusions are based merely on a “guess.”

Lakey asserts I am wrong, but he mischaracterizes my arguments, ignores the bulk of my evidence, and does not offer any new facts that successfully challenge my analysis. Let’s review.

Lakey’s Defense

Lakey says my key error is in “casting Sharp as a political thought leader” who offered social movements a specific “strategy” and “moral guidance.” According to Lakey, I unfairly criticize Sharp for neglecting questions like “What is your affirmative program?” and “What are your ideas about how the economy should be organized?” Lakey explains that Sharp “deliberately chose not to become a political leader,” so “[i]t makes no sense to criticize his not acting like one.” Sharp was, Lakey writes, simply trying “to be helpful by explaining how the technique of nonviolent struggle works.”

Lakey suggests Sharp is best understood by way of metaphor: like a “lonely botanist” who spent his career “plug[ging] away” in the “distant jungles,” misunderstood by his peers. Other people would apply and profit from his discoveries, but the botanist is “busy exploring a yet more distant part of the jungle.” Finally, the botanist’s lifelong work leads to a “paradigm change.”

This is a straw man. I do not argue that Sharp should be viewed as a “political thought leader.” To the contrary, I critique the main public narrative about Sharp, which does cast him as such. In the press, Sharp is often praised in the same breath as political leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Mainstream accounts emphasize his early arrest and imprisonment for refusing to fight in Korea, his lifelong struggle against “dictatorships,” and his four nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize. Documentaries like [How to Start a Revolution](#) and books like [This Is an Uprising](#) portray Sharp in similarly romantic fashion, a fabled guru of radical activists around the world. (It’s true, Sharp’s ideas are ubiquitous throughout protest movements globally.) In sum, Sharp enjoys a glowing public profile as a courageous, progressive hero of nonviolent liberation movements.

As I show in “Change Agent,” this profile obscures more than it reveals. Sharp was no Gandhi-like tribune of the people.

But to say Sharp was not a political leader is *not* to say that Sharp was apolitical. Far from being a “lonely botanist” working in a neutral fashion on the outskirts of civilization, Sharp was often on the front lines of history, with clearly discernable politics.

Sharp was a Cold War defense intellectual with a thirty-year post at the epicentral defense and intelligence brain trust, the Center for International Affairs at Harvard. He was a master tactician who trained anti-government protest movements in countries running afoul of free market orthodoxy and US geopolitical priorities. He was a neoliberal idealist who believed that big, economy-regulating states were inherently violent. He thought his “people-powered” politics of nonviolent action could help make governments smaller, and thus more peaceful.

As to the questions Lakey says I improperly “demand” of Sharp: these are actually questions I pose to social movements possessed of the incorrect idea — thanks to the aforementioned popular narratives — that Sharp *is* a progressive “political thought leader.” This misimpression is dangerous. Sharp was an academic focused on the mechanics of “nonviolent” regime collapse. His post-revolutionary instructions are limited to loose paeans to “democracy,” “freedom,” and state “decentralization.” If justice-seeking activists treat Sharp and his intellectual heirs as their political cornerstone, they run a big risk: they could *succeed* in collapsing their government, but then not know what to do next. They’ve created a volatile power vacuum that might be filled by neoliberal puppets, racist nationalists, religious fascists, criminal networks, or nothing at all — a failed state. We have seen this entropic dynamic play out most recently in the Arab Spring.

After misrepresenting my point, Lakey actually agrees with my warning: “I happen to agree with Smith’s concern about overthrowing dictatorships with no preparation for the aftermath.”

The Evidence That Gene Sharp was a Cold War Defense Intellectual

Lakey claims that my only evidence that Gene Sharp was a Cold War defense intellectual is that “nonviolent struggle was used to hasten the unraveling of the Soviet empire.”

Actually, the evidence is as follows. In 1965, Gene Sharp, then a graduate student at Oxford, was recruited by a powerful American nuclear strategist named Thomas Schelling to join a new, cutting edge, wired-in incubator for US Cold War defense, intelligence, and security policy development: the Center for International Affairs at Harvard. The “CIA at Harvard,” as it was then called, was the epicenter of the Cold War intellectual establishment, serving as hearth and home to top-flight Cold Warriors like Henry Kissinger, McGeorge Bundy, Samuel Huntington, and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Schelling, who would be a key champion of Sharp’s work, was a presidential adviser, RAND Corporation researcher, Harvard economics professor, expositor of the controversial “madman theory” of international affairs, and, according to the *Washington Post*, “the man who made the Cold War what it was.” In the mid-1960s, Schelling was also a consultant for the US Department of Defense’s “Project Camelot.” Camelot was a massive social-science research initiative focused on quelling counterinsurgency and smoothly transitioning the globe to an American-led

world order. Among its priorities: “peace research.” With Schelling’s help, Sharp too would secure Department of Defense funding for his doctoral research on the dynamics of nonviolent action. The results would eventually be published as Sharp’s magnum opus, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Sharp’s affiliation with the CIA at Harvard would be long, positive, and productive. He would remain there for thirty years, calling it his “academic home.”

Lakey’s version of the foregoing facts is this: “Smith calls Sharp a Cold Warrior, lining him up with Harvard’s Thomas Schelling, who consulted with the Department of Defense.” There’s no recognition of Sharp’s own appointment at the CIA at Harvard, Sharp’s own Department of Defense funding, the full nature of Sharp and Schelling’s career-long collaboration, or the historical context that illuminates the meaning of these facts.

As Lakey acknowledges, Sharp’s nonviolent weapons system was in fact used to help achieve the ultimate Cold War goal: collapsing the Soviet Union. In 1985, Sharp published *Making Europe Unconquerable* under the auspices of something called the Program on Nonviolent Sanctions in Conflict and Defense. This was Sharp’s very own center within the CIA at Harvard, established with Schelling’s help. Sharp’s thesis in *Making Europe Unconquerable* was that NATO should adopt a policy of “nonviolent sanctions” vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. “Father of the Cold War” George Kennan contributed the book’s forward.

Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing all the way up to the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Sharp and colleagues from his NGO the Albert Einstein Institution (AEI) provided nonviolent action training directly to secessionist leadership in the Baltics and Russia, making several in-person trips to the region to provide on-the-ground consultation. (Lakey acknowledges Sharp “consult[ed] with Baltic and other governments.”) AEI’s help proved pivotal. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the new Lithuanian defense minister remarked that, if forced to choose, he would prefer Sharp’s nonviolent action weapons system to the nuclear bomb.

To sum up: throughout the Cold War, Gene Sharp theorized defense questions, with US Department of Defense monies, with express reference to the Soviet Union, with the approbation of US defense leadership, within an intellectual nerve center of the US defense and intelligence establishment, the CIA at Harvard. He even directly counseled those applying his theories on the ground in the Soviet Union. He was a Cold War defense intellectual.

Lakey has another objection: “A real Cold Warrior would give his weaponry to one side and deny it to the other. He would keep it secret and, in that way, make it all the more powerful. Sharp, of course, prodigiously published his work.” Actually, a real Cold Warrior would have understood very well the weapons of modern warfare take many forms. Some must remain secret, while others — like Sharp’s Department of Defense-funded nonviolent weapons system — are operationalized only by propagandistic promotion.

Incidentally, while some interpreters of my work have called Sharp a “Cold Warrior,” and while I think this is a defensible descriptor, I generally call Sharp a “Cold War defense intellectual.” “Defense intellectuals” are theorists of a certain style and milieu who orient their research toward

the US defense and intelligence establishment. They are advisers, not policymakers; behind-the-scenes experts, not political leaders.

Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution

Lakey asserts that Sharp simply wanted to “amplify the power of nonviolent struggle for whoever chooses to try it.” But the record shows that Sharp chose to amplify the power of nonviolent struggle at particular times, in particular places, with particular allies.

Sharp established the Albert Einstein Institution (AEI) in 1983, with Schelling on the board of directors. The group’s mission: to advance nonviolent struggle around the world. Sharp cofounded this outfit with one of his former students: Peter Ackerman. Ackerman’s day job was helping manage the notorious junk bond empire Drexel Burnham Lambert. There, Ackerman served as right-hand man to Michael Milken — the banker who helped inspire Oliver Stone’s avaricious, corporate-raiding, 1980s-defining *Wall Street* character Gordon Gekko. Ackerman would go on to serve on the board of the neoliberal CATO Institute and would advocate for that enduring neoliberal aspiration, the privatization of social security, through the CATO Institute’s Project for Social Security Choice.

Ackerman helped bankroll AEI, contributing millions of dollars. And though Sharp’s boosters try to distance him from congressionally funded organs of US soft power, AEI indeed sought and received money from groups like the US Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the International Republican Institute. So, too, did international activist groups with which AEI worked.

Another important member of the AEI team was Colonel Robert Helvey, who met Sharp at the CIA at Harvard. Colonel Helvey had been dean of the National Defense College. This was the training institute for the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), one of the “big five” agencies in the US Intelligence Community (IC). Helvey also worked with the Joint Military Attaché School (JMAS), a more specialized program that trains intelligence gatherers for the DIA’s international Defense Attaché System. Colonel Helvey would become one of AEI’s most important activist trainers.

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, AEI and its offshoots — groups like the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) and the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) — could be found training anti-dictatorship activists around the world.

But not in dictatorial US client states like Chile, Saudi Arabia, El Salvador, and Zaire. In two decades worth of AEI annual reports, there is scarcely mention of these countries.

Rather, AEI and its offshoots emphasize training activists in countries like the Soviet Union, Burma, Thailand, Tibet, Yugoslavia, China, Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, and post-Soviet Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia. These were countries thwarting the United States’ geostrategic priorities, or otherwise resisting neoliberal economic “reforms” — deregulation, privatization, austerity-forcing social spending cuts, and more. AEI did not even try to obscure its politically tilted approach to “fighting dictatorships.” After the Soviet collapse, AEI’s president, Christopher

Kruegler, reminded AEI's supporters: "A fifth of humanity still lives under brutal communist autocracy."

Rather than address the record, Lakey charges that "If governments [Smith] supports do get overthrown nonviolently, she's clearly ready to lay that at Sharp's door." No. I lay at Sharp's door those nonviolent revolutions that he, AEI, and its offshoots openly celebrate having helped. Key examples include the Soviet Union (1991), Yugoslavia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004). After these US-backed, Sharpian "nonviolent revolutions," new leadership demonstrated greater fealty to the United States' agenda and greater submission to Western demands for neoliberal economic "restructuring." While protestors often had good reason to desire change, today it is commonly recognized, even in the mainstream, that these ousters — sometimes called "color revolutions," thanks to the telltale use of official protest colors, per Sharp's framework — were regime-change operations undertaken by the United States to punish upstarts and install more compliant "clients."

Lakey protests, pointing out that "nonviolent struggle has also been used to overthrow regimes that were part of the US empire," as in the case of Pinochet's Chile. Nonviolent tactics have been used throughout history by a great variety of interests. But we are talking about Gene Sharp and AEI. AEI reports from the late 1980s and 1990s emphasize Sharp and colleagues consulting with activists from non-allied countries like Burma, China (plus Taiwan and Tibet), and the Soviet Union — not Chile, where leftists were resisting Pinochet, the murderous US-backed tyrant installed after the CIA-backed overthrow of the elected democratic socialist Salvador Allende. Nor does Lakey offer any evidence that Sharp or AEI were instrumental in the anti-Pinochet struggle.

Lakey also suggests that AEI's training of Palestinian activists is proof Sharp was willing to buck US geopolitical priorities. But over his career, Sharp met not only with Palestinians, but also with top-ranking members of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). According to nonviolent action scholar Maria Stephan, the IDF ended up using Sharp's ideas to quash the First Intifada. Similarly, Sharp and AEI's work on South Africa was consistent with Reagan-era foreign policy.

Gene Sharp's Neoliberal Politics

What explains Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution's pattern of choices? In "Change Agent," I show they are consistent with Sharp's neoliberal worldview, which was defined by anxiety about the supposedly inherent "violence" of "centralized State power."

Lakey claims I am wrong, that I am "forc[ing] Sharp to weigh in" on questions Sharp did not seek to answer, unfairly "teasing out inferences from his writings."

Sharp's politics are ascertainable throughout his whole body of work. But of particular note is *Social Power and Political Freedom*, a 400-page political treatise Sharp published in 1980, with Thatcher and Reagan in the background. The thesis of this book is a critique of "centralized State power," as expressed through things like "State ownership," state "regulation" and "controls" over the economy, and all those political strategies that "rely upon the State to make needed social and economic changes." Sharp opposed "centralized State power" because he

thought it the key source and vector of violence in the modern world. The book's introduction was written by a powerful libertarian senator, Mark Hatfield, a latter-day Ron Paul. As Senator Hatfield summarizes in the introduction:

Sharp's vision and apprehension of the criminal realities of centralized government are foremost in importance. In this work [Sharp] pragmatically describes the resulting institutionalized violence that spews from centralized government, whether that government is ruled by self-appointed or elected officials — war, dictatorships, genocide, and systems of social oppression will always follow.

Indeed, Sharp takes an entire chapter to critique communists and social democrats alike for pursuing state power, because, according to Sharp, trying to fix social and economic problems by way of the state “does not empower the people who are already weak.”

Sharp's remedy to big, violent, economy-regulating governments? State “decentralization”: bringing about a “significant devolution” or “redistribution” of “centralized State power” to a “variety” of “alternative,” “independent,” “non-State” social groups and institutions. And how to effect this “decentralization”? Sharp's own politics of nonviolent action. Sharp was like Machiavelli in reverse, interested not in building the consensus that undergirds state power, but in dissolving it.

Sharp argued state “decentralization” would have the happy effect of reducing violence in society generally. He does not address examples of “decentralized,” laissez-faire governments presiding over highly violent societies, as in the antebellum US South. Nor does he discuss the empowering things that “big” and “centralized” governments have done throughout history, like guaranteeing K–12 education for all children regardless of means.

Ignoring all of this, Lakey writes that my analysis of Sharp's politics must spring from a “fear that people power might prevail over the military power of a state [Smith] supports.”

Lakey also thinks my observation that Sharp had neoliberal politics “contradicts” my observation that Sharp was a Cold War defense intellectual, since Cold Warriors “very much wanted to support the security of their state.” (Here Lakey actually concedes Sharp's close associations with the defense and intelligence world.) But there is no contradiction. The best opponents of “big government” — from Thomas Jefferson to the Koch brothers — have understood that they must *engage* government if they are to shrink it. Sharp opposed “centralized State power,” desired its “decentralization,” and thought his politics of nonviolent action could help do that. So that is what he advocated to policymakers.

Gene Sharp and Class Struggle

In “Change Agent,” I show that Sharp's neoliberal, anti-“big government” politics were not just incidental to his revolutionary theory, but fundamental. Sharp casts the great world-historical struggle as between “dictators” who seek to grow the “centralized,” malevolent, means-of-production-owning state, and “decentralizing,” peace-producing “people power.” Sharp's framework anticipates, and so conjures, a specific struggle, and that struggle is the body politic against the government.

This is a significant departure from the classical left theory of power, which understands the history-moving struggle to be between the classes: those who own and profit from the world's productive assets, and the 99 percent who must sell their labor to survive. This is called "class struggle."

Lakey explains that Sharp was simply not interested in class struggle as such. According to Lakey, Sharp was curious about "working people's choice to differ sometimes from the conventional wisdom that to become powerful it is necessary to be violent." But Sharp himself wanted to develop theory free of the question "Which side are you on?"

First, you heard it from Lakey: Sharp wasn't interested in class struggle as such. If you are interested in building a class-conscious movement, beware relying too heavily on Sharp's work, because this was not his project. In fact, it seems Sharp did not think of "class" as a productive relation at all. In *Sharp's Dictionary of Power and Struggle*, the entry for "class" is subdivided into two concepts: "political class" and "social class." No mention is made of "economic class" at all.

Second, Sharp's theorization of nonviolent action did not escape the question "Which side are you on?" What is at issue is how he *framed* the sides.

Finally, I reject Lakey's implication that working people who choose nonviolent struggle are "innovators" bucking some "conventional wisdom" that to be powerful requires violence. If workers' struggle takes a "conventional" form, that form is the strike. The idea that the typical labor struggle is violent is a right-wing talking point and historically inaccurate.

Sharp's Definition of "Violence"

Gene Sharp's goal was to end "violence," which he defined in *Sharp's Dictionary of Power and Struggle* as "the direct infliction of physical injury or death on persons by whatever means, or the threat to inflict such harm." In "Change Agent," I argue that this definition naturalizes *indirect* forms of violence inflicted by opaque "market forces," laws, and government policies.

Lakey counters: Sharp simply sought to define "violence" and "nonviolence" in "behavioral" rather than "ethical" terms, "emphasiz[ing] observable phenomena" rather than morality. He charges, "For Marcie Smith . . . definitions based on observable behaviors is not the bottom line — morally-based political judgments are."

It is true Sharp distanced himself from pacifist rhetoric. But Sharp's entire framework pivots on the moral claim that "violence" is bad and "nonviolent action" is good. Lakey himself writes that Sharp "detested violence" and "believed that political actors should know about an alternative way to fight their battles that didn't bring the terrible suffering of war."

The question I am raising is this: What exactly does it mean, and what does it not mean, to say Gene Sharp "detested violence" and promoted "alternatives"?

In *Making Europe Unconquerable*, Sharp discussed how a government could offensively use his system of nonviolent action to "spread its own political outlook and system" and to effect regime

change: “This may involve using nonviolent international political and economic sanctions and spreading knowledge of how to wage nonviolent struggle to the population of the countries with those conditions and disliked regimes.”

Where international economic sanctions result in half a million children dead, as happened in Iraq, should this “observable phenomenon” be counted as “nonviolent” since the injury was inflicted only indirectly? When nonviolent regime change resulted in the privatization of post-Soviet Georgia’s hospitals and deregulation of its health insurance system, causing medical costs to skyrocket and reducing access to health care, should this “color revolution” be celebrated as a victory for peaceful struggle?

According to Sharp’s definition of “violence,” yes, on both counts.

Subjectivity and Objectivity

Despite our differences, Lakey and I agree on some things. We both think that Sharp “influenced politics in the world,” is a difficult character to understand, and made correct observations about the dynamics of protest.

But a final important difference between us is this: Lakey is an intimate authority on Sharp, whereas I am not. Lakey wonders “why *Jacobin* would turn to [Smith] as an authority on [Sharp],” since I “didn’t know [Sharp] personally” or consult with Sharp’s associates.

It is entirely true: my authority to speak on this subject is based not on a lifelong friendship with Sharp, or on the warm perspectives of his closest colleagues. My authority flows from admittedly drier, more academic sources: Sharp’s own corpus, Sharp’s historical context as documented by major news outlets and books from reputable publishing houses, the history of the Center for International Affairs, and the history of the Albert Einstein Institution. Citations are available for review in the 229 footnotes in “Change Agent.”

Intimate perspectives can be valuable to understanding world-historical figures like Sharp. But intimacy can sometimes undermine clear and objective thinking. Indeed, while Lakey clearly dislikes my conclusions, he does not describe my arguments correctly, ignores most of my evidence, and, most critically, does not offer any new facts that successfully challenge my analysis.