Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence

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Shortly after the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955–1956 established Martin Luther King Jr. as the nation’s leading practitioner of nonviolent direct action, an official from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) asked him to name the books that had most influenced his thinking. King chose five texts. Four of them seem unsurprising: Mohandas Gandhi’s autobiography, Louis Fischer’s 1950 biography of the Indian leader, Henry David Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience, and Walter Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel classic, Christianity and the Social Crisis. The fifth book on the list, however, was Richard Gregg’s 1934 The Power of Non-Violence, a text virtually unknown today among historians of modern America. Even major biographies of King, such as those by Taylor Branch and David Garrow, largely ignore Gregg. Yet he was the first American to develop a substantial theory of nonviolent resistance.¹

Militant nonviolence did not emerge in the United States as a response to racial segregation in the 1950s. Its central characteristics appeared during the interwar period, amid a worldwide crisis of democracy fomented by industrial conflict, economic instability, an increasingly precarious colonial system, and the ascendant threats of fascism and Communism. In this context, Richard Gregg became part of a small radical pacifist vanguard that went beyond mere opposition to international war to insist that the future of democratic societies depended on their members’

absolute renunciation of violence as a means of social change or conflict resolution. As an alternative, members of pacifist organizations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the War Resisters League (WRL) began to experiment with social and political practices that they came to call nonviolent direct action, nonviolent resistance, militant nonviolence, or simply nonviolence. Then, during World War II, a new generation of pacifists and their allies took the project further, particularly through their work in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). By the time that King read Gregg's writings in 1956, the method of nonviolence had undergone decades of elaboration, revision, and occasional practical application.

The recovery of Richard Gregg's career opens a window on the early trajectory of nonviolent action as an intellectual, theoretical, and political project. Historians of the civil rights movement have shown how the idea and practice of nonviolence shaped the politics of such figures as King and Bayard Rustin, and some recent work has uncovered the important debates in the 1960s over the advantages and limits of nonviolence as a method. Historians of interwar pacifism have revealed the links between the American peace movement and a wide range of domestic reform initiatives. Still, neither civil rights historians, with their focus on racial equality, nor peace historians, with their stress on international relations, have adequately analyzed the complex roots of nonviolence, its moral and strategic innovations, and its historical significance. Gregg's eclectic career allows a more expansive view. Though he was a pacifist, his conception of militant nonviolence owed much to factors outside the peace movement, particularly his experience and observation of organized labor in America and anticolonialism in India. In his enduring belief in the centrality of labor, Gregg drew on the ethos of the Old Left, but his fear of a mechanized, centralized, and militarized society looked forward to the concerns of the New Left. Gregg's long personal and intellectual journey shows the enduring problem of violence and the elusive goal of nonviolence to be crucial not only to the history of pacifism and the civil rights movement but also to the general development of modern American dissent.


More than any other single figure, Gregg taught American pacifists and social reformers that nonviolence was more than an ethical or religious principle; it was also a self-conscious method of social action with its own logic and strategy. Specifically, he argued that the method, particularly when it involved suffering, became a dramatic performance that would elicit guilt and shame from opponents and sympathy from onlookers. Gregg’s theories were the result of an unprecedented transnational exchange. In the 1920s he took up residence in India, where he befriended Gandhi and became the first American to make an extensive study of the Indian independence movement. He believed that Gandhi was developing a comprehensive counter-modernity, a more humane alternative to Western civilization that would use modern scientific knowledge to create a simplified, decentralized, peaceful, and ecologically balanced culture. But Gregg’s most lasting and original contribution to American politics and intellectual life was his explication and modification of the Indian leader’s nonviolent techniques. For Gregg, as for generations of pacifists before him, the rejection of violence was a fundamental religious imperative. Yet the “power of non-violence” drew on more than divine mandate; it also depended on the insights of modern psychology, the influence of mass media, and the experience of mass spectatorship. In his fusion of principle and spectacle, he hoped to rescue and revitalize democratic practice. That King was the person who came closest to fulfilling that goal was only one of the surprises in Gregg’s unlikely career.

Richard Bartlett Gregg was America’s first major theorist of nonviolent action, and like many innovators he is difficult to categorize. Born the son of a Congregational minister in 1885, he held a deep religious faith throughout his life but remained aloof from organized Christianity. Some thought that he was a Quaker (and the assumption persists in a few recent accounts), but Gregg felt no inclination to join even that most inclusive and broad-minded of Christian traditions. “I do not belong to any church,” he once explained. “I'd rather work from the outside.” His interests were diverse—he became most widely known for his writings on pacifism and nonviolent action between anticolonialism and civil rights, see James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill, 2002); and Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, 1997).


violent action, but he also published books and pamphlets on religion, science, economics, sexual ethics, and organic farming. Finally, though his theories highlighted the performative dimensions of politics, Richard Gregg was no performer. He “was a quiet and very humble man,” one admirer remembered, “painstaking in his speech and writing.” Another explained that he was “one of the quietest radicals in history.”

Gregg’s radicalism first emerged, not in the context of the American peace movement, but out of his experience of American industrial conflict. Like his father and three brothers, he attended Harvard College, where he studied mathematics and science and initially planned to be an electrical engineer. At some point he changed his mind, and he eventually obtained a degree from Harvard Law School. After practicing for a few years, he opened an office in 1915 with Robert G. Valentine and Ordway Tead, two experts in the emerging fields of personnel management and industrial psychology. The men were, Gregg remembered, “employed sometimes by employers, sometimes by labor unions, sometimes by joint associations of employers

and unions.” No doubt they kept busy. Between 1915 and 1920, the labor movement sustained a level of activity and power unprecedented in American history. Union membership nearly doubled in those years, and many industries became unionized for the first time. The militance of the growing labor organizations, alongside the rapid expansion of large corporations, produced an explosion of strikes and other unrest, many of them resulting in violence.8

Even after United States intervention in the Great War in Europe, Gregg continued his attempts to resolve the industrial war at home. He harbored antiwar inclinations, recalling decades later that, although he “did not receive any church training against war” as a youth, he had “given [himself] religious training in this matter” by the time of the war. In 1917 he was slightly too old to be drafted, a fate that may have forced him to make a more public statement of his views. But he seems to have had little connection to organized pacifism. Those years saw a revitalization and radicalization of the American peace movement as leading American peace advocates such as A. J. Muste, Kirby Page, and Jessie Wallace Hughan dedicated themselves to radical pacifism as a result of their wartime experiences. Yet until the 1930s Gregg played no visible role in the renewed war against war. Coming to the question of violent means from outside the peace movement, he was uniquely situated to help change the meaning of pacifism itself.9

Despite his focus on the industrial arena, he had little success there. Shortly before the armistice, he took a job in Woodrow Wilson’s wartime government as a mediator for the National War Labor Board, but his experience settling a protracted dispute at the Bethlehem Steel Company proved frustrating and unrewarding. His political allegiance turned increasingly toward organized labor. After leaving his government post, Gregg began doing statistical, legal, and public relations work for the Railway Employees’ Department (RED), an amalgam of unions representing the shopmen who built and maintained the nation’s trains.10 Enjoying unprecedented prosperity during the wartime nationalization of the railroads, the RED had become the kind of centralized modern labor organization that required the professional expertise of such people as Gregg. Within a few years, however, the railway shopmen found themselves pinched by a slumping economy, harassed by anti-union railroad owners, and abandoned by the pro-business policies of the Harding administration. On July 1, 1922, after a series of layoffs and a wage cut, four hundred thousand of them went out on strike.

The railway shopmen's strike of 1922 probably did more to shape Richard Gregg's ideas about violence than did the military slaughter of the Great War. A total of 1.6 million workers went on strike that year, including not only railway shopmen but also miners and textile workers. For many Americans, the labor battles that ensued posed a far more immediate threat to their way of life than the bloodshed across the Atlantic Ocean had. Soldiers had not occupied American cities in 1918, as they had in Europe, but federal troops did march through the streets of many industrial communities in the United States during the summer of 1922. In addition, local marshals and company guards patrolled major railroad shops in Chicago, where Gregg worked, and in cities across the nation. Guards occasionally fired on strikers, who fought back by kidnapping and assaulting replacement workers, sabotaging trains, and dynamiting tracks. In this desperate climate, the Harding administration became increasingly intent on ending the conflict, and in September a federal judge issued an injunction against the rail strike as a conspiracy in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act. Over the next few months, the shopmen reached separate agreements with the railway companies and returned to work. Federal law had given the railroad owners almost total victory.11

Sometime during the railway strike, “when feeling was most bitter,” Gregg had seen a glimmer of hope. In a Chicago bookstore, he came across “an article about Gandhi which gave some quotations from him.” He was profoundly interested and, he later remembered, “got hold of everything about him and by him that I could find.” To this minister’s son, the peculiar Indian Hindu “seemed more like Christ than anyone I had heard of in the present world.” Meanwhile, the Railway Employees’ Department, decimated by the strike, had to downscale its operations, and Gregg lost his job. He made up his mind to go to India.12

In his few years working for the federal government and the railway shopmen’s union, Gregg had witnessed the disintegration of the labor movement in America. He had taken part in government mediation that was apparently fair and open but that lacked the power to enforce even its own moderate recommendations. Then he had participated in a strike that had twisted into an escalating spiral of destruction, only to end with a legal decision that seemed to restore order at the expense of justice. Neither the rational methods of legal professionalism nor the fearsome power of violent action had done much to solve the problems of the new industrial society. Richard Gregg sailed for India on January 1, 1925, to find a better way.

In the life of Mohandas Gandhi, Gregg must have seen a few parallels to his own. The man he hoped to meet had also discovered both the inadequacy of law and the uncontrollable nature of violence. Born in 1869, Gandhi was already an established Indian leader by the time Gregg sought him out, but his path had been circuitous. He had originally planned to be a lawyer, training in London for that purpose. Although he eventually established a successful practice in South Africa, he also encountered there a system of racial discrimination far worse than anything he had

11 Colin J. Davis, Power at Odds: The 1922 National Railroad Shopmen’s Strike (Urbana, 1997); Montgomery, Fall of the House of Labor, 399–410.
12 Gregg to Bacon, April 9, 1934, series 2, Pendle Hill Records.
experienced in India or in England. As a consequence, he found himself increasingly engaged in political activity on behalf of his fellow Indians, including a few early attempts at nonviolent resistance. When he returned to India in 1915, he abandoned law and turned his efforts toward political action and the development of satyagraha. Translated loosely as “hold fast to the truth,” the term came to refer to both Gandhi’s philosophy of conflict resolution and his method of militant nonviolent action. In 1920 he began a nationwide noncooperation campaign, his first attack on colonialism as a system. Yet the specter of violence stalked his efforts. Just as the American railway strike had devolved into an increasingly violent struggle, so Gandhi’s campaign floundered as a result of government repression and rioting by his followers. In February 1922 he called off the effort, denouncing both the “organized violence of the Government” and the “unorganized violence of the people.” Yet, as Gregg’s bookstore epiphany illustrates, the Indian leader’s novel methods of political protest had already brought him his first widespread international attention.

To understand Gandhi’s methods, Gregg immersed himself in Indian culture for four years. He had visited the country before, while working for his brother-in-law in 1913. On that earlier trip, Gregg later confessed, he had been “an ignorant tourist with the usual ideas as to the superiority of the white man.” Now he went abroad “not as a missionary or business man, but to learn about India, the land, the people, the religion and philosophy, the attitude toward life.” He “avoided white men as much as possible” in order to interact with Indians, “eating their food, wearing their kinds of clothes, trying to learn their language, adopting their customs so far as I could, travelling with them so far as I could in the third (‘lowest’) class railway carriages.” One white man he did not avoid was Charles F. Andrews, an Anglican minister who had become one of Gandhi’s closest English friends and most enthusiastic supporters. Andrews smoothed Gregg’s path into the mahatma’s Sabarmati ashram, where he spent several months. Gregg also met the poet Rabindranath Tagore and spent time at his school.

Yet Gregg faced considerable challenges as he sought to “learn about India.” He contracted malaria and dysentery during his first year overseas and struggled with frequent health problems after that. During his recovery, he took a job teaching science in a Himalayan village, and his experience there led him to write A Preparation for Science, a textbook that attempted to convey Western scientific concepts using examples and objects (such as pebbles and rice) that were familiar to Indian peasants. The book showed Gregg’s interest in science as a systematic way of examining the world that was “not the same as machinery or Western technology.” Like Gandhi, who often described himself as a modern researcher performing “experiments with truth” (as the title of his autobiography had it), Gregg understood himself to be a scientist


even as he renounced many of the fruits of scientific knowledge. Here, too, were Gregg’s initial forays into translating ideas between India and the West, the kind of translation he later performed in his writings on nonviolence.15

Gregg’s next book, Economics of Khaddar, sought to divorce economics from Western capitalism, just as A Preparation for Science had split science from Western technology. Economics of Khaddar was his first book about Gandhi, but it was not about nonviolent resistance. It was instead an analysis of the mahatma’s proposed system of small-scale domestic textile production. Much to the embarrassment of other Indian political leaders (and most American admirers), Gandhi publicly championed an economic program that required his fellow Indians to spend time each day spinning thread for the production of khaddar (handmade cloth). Economics of Khaddar sought to demonstrate the practicality of Gandhi’s idea. “The khaddar movement,” Gregg argued, “is more and more using modern science and technology, but applying them to a different mode of power utilization and to a different type of machinery from that found in Western industrialism.” Gregg tried to show that India’s agrarian society required an economy different from those of Europe and America. Undoubtedly influenced by his experience with American industrial strife, he believed that handicraft production was morally and aesthetically superior to Western industrial capitalism, but he assumed that there was no need to give up economic efficiency to attain moral superiority. Though he presented his book as an analysis of Indian conditions, he also criticized the West, arguing that even there, decentralized production would be a more effective and humane method of economic life. Gregg was trying to imagine a countermodernity that could employ modern economic knowledge but dispense with modern capitalism.16

A Preparation for Science and Economics of Khaddar have little apparent relation to Gregg’s writings on nonviolent politics. Because they were published in India, few Americans ever read them. Yet those works first articulated his idea that modern discoveries had proved the rationality and usefulness of social practices that seemed primitive or antimodern. Gregg relied on this same ironic premise in defending Gandhi’s use of nonviolence. The Indian leader’s philosophy, he explained, might appear “preposterous to Westerners,” a relic of ancient or exotic religious practice. In fact, nonviolence was the logical application of modern psychology, modern politics, and modern systems of representation and communication. Spectatorship was the key to this new political discipline. Gregg came to believe that in Gandhi nonviolence had become more than an inner conviction; it was now a performance, part of a public moral dialogue intended to elicit sympathy from both opponents and disinterested observers. Gregg’s theory of nonviolence sought to combine moral and spiritual principles with the strategic dramatization of those principles.17

15 Richard B. Gregg, A Preparation for Science (Ahmedabad, [1928]), 6–9, 16.
17 For Gregg’s understanding of his project, see Richard B. Gregg, Gandhiji’s Satyagraha; or, Non-violent Resistance (Madras, 1930), ix–xii; and Gregg, Power of Non-Violence, 11–14. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent
Neither Mohandas Gandhi nor Richard Gregg invented the practice of nonviolent resistance. People lacking power have probably employed what the anthropologist James C. Scott has called “weapons of the weak” as long as social inequalities have existed in human societies. In the American context, black slaves in particular used forms of sabotage and subterfuge short of open revolt to assert their autonomy and improve their material conditions. Yet by its nature such “everyday resistance” renounced any attempt at systematic social change.18 Closer to Gregg’s own theories was the approach of the nonresistant followers of William Lloyd Garrison in the 1830s and 1840s. Those radical pacifists, while promising to “repudiate all human politics, worldly honors, and stations of authority,” placed great faith in the power of public opinion. An 1839 article in one of their journals described the peculiar advantage that nonresistants held over attackers: “The aggressor of a nonresistant will be placed in the wrong; he will be condemned by himself, by byestanders, by the public.” Yet, although Garrison and his associates certainly knew how to deploy public spectacle, they ultimately saw their stance as an inner conviction to do right regardless of political consequences. For Garrison, the strategic advantages of nonviolence were incidental to its religious superiority; Gregg’s writing made nonviolent strategy itself a subject of careful analysis and conscious manipulation.19

Gregg’s innovations in nonviolent action developed alongside, and later within, the new radical pacifism that revitalized and transformed the Garrisonian tradition in the decades after World War I. The devastating effects of the conflict in Europe and the jingoistic and reactionary climate of the home front led a few Americans, most of them left-leaning ministers and reformers, to embrace absolute pacifism. The most important organization for the dissemination of their views in the interwar period was the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which had been founded in 1914. The FOR’s roots in the Social Gospel showed in its nonsectarian Christian orientation and in its wide-ranging attempts to infuse pacifist principles into diverse arenas of social life, such as industry, education, and race relations. The War Resisters League, begun in 1923 as a secular offshoot of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, focused more narrowly on international war but shared its parent’s radicalism. In the 1930s, Gregg would become a member of the WRL and a leader in the FOR.20


Overlapping those organizations was the active interwar Socialist party (SP), led by the former FOR secretary Norman Thomas. Until the Spanish civil war, the SP espoused a position on international war that was very close (though not identical) to pacifism, and many prominent pacifists were SP members. Militant nonviolent action became an important project in the pacifist-Socialist nexus, though it was usually proposed as a response to the problem of war among nations. For instance, Devere Allen, an important figure in the FOR, WRL, and SP, insisted that workers could stop war through a concerted nonviolent refusal to take up arms or manufacture them, a general strike for peace.21

During the 1920s the Indian independence movement came to seem the best hope for an efficacious form of nonviolent action. Radical pacifists recognized that Gandhi’s success was crucial to their project, and they were among the first Americans to study and publicize his ideas. Beginning in 1926, Gandhi’s autobiography appeared for the first time in the United States as a serial publication in Unity, a religious journal edited by the influential New York pacifist minister John Haynes Holmes. The interest went the other way, too; around the same time, Gandhi reprinted a tract by the pacifist propagandist Kirby Page in his journal Young India. Such efforts formed a significant transnational conversation, perhaps the first time that a predominantly white American reform movement had embraced a leader from among the “colored races” as a spiritual and political innovator of global significance.22

Nevertheless, American pacifists initially had some difficulty explaining exactly why Gandhi mattered to modern politics. Many saw the mahatma primarily as a saint or great man, a transcendent embodiment of a religious ideal. Holmes considered the Indian Hindu “the Christ of our age”; Page published a 1930 pamphlet on Gandhi that was called simply Is Mahatma Gandhi the Greatest Man of the Age? Richard Gregg avoided such sentimental veneration. Despite his personal admiration for Gandhi, and his own early impression that the mahatma was “like Christ,” Gregg said almost nothing in his books on nonviolence about the Indian leader’s status as a great man.23

Gregg regarded himself as a scientist and a cultural translator, and he wrote accordingly. He published three books on nonviolence: The Psychology and Strategy of Gandhi’s Non-Violent Resistance in 1929, Gandhiji’s Satyagraha; or, Non-violent Resis-


22 E. Stanley Jones to Kirby Page, Feb. 6, 1926, Kirby Page Papers (Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, Calif.).

Pacifists were among the first Americans to discover Mohandas Gandhi. This special December 1924 issue of the pacifist-socialist journal the *World Tomorrow* contained essays by American, English, and Indian writers, along with a bibliography of works about Gandhi and India. *Courtesy Yale University Library.*

**GANDHI!**

Gandhi, Before His Imprisonment

---*Courtesy The New Orient.*

The Fellowship Press, Inc.
396 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

In 1930, and *The Power of Non-Violence* in 1934. They were less a trilogy than a continuing revision of the same general material, a long attempt, as Gregg put it, “to state in Western concepts and terminology the principles and practice of non-violent resistance.” The titles, with their invocations of “strategy,” “resistance,” and “power,” suggest in capsule form Gregg’s pragmatism. He thought of his books as a way to extricate pacifism “from the profitless atmosphere of emotional adjectives and of vague mysticism, futile protests and sentimentalism combined with confused thinking.” For this project, he cultivated a diffident writing style marked by constant hedging; he frequently acknowledged to his readers that he might be “mistaken” or even “wrong.” The reservations were an organic part of his argument, for he believed that a practitioner of nonviolence (like a theorist of it) “recognizes that no matter what his beliefs and convictions are, he may possibly be mistaken or at fault.” In part Gregg borrowed this tone from Gandhi himself, who became both legendary and notorious for his public confessions of uncertainty and his nearly obsessive self-examination.
Gregg tried to move pacifists beyond allegiance to moral truisms and toward a more pragmatic politics.

Gregg posited a form of nonviolent resistance that depended on explicit self-consciousness, the kind of self-consciousness associated with the modern psychological self. Earlier religious pacifists (and before the twentieth century, virtually all American pacifism was grounded in religious faith) tended to view their condemnation of violence as an internal conviction. Its effect on others, though sometimes profound, was ultimately irrelevant in comparison with the believer’s own determination to follow the divine will. Gregg, in contrast, said little about the nonviolent resister’s own beliefs, focusing instead on the reactions of both violent attackers and disinterested spectators. By doing so, he helped make nonviolence a technique for social change.

“Let us . . . try,” Gregg suggested, “to understand first how non-violent resistance works.” In each of the three books, he presented a pair of dramatic scenes. First, he asked readers to imagine two men, one who attacks violently and another who defends himself by the same method. Such combatants, he explained, implicitly consent to a common set of moral values, despite their apparent opposition. Both believe in the efficacy and appropriateness of using physical force to settle disputes. Then Gregg changed the scene, portraying a violent attacker who faces a nonviolent resister. In failing to defend himself, the second person intentionally disrupts the attacker’s value system. He employs “a sort of moral jiu-jitsu” that causes his attacker to “lose his moral balance.” This was a psychological game, and Gregg counted on the violent attacker to cave in from sympathy, pity, or sheer bewilderment. He suggested that the nonviolent conversion of an opponent was “analogous to . . . religious conversion, though in this case the change is moral rather than religious.” More often, however, he drew on modern psychological models to explain how it happened. Gregg’s use of psychological theories was opportunistic and eclectic; he was equally likely to employ Freudianism, the early behaviorism of John B. Watson, or the theory of emotion formulated by William James and Carl Georg Lange to make his case. The larger point was that scientific authority could validate the methods that Gandhi explained in moral and spiritual terms. Just as modern economics had shown the unlikely rationality of hand spinning, so modern psychology proved the effectiveness of standing defenseless before an enemy’s assault.

The nonviolent method, though a sincere expression of principle, was also a public performance intended to persuade an audience. Gregg’s construction of nonviolent action rested on the power of sympathy. “Undoubtedly,” he wrote, “the sight of another person voluntarily undergoing suffering for a belief or ideal moves the assailant and beholders alike and tends to change their hearts and make them all feel kin-

24 Gregg, Gandhiji’s Satyagraha, x; Gregg, Power of Non-Violence, 11, 210. My account of Gregg’s theories, especially his views of human nature, elaborates on the pathbreaking analysis in Chatfield, For Peace and Justice, 202–12.

25 Gregg’s three major works on nonviolence contain many passages and sections that are identical or very similar. Where appropriate, I have cited the work quoted in the text first, then used cf. to indicate parallels in the other works. Gregg, Power of Non-Violence, 41–68. Cf. Richard B. Gregg, The Psychology and Strategy of Gandhi’s Non-Violent Resistance (Madras, 1929), 1–90; and Gregg, Gandhiji’s Satyagraha, 8–79.
ship with the sufferer.” He proposed two reasons for this phenomenon. One was physiological: humans had evolved to react to one another’s pain. “Hence the sight of suffering, in all probability, causes an involuntary sympathetic response in the nervous system of the beholder, especially in the autonomic nervous system,” Gregg wrote. The other reason stemmed from a psychological desire for vicarious experience. Gregg noted that “everyone wants, in his heart, to be strong and brave.” At the sight of a nonviolent resister, “we wonder if we could do so well, and perhaps we even unconsciously identify ourselves with him.” That potential for identification made “beholders” into a potent force in Gregg’s scheme.26

Spectators played an important role in the victory of the nonviolent resister. Gregg, who was fundamentally optimistic about human nature, believed that a violent attacker would indeed convert, but he argued that third parties could assist the process. “If there are onlookers,” he wrote, “the assailant soon loses still more poise. Instinctively he dramatizes himself before them and becomes more aware of his position.” The “audience,” Gregg thought, became “a sort of mirror,” reflecting back to the attacker his egregious violation of moral standards.27

Gregg believed that mass media had created a global audience, for both nonviolent resisters and their violent opponents. Under modern conditions, he explained, “ruthless deeds tend to become known to the world at large.” He acknowledged the existence of state censorship but maintained that the power of mass media would eventually overcome it. “Newspaper reporters are always keen for scenting a ‘story,’” Gregg opined, “and as soon as they learn of a censorship anywhere they are still more eager.” Whatever its moral import, the scene of defenseless men and women voluntarily succumbing to vicious assaults made a fascinating “story.” Nonviolent resistance “makes wonderful news,” Gregg insisted. “It is so unusual and dramatic.” He even compared the power of the nonviolent resister’s appeals to the persuasive effects of “commercial advertising.” He concluded, with both prescience and unwarranted optimism, that the threat of bad publicity would give the practitioners of nonviolence a decisive advantage over their violent opponents.28

Gregg’s pragmatic theories led him to the daring argument that “non-violent resistance is perhaps . . . more like war than we had imagined.” Other contemporaneous pacifist works, such as Devere Allen’s 1930 The Fight for Peace, called for a more aggressive and militant opposition to war, but few engaged military strategy itself as extensively as Gregg’s did. Certainly no other peace advocate had ever gone so far as to write a book whose opening chapter was titled “The Truths and Virtues of Militarism,” as the first chapter of Gandhiji’s Satyagraha was. Gregg opposed the violence of

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war, but he accepted the necessity of conflict in social life. So he quoted extensively from Carl von Clausewitz, Napoleon Bonaparte, and other military strategists, and he called nonviolence a “weapon,” sometimes implying that like poison gas or machine guns, it was an innovation in the history of warfare. Nonviolent resistance became a kind of war without killing, for Gregg thought that killing was unnecessary to achieve war’s goals. “Though war uses violence,” he explained, “the effect it aims at is psychological. Non-violent resistance also aims at and secures psychological effects, though by different means.” If nonviolent action was a kind of conflict and not a retreat from the world, it needed to draw on the “truths and virtues of militarism.” Following Gandhi, Gregg’s work suggested that nonviolent action had many of the characteristics of war: It relied on courage, loyalty, and other martial qualities; it required attention to strategy; and it depended on moral, emotional, and psychological advantages, not solely physical ones.29

Yet for all Gregg’s language of “psychology and strategy,” his vision retained a religious basis. He was explicit about the spiritual imperative at the heart of his rejection of violence. He ended his books by explaining that nonviolent action was “the practical instrument by which we can make very great progress” toward creating the “kingdom of God . . . here on earth.” With that language, he positioned himself as an heir to the Social Gospel tradition that sought to usher in the millennium through human progress. Yet Gregg, attentive to issues of strategy, generally avoided religious language in his books, for he felt that he could gain wider attention by appealing to secular, and particularly scientific, explanations for his views. He did so, he explained in a letter to the American pacifist leader John Nevin Sayre, on the assumption that “readers who were religious would immediately link up my secular reasoning with the precepts of the New Testament and other religious thinking.” And they did.30

Such readers could “link up” because Gregg’s ideas admitted of both religious and secular interpretations. He insisted that “values,” not material conditions, constituted the basis of reality. “Deeper than rulership by political governments, banks, and classes is the control coming from ideas and sentiments,—a scheme of values, a set of ideals or activities which people desire and believe to be right,” he wrote.31 Clearly, this view had affinities with the Christian belief in a spiritual reality that transcended the physical world. Yet his focus on the importance of symbolic action spoke to modern secular concerns as well. The discoveries of Einsteinian physics, the increasing pervasiveness of mass media, and the findings of psychology (all of which Gregg incorporated into his work on nonviolence) had highlighted the active role of the observer in constituting reality. Gregg’s attention to values and symbols spoke to such awareness of the subjective components of human experience. He believed that by attending to the primacy of ideals, he could help solve the crisis of democracy that

29 Gregg, *Gandhi’s Satyagraha*, 1–7; Gregg, *Psychology and Strategy of Gandhi’s Non-Violent Resistant*, 95;
threatened America and the world. Gregg’s work spoke to American pacifists, but it also engaged the broader debate over the character and meaning of politics and citizenship.

In the 1920s and 1930s, while Richard Gregg was formulating his theory of nonviolence, other American political and social critics were analyzing the place of emotional, moral, and spiritual factors in modern life. Works such as Walter Lippmann’s *A Preface to Morals* and Thurman Arnold’s *The Symbols of Government* insisted that the values, myths, and symbols that guided American society were obsolete, ineffective, and even dangerous. With self-critical accounts such as those, liberal democracy hardly needed enemies, yet radicals left and right seemed to be proliferating, and they, too, talked of morals, values, and symbols. In *I’ll Take My Stand*, the southern Agrarians defended a conservative rural culture as the only moral one. Marxists associated with the Popular Front sought to invent a “revolutionary symbolism” for a new society. More akin to Gregg’s project was the Catholic Worker movement, begun in New York City in 1933. Led by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the group espoused beliefs that paralleled Gregg’s commitment to radical nonviolence, his agrarian and decentralist predilections, and his unconventional religiosity. Amid the varied attempts to reinvent the value systems of the modern United States, Gregg made sense when he tried to explain how attention to values and symbols in nonviolent resistance could revitalize and expand not only pacifism but democracy itself.32

To many Americans the career of Mohandas Gandhi seemed especially relevant to the crisis of democratic values. In 1930 the mahatma reached a high point in his long career with the “march to the sea,” a mass nonviolent protest against the British salt tax. The next year he traveled to London in an attempt to negotiate the end of colonial rule in India.33 The events of those years brought Gandhi unprecedented exposure in the United States. Newspapers regularly reported on the Indian independence movement, while the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, the *Crisis*, and other liberal journals analyzed his exploits. Americans first heard Gandhi address them over their radios on September 13, 1931, when he asked for support in the fight for *swaraj* (self-rule). In that Gandhian moment, the mahatma became part of the landscape of American political and literary culture. Sen. John J. Blaine of Wisconsin sponsored a congressional resolution endorsing freedom for India, while Thornton Wilder’s 1935 novel,

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Heaven’s My Destination, narrated the adventures of a midwestern Gandhian traveling salesman with a quixotic desire to remake the world.34

Gregg contributed to this larger effort to comprehend Gandhi. Following his return to the United States in late 1928 (he went back to India in later years), he became a leading American analyst of Indian affairs and advocate of Indian independence, writing essays for the Nation and other periodicals. Having learned the importance of winning over public opinion in a political conflict, he set out to do just that. With J. B. Matthews and Roger Baldwin, he started the American League for India’s Freedom, one of several pro-independence groups then springing up. The league published bulletins promising “up-to-date and accurate news regarding the Indian struggle for independence,” particularly “what does not appear commonly in the press.” Like Gandhi, Gregg had left his legal career behind; he was now committed to discovering and publicizing the meaning of the mahatma for the modern world.35

For Gregg and other American liberals and leftists, particularly those with religious allegiances, Gandhi promised a non-Communist form of radical dissent. In a pamphlet published in India as Gandhism and Socialism in 1931 (a revised version, Gandhiism versus Socialism, appeared in the United States the next year), Gregg argued that a decentralized, nonviolent vision for society was more just and humane than “socialism,” by which he meant primarily Russian Communism but also other forms of economic collectivism. (Unlike many of his pacifist colleagues, Gregg apparently never joined the SP.) Starting from the contention that power flows ultimately from ideas and values, he maintained that “socialism” presented a set of all-too-familiar symbols. “Socialism, especially as exemplified in Russia,” Gregg explained, “clings to military and police violence and their symbols, as a prime control of society.” Gandhi’s program went deeper. In their celebration of poverty, their simple dress, their decentralist and producerist ideology, and their commitment to nonviolence, the followers of the mahatma promised a fuller transformation of the social order. The “change of inner systems of values and of the symbols that go with them,” Gregg announced, would be “real revolution.”36

Gregg, like civil rights and New Left leaders some three decades later, tried to use nonviolence to move beyond ideology. This “quiet radical” kept his distance from the sectarian infighting that racked the American Left in the 1930s. In the winter of 1933–1934, for instance, the Fellowship of Reconciliation became embroiled in an internal dispute over the legitimacy of violence as a form of class struggle (the Socialist party was then debating that issue). The controversy, which led Reinhold Niebuhr and a few other FOR leaders to renounce pacifism, was at bottom about the relevance.

35 News Bulletin, 8 (July 1, 1932); Chatfield, For Peace and Justice, 203. A few issues of the News Bulletin and other documents from the American League for India’s Freedom are in the Swarthmore College Peace Collection.
36 Richard B. Gregg, Gandhism and Socialism: A Study and Comparison (Madras, 1931); Richard B. Gregg, Gandhiism versus Socialism (New York, 1932).
of Marxist theory and Communist practice to the pacifist project. In the end, the organization condemned class violence, and most pacifists remained suspicious of Marxism. Gregg’s assessment of the debate reiterated his interest in method and his lack of concern with ideology, Marxist or otherwise. “Our primary purpose,” said Gregg of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, “is the thinking and working out of a certain technique,” the technique of nonviolence. The FOR should include anyone dedicated to that project. “A military drill master,” Gregg explained, “can do his job equally well whether he is a republican, a democrat, a socialist, a Nazi, a communist, or a British Labor Party man.” In nonviolence, as in war, one could bring any ideological coloration to the task of developing strategy. Gregg exaggerated for effect; he did not seriously consider nonviolent Nazis a possibility. Yet his point was clear: a method, not a specific political system, would help alleviate the crisis of democracy.

The method of nonviolent resistance was, Gregg maintained, “the key to the problem of liberty in the modern State.” He had experienced the “problem” close up. Observing postwar federal labor policy in the United States and British colonial rule in India, Gregg found the governments he lived under arrogant, menacing, and out of touch. “It can hardly be doubted,” he concluded, “that the history of the State, more than of any other institution, is full of violence.” Though he envisioned a future when governments might become nonviolent, he usually saw nonviolent resistance as a popular democratic action that could check state power. Nonviolence would not abolish legislatures, he wrote, but it “controls them, puts them in their proper place, and renders them less capable of doing harm.” Through picketing, strikes, boycotts, and mass demonstrations, ordinary men and women could dramatize the state’s dependence on the cooperation of its citizens or subjects. Bodies that neither obeyed nor resisted official authority threatened the subtle systems of corporeal discipline that Michel Foucault has identified as the defining features of modern power relations. Militant nonviolence, like Gregg’s proposed economic system, decentralized power.

Nonviolence cut across social divisions and offered the possibility of truly inclusive participation. “It may be practised,” Gregg insisted, “and skill may be acquired in it in every situation of life, at home and abroad, by men and women of any and all races, nations, tribes, groups, classes, or castes, young and old, rich and poor.” He considered it “important” that women could participate, observing that “they are more effective in it than most men.” Gregg attributed much of the success of the 1930 salt march to the fact that “a great many more women are taking active part . . . than was the case in 1920–21.”

37 Minutes of Fellowship of Reconciliation Council Meeting, Dec. 16, 1933, box 2, series A-2, section II, Fellowship of Reconciliation Papers (Swarthmore College Peace Collection); Gregg to Sayre, Feb. 23, 1933, box 6, series A, Sayre Papers. On the debates over class violence at this time, see Chatfield, For Peace and Justice, 191–97; Richard Wightman Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography (San Francisco, 1987), 154–59; and Meyer, Protestant Search for Political Realism, 203–16.

38 Gregg, Power of Non-Violence, 155; Gregg, Gandhiji’s Satyagraha, 287; Gregg, Gandhism and Socialism, 27; Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1995).

39 Gregg, Power of Non-Violence, 127; Richard B. Gregg, “Will Gandhi Win?,” Nation, June 4, 1930, pp. 661–63. See also Richard B. Gregg, “India Confronts Britain,” ibid., June 18, 1930, pp. 696–99. Writing at a time when soldiers were assumed to be male, Gregg did not address the masculine bias in a form of political action explicitly modeled on war. On the gender politics of radical pacifism, see Marian B. Mollin, “Actions Louder Than
exercise individual agency in nonviolent action, Gregg thought, elevated his system above the League of Nations, the World Court, and the other high-minded schemes promoted by the American peace movement between the wars. Such “proposals seem always something to be done by someone else,” he complained, “by governments, by statesmen, by educators, by great bankers, or the like.” In contrast, militant nonviolence gave each participant a personal stake in political action.

Nonviolence was an autonomous method that could theoretically serve varied political purposes, but Gregg believed that the method was particularly appropriate to a few specific purposes. Notably, he said little in the early 1930s about using nonviolent action to prevent international war. The applications that he foresaw emerged from his own experience. Having spent several years attempting to end labor strife in America, he hoped that nonviolence would help workers achieve economic justice. And after his time in India, he saw nonviolence as the best way for colonized and subjugated populations to overthrow systems of racism and imperialism.

Gregg believed that the labor movement had made a tragic mistake by countenancing the violent tactics that he had witnessed in the 1922 railway strike. “I am inclined to believe,” he wrote, “that one reason why so many strikes fail in Western countries is because both employers and employees, capitalists and proletariat, are snared in the same net of ideas and valuations, those of money and of violence.” He believed that most violence originated with employers and the state, not with labor, but he also thought that workers had to transcend brutality rather than repay it. Gregg extolled the “non-violent strike.” Frankly admitting that strikes involved a measure of coercion, he denied that “all coercion is violence.” He was also the most accommodating of reformers. “If any conservatives are anxious lest there might be a ‘tyranny of labor,’” Gregg offered, “let them remember that they also have the privilege of using non-violent resistance” (he did not explain the logistics). Yet Gregg’s sympathies were with labor, and he sent one of the first two copies of Gandhi’s Satyagraha to Andrew Furuseth, the venerable founder of the International Seamen’s Union, whom Gregg had probably met while working briefly for the U.S. Shipping Board during the war.

Gregg viewed the strike primarily as a performance, not as a battle over material goods. Workers resorted to violence (“in those relatively rare cases where there is no provocation from strike breakers or policemen”), not to do their employers material harm, but to “dramatize the issues” involved in the conflict. The “surest form of melodrama,” Gregg explained, “is violence.” Admitting that violence was “effective” in that regard, he argued that “non-violent resistance, if well managed, is still more surprising and dramatic.” Workers could win strikes, not by financially crippling a business enterprise, but by gaining the sympathy of the public and, one might hope, of the employer. Gregg believed that strikes took place primarily in the realm of sym-


40 Gregg, Power of Non-Violence, 226. Cf. Gregg, Gandhi’s Satyagraha, 467.

bols and values, which could be acted out. At the time other writers on the left were also emphasizing the role of public opinion in strikes. Sidney Hook maintained that violence appealed to subordinate groups because “it symbolizes in dramatic fashion the issues involved” in a social conflict, while Louis Adamic defended violent tactics as the most effective way for workers to call attention to their struggle. Gregg sought to collect material on nonviolent strikes into pamphlets, suggesting that they could provide “thrilling reading” and perhaps the basis for “some little one-act plays.” He hoped to inspire “both leaders and workers in the labor struggle and perhaps also . . . Negroes in the inter-racial struggles.” So the other copy of *Gandhiji’s Satyagraha* went to W. E. B. Du Bois at the *Crisis.*

Many black and white Americans had begun to think about connections between Gandhi’s campaigns and American racial politics. Despite the popular idea that Martin Luther King Jr. discovered Gandhi for African Americans, black intellectuals were fervently debating the meaning of the Indian independence movement as early as the 1920s, and black newspapers regularly covered the mahatma’s activities. Unlike Gregg, African Americans tended to focus on Gandhi more as a representative of global anticolonialism than as an exemplar of nonviolent techniques of social change. Still, his method was sometimes a focus of debate. In 1924, for instance, the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier sharply criticized Gandhi’s unarmed resistance, arguing that its use in the American South would result in “an unprecedented massacre of defenseless black men and women.” Other prominent African Americans were more optimistic; the minister, educator, and FOR leader Howard Thurman traveled to India to meet Gandhi in 1935, an event highly publicized in the black press.

A few white radical pacifists also connected Gandhi’s work to American racial politics. Devere Allen wrote that Gandhi’s early career in South Africa led him into “much the same sort of experience an American Negro would meet if he forgot the color line and Jim Crow cars in Mississippi,” while John Haynes Holmes put Gandhi’s work on behalf of untouchables in American terms: “As Garrison freed the slave, so would Gandhi free the pariah.” The analogy was strained, eliding as it did complicated issues of racial identity, but the message was unambiguous—Gandhi pointed the way toward a radical nonviolent politics that could eliminate hierarchies of race and caste. When Richard Gregg tried to use Gandhi to rethink not just pacifism, but racial democracy, he entered a lively and multifaceted debate.

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Along with the book, Gregg sent a letter to Du Bois explaining that he thought it “more important for Negroes and Labor to understand this new method of handling conflict than for any other groups of the population.” The two had already corresponded while Gregg was in India. Du Bois sent him the *Crisis* and a copy of his book *Darkwater*. Gregg, in turn, mailed *Economics of Khaddar* and argued for its relevance in America: “I think the movement has something that all our farmers and unemployed can profit from, especially those in the South.” Gregg saw racial inequality, like labor conflict, as a question of values. “More than ever,” he wrote Du Bois, “I am convinced that in essence it is a spiritual and moral attitude which is at fault, and that the only real solution must be in the realm of the spirit.” The “attitude” had global ramifications. In *Gandhiji’s Satyagraha*, Gregg discussed racial violence against blacks in Africa as well as the United States, and he argued that in “Asia and other countries the white race is treating colored races in ways which are violent in spirit and result, if not in outward form.” Colonial regimes involved “a denial of choice or preference to the tropical peoples, and are therefore a form of violence.” By arguing that nonviolent resistance could supply the power to defeat imperialism and racial violence, Gregg once again linked pacifism to issues of democratic participation and self-determination.

Du Bois, though he would have found much to admire in Gregg’s work, may have paused over his racialist assumptions. In his writing on Gandhi, Gregg occasionally drew on the commonplace dichotomy that set an aggressive West against a submissive East. Similarly, in order to critique white racism and imperialism and to legitimate the use of nonviolent action in resisting them, Gregg sometimes postulated opposing “white” and “colored” characteristics. “The Negroes,” he explained, “are a gentle race, accustomed to marvelous endurance of suffering. Their gentleness and humility would be towers of strength to them in any campaign of non-violent resistance.” Such traits, he believed, marked “all colored races.” The white race, in contrast, was destroying itself through its own “pride.” Gregg argued that “we as a race cannot escape from our own chains without the help of our colored brothers and sisters.” This aspect of Gregg’s racial critique would enter into the later civil rights movement, as King and other African American leaders were both empowered and limited by their skillful utilization of white ideas about the natural characteristics of blacks.

In 1934 Gregg published *The Power of Non-Violence*, an extensively revised version of *Gandhiji’s Satyagraha*, the work he had sent to Du Bois. In the six years since his return from India, Gregg had become a central figure in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, just as the organization was entering a period of astonishing vitality. Its ranks included not simply the leaders of the American peace movement, but a broad cross

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45 Du Bois quoted from Gregg’s letter; see “Browsing Reader,” 341. Basing his discussion mostly on *The Power of Non-Violence*, Chatfield mistakenly claimed that Gregg “did not anticipate the use of the technique [of nonviolent action] in the American struggle for racial equality”; see Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice*, 209.

46 Gregg to Du Bois, Nov. 19, 1926, in Du Bois Papers, reel 18; Gregg to Du Bois, July 24, 1928, ibid., reel 25; Gregg, *Gandhiji’s Satyagraha*, 281, 241–43.

47 Gregg, *Gandhiji’s Satyagraha*, 281.
section of theorists and reformers of American Christianity and American democracy: the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the southern labor organizer Howard Kester, the industrial unionist and later leader of post–World War II pacifism A. J. Muste, the liberal Protestant internationalist Sherwood Eddy, and the prominent black educator and preacher Howard Thurman. Like Gregg, those figures paid at least as much attention to industrial and racial violence as to international warfare. Here was fertile ground for the growth of his ideas about nonviolence.48

The Power of Non-Violence garnered enthusiastic reviews in radical pacifist and liberal Protestant circles. It became, in the words of one FOR leader, “the ‘Bible’ of nonviolence.” It was the first of Gregg’s books to be published in America, rather than India. The FOR promoted it in its journal Fellowship, while Gregg himself led study groups across the Northeast and promoted his views during a short stint as director of Pendle Hill, a Quaker school. (“Calm yourself,” he wrote a friend, “because I have not become a Quaker.”) The 1935 reprint of the book included “Questions for Study” to encourage group discussion.49 In a foreword the eminent Quaker leader


49 Sayre to Gregg, Jan. 26, 1942, box 6, series A, Sayre Papers; “Non-Violence Is Power,” Fellowship, 1 (April
Rufus Jones pronounced *The Power of Non-Violence* “a new kind of book” that employed “practical wisdom” as an antidote to pacifism’s airy abstractions. A reviewer in the *Christian Century* congratulated Gregg for undertaking the “monumental task of spelling out ABC and working out one-two-three a language and ethics actually utilisable in all social groups from homes and schools to factories, parades and international conclaves.” Kester told him that he found *The Power of Non-Violence* “most stimulating and helpful” in his work with sharecroppers. Not surprisingly, the book’s pragmatic orientation was its most frequently noted feature.50

Not every reader was enamored of Gregg’s practical pacifism. Niebuhr, who left the FOR and abandoned pacifism around the time when *The Power of Non-Violence* appeared, argued that Gregg’s approach was not practical enough. Niebuhr’s 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* had argued, as Gregg had, that Gandhi must be understood as a modern political strategist rather than a religious mystic or a great man. In a trenchant review of *The Power of Non-Violence*, Niebuhr clarified what was at stake in a focus on the strategic advantages of nonviolent action. While acknowledging that Gregg had “written the most authoritative book on non-violence yet published in this country,” he wondered if *The Power of Non-Violence* did not place its author in an impossible bind. “Since his defense of non-violence is consistently pragmatic,” Niebuhr reasoned, “it prompts the question whether it is possible to condemn violence so absolutely within the framework of a pragmatic position.” Gregg “may have proved that it is important to reduce violence to a minimum,” but “he has not thereby proved that force may not be necessary in a final crisis.” If political effectiveness was the measuring stick, then the absolute condemnation of violence as a transgression of spiritual or moral laws had no validity. If nonviolence was a better kind of war, then its essential difference from war became unclear. Given Gregg’s pragmatic tone, Niebuhr found the “unqualified character of his loyalty to the principle of non-violence” to be “confusing.” Gregg had tried to clothe the absolute values of religious pacifism in the relativist garb of scientific politics. But could one really maintain both principle and pragmatism? Gregg had suggested that nonviolence was in part a performance, but could it be *only* a performance, with loaded guns hidden just offstage in case the audience failed to respond? In writing about the strategy of nonviolence, Gregg had never meant to suggest that strategy was everything, but his explicitly instrumental focus raised the possibility of political actors who chose nonviolence on the grounds of pure political expediency.51

Krishnalal Shridharani, a brash young disciple of Gandhi who came to America in 1934, took Niebuhr’s case to its logical conclusion. His 1939 work, *War without Violence*, treated militant nonviolence as a method of social change attuned to modern mass media and mass spectatorship, just as *The Power of Non-Violence* did, and

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Shridharani drew on that work. However, where Gregg was evasive about whether nonviolent resisters could succeed without a foundation of deeply held pacifist conviction, Shridharani was unequivocal. “There being no universal and time-honored criteria for ethical values,” he wrote, “it is useless to prescribe Satyagraha on the grounds of moral superiority, notwithstanding the efforts of Gandhi and his disciples.” The merit of militant nonviolence was simply its “higher efficiency.”

Shridharani accused American pacifists of exaggerating the spiritual dimensions of the “essentially secular” Indian independence movement. He maintained that the religious aspects of satyagraha were “there for propaganda and publicity reasons as well as for the personal satisfaction of deeply conscientious men like Gandhi” and a few of his followers. The “multitudes” understood nonviolence solely as “a weapon to be wielded by masses of men for earthly, tangible, and collective aims and to be discarded if it does not work.” Shridharani was consistent, stating frankly in 1941 that India might have to defend itself against outside aggressors by force of arms. War without Violence became enormously influential among radical young members of the FOR and WRL, but Shridharani’s acceptance of military force and his extreme secularism prevented full acceptance of his views in pacifist circles. Gregg’s balance of spiritual imperative and strategic method, however uneasy or inconsistent, proved more durable as nonviolence grew under the influence of a new generation of creative dissenters.

At first, the “good war” seemed to mark the decline of pacifist vitality. Gregg himself had little to say about how to avoid or resist World War II. Like many American pacifists, he issued dire and overwrought predictions, maintaining that “we are almost certain to have in America as well as in all Europe, some form of dictatorship, and here it will be fascist.” Gregg seldom mentioned mass nonviolent resistance in connection with the war, realizing that American pacifists had neither the numbers nor the organization to implement it. Meanwhile, Niebuhr continued to attack Gregg’s theories. The Power of Non-Violence, he wrote in 1940, “has become something of a textbook for modern pacifists,” whereas it was in fact the “reductio ad absurdum” of their views. Niebuhr insisted, as he had in his earlier review of Gregg’s book, that militant nonviolence had neither the moral transcendence of traditional nonresistance (as practiced by Christian sects such as the Mennonites) nor the political effectiveness of liberal realism. Yet despite such dismissals and in the face of radical pacifism’s apparent failure, Gregg’s theories quietly gained strength as guides to a method of domestic social change that could reshape and revitalize American democracy.


53 Shridharani, My India, My America, 276. Muste thought that War without Violence was “the most important book” on Gandhi’s methods; see Nat Hentoff, Peace Agitator: The Story of A. J. Muste (New York, 1963), 190. But he was disappointed by Shridharani’s rejection of absolute pacifism; see A. J. Muste, review of My India, My America by Krishnalal Shridharani, Fellowship, 7 (Dec. 1941), 194; and Krishnalal Shridharani, “Has Not Renounced Satyagraha,” ibid., 8 (Jan. 1942), p. 15. For another account of Shridharani’s influence, see James Farmer, Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement (New York, 1985), 93–95, 112–13.

Three wartime phenomena advanced the theory and practice of nonviolence: conscientious objection, Japanese American internment, and early campaigns for black equality. The work camps and prisons that housed conscientious objectors (COs) became laboratories for developing the nonviolent methods Gregg had described. There the federal government did what the FOR and WRL could not: it concentrated the most dedicated pacifists in the country into groups and gave them a lot of spare time. The result was a rash of creative nonviolent actions, from orchestrated work stoppages in the camps to attempts at racial integration of prisons. A new cohort of nonviolent innovators, including Bayard Rustin, George Houser, and David Dellinger, coalesced in the camps and prisons. Rustin, then a dynamic young secretary in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, personally tried to integrate the Ashland, Kentucky, prison by listening to the radio with some white FOR members. A white inmate objected and began to beat Rustin with a long stick. The other COs attempted to disarm the man, but Rustin ordered them to stop and absorbed the blows without resisting. The bewildered assailant soon ceased his assault, and Rustin’s friends considered the incident a victory for nonviolent resistance, “a perfect example,” one CO thought, “of what Richard Gregg described in his POWER OF NON-VIOLENCE.”

The Japanese internment program provided no such “perfect examples,” but it too led American pacifists to think more specifically about Gregg’s ideas. More than any other development on the home front, the evacuation and confinement of Japanese Americans living on the West Coast seemed to confirm the pacifist diagnosis of incipient fascism in the wartime United States. Radical pacifists, both inside and outside the camps, were among the most vociferous opponents of the relocation program, and some imagined using Gandhian methods to combat it. Hideo Hashimoto, a Methodist minister, tried to promote nonviolent action among his fellow internees. From the Jerome relocation center in Arkansas, he wrote to FOR co-secretary John Nevin Sayre that he was “stud[y]ing Richard B. Gregg again,” just as he had during FOR meetings in California before the war. Meanwhile, a young white FOR secretary suggested “camping outside one of the evacuation camps, sharing their living conditions and privations, and perhaps picketing the gates; or even lying down across the entrances so that army and other evacuation officials would be made to realise what they are doing.” The radical pacifists did not manage to employ nonviolent resistance

to oppose internment, but their words show that they had begun to imagine its use in concrete American situations.  

The problems of conscientious objection and Japanese internment showed that nonviolent action might be adapted to serve a variety of ends. Nonviolence in America did not grow organically out of the “black church,” as the myths surrounding the civil rights movement sometimes suggest. Rather, this political discipline emerged from an interracial, cross-cultural conversation among radical pacifists and their allies, a conversation that included figures as dissimilar as Bayard Rustin, Hideo Hashimoto, and Krishnalal Shridharani, as well as Richard Gregg and Mohandas Gandhi. The historical convergence of nonviolence and the fight for African American equality was contingent and chronologically bounded. Nonetheless, that convergence brought results that American pacifists could scarcely have imagined a few decades before. Rustin, King, and other civil rights leaders downplayed Gregg’s explicit scientific justifications for nonviolence; they were, for example, unlikely to speak of “an involuntary sympathetic response in the nervous system,” as he had. Yet they put into practice Gregg’s larger idea that nonviolence had a strategic logic that operated alongside, or even independent of, its status as a religious principle.

It was the Congress of Racial Equality that first systematically brought Gregg’s ideas to bear on the problem of racial discrimination. Founded in 1942 as an independent offshoot of the FOR, CORE used sit-ins and related tactics at restaurants, barbershops, swimming pools, skating rinks, and movie theaters. Erasing the Color Line, CORE founder George Houser’s 1945 account of the group’s early actions, bore the imprint of Gregg’s theories. Indeed, the final chapter of Houser’s pamphlet was entitled simply “The Power of Non-Violence.” The organization depended on the strategic deployment of nonviolent spectacle to sway both opponents and onlookers. “Violence,” Houser explained, “inevitably leads to a hostile public opinion toward a minority group,” while strategic nonviolence could elicit sympathy, or at least grudging acceptance, for the proponents of racial equality. Other CORE leaders also understood nonviolence as a dramatic method for influencing others. James Farmer recalled that during preparation for an early sit-in, he felt like “a young actor at a dress rehearsal before opening night of his Broadway lead.”

The CORE leaders understood nonviolence to be a technique for domestic social change that worked independent of its practitioners’ ideas about international war. In fact, the group’s leaders insisted that CORE not directly associate itself with the antiwar movement. Farmer remembered telling a skeptical Muste that the “masses of Negroes will not become pacifists. Being Negroes for them is tough enough without being pacifist, too. Neither will the masses of whites.” Farmer considered the antiwar stance a desirable, but not a necessary, corollary of allegiance to nonviolent action. “Some individuals, no doubt, will see the effectiveness of domestic nonviolence and will

56 Hideo Hashimoto to Sayre, March 10, 1943, box 9, series E, Sayre Papers; Caleb Foote to Sayre, June 1, 1942, ibid.; Sayre to Foote, June 3, 1942, ibid.

57 George M. Houser, Erasing the Color Line (New York, 1945); Farmer, Lay Bare the Heart, 91–92. The standard work is August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942–1968 (New York, 1973); for radical pacifist influence in the organization, see Tracy, Direct Action.
make the transfer to the international scene; that will be fine,” he explained. “Others will not, and that, too, will be acceptable.” Because CORE welcomed nonpacifists, the FOR refused to affiliate with it, though the older organization provided much of CORE’s early funding.58

Even among CORE leaders and other true believers in Richard Gregg’s theories, few were optimistic during the postwar years that militant nonviolence could help the cause of racial equality in the American South. Pacifist attention to the South, led by Kester’s dangerous work in the 1930s organizing black and white sharecroppers, had declined. In a 1948 pamphlet, Constance Rumbough, the FOR’s southern secretary, wrote that because of state segregation laws and intense prejudice, “most Southern leaders think that the nonviolent direct action technique is not advisable in this area.” Indeed, some FOR members in the South thought that the organization had focused too single-mindedly on militant nonviolence, to the exclusion of less confrontational antiracist practices (Farmer and other young militants were simultaneously arguing that the organization was too reluctant to embrace the technique). Amid this neglect of the South, news of a mass nonviolent protest in Montgomery, Alabama, took American pacifists completely by surprise.59

In the history of militant nonviolence, the Montgomery bus boycott marked a milestone because its leaders were not pacifists. Though CORE was not officially a pacifist organization, Rustin, Houser, Farmer, and most of the other founders had been conscientious objectors during World War II. King and the members of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) had no such pedigree. The men and women who organized the bus boycott were seeking racial equality; they had no particular interest in questions of war and peace. In the MIA nonviolent action achieved full separation from the pacifist antiwar position.

The Montgomery bus boycott did not begin as an application of The Power of Non-Violence. Initially, the boycotters’ refusal of violence was wholly pragmatic and conditional, and they refused to abandon the right of self-defense, as Houser, Rustin, and Farmer had done in their own nonviolent protests for CORE. Guns were everywhere, and black Montgomerians made no apologies for their defensive preparations. Jo Ann Robinson, an initiator of the boycott as a leader of the Women’s Political Council, remembered that black men “got their guns and placed them conveniently near their beds.” Robinson herself procured a pistol and pronounced it a “comfort,” though she “was afraid to shoot” it. On January 30, 1956, King’s home was bombed,

58 Farmer, Lay Bare the Heart, 111; Meier and Rudwick, CORE, 3–38. The FOR became more sympathetic to militant nonviolent techniques during the war, organizing in 1941 a Committee on Non-Violent Techniques under the direction of Jay Holmes Smith, a white Methodist missionary expelled from India for his support of independence. See J. Holmes Smith, “A Missionary Leaves India,” Christian Century, April 10, 1940, p. 485; Haridas T. Muzumdar, America’s Contributions to India’s Freedom (Allahabad, 1962), 7; Minutes of FOR Executive Committee, Feb. 11, 1941, box 3, series A-2, section II, Fellowship of Reconciliation Papers; J. Holmes Smith, “Non-Violent Direct Action,” Fellowship, 7 (Dec. 1941), 207.

and boycotters assembled with guns, knives, and broken bottles, dispersing only at the young minister’s insistence.  

The boycott began to approximate Gregg’s vision of nonviolence more closely when Bayard Rustin arrived in Montgomery under the auspices of the War Resisters League. Rustin helped convince King that absolute nonviolence was a religious imperative, but he also showed the boycotters how it could work as a political strategy. Rustin encouraged King to cease the open display of weapons, arguing that the fear and suspicion that they created outweighed any security that they might offer. He also adroitly thwarted a plan to destroy the MIA by arresting its leaders. On February 21 a grand jury had indicted over one hundred of the boycott’s organizers for violation of a state antiboycott statute. The MIA leaders were dismayed, but Rustin urged those indicted to turn themselves in voluntarily, wearing their Sunday clothes and smiling broadly. They adopted his plan, to the amazement of the local police. A large crowd turned out to witness the scene at the jail, producing “a mood of good-natured hilarity,” in the words of one early chronicler. Deputies laughed and joked with the prisoners, and an exasperated sheriff finally announced: “This is no vaudeville show.” His comparison was apt. Under Rustin’s guidance, a particularly savvy nonviolent spectacle had turned the formidable power of southern law into a game, a performance, a show.

Rustin’s stay in Montgomery was brief. His radical pacifist sponsors worried that his controversial background, including a 1953 California conviction for performing a homosexual act, would come to light and undermine the boycott. Glenn Smiley, the southwestern secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, soon replaced him as the pacifists’ representative in Montgomery (though Rustin continued to play a less visible role). Smiley, seeking to continue King’s education in radical pacifism, brought books with him, prominently including The Power of Non-Violence; he also distributed copies at black colleges across the South. King was deeply affected by the book. “I don’t know when I have read anything,” he wrote Gregg, “that has given the idea of non-violence a more realistic and depthful interpretation.” King would be sufficiently impressed to write the foreword to the revised 1959 edition, where he stated that events during the quarter century since the original publication “have shown . . . how right Richard Gregg was.” Under the influence of Gregg’s ideas, the Montgomery bus boycott gradually became a Gandhian project.

The effect of The Power of Non-Violence became evident in King’s writings and speeches, particularly in “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” the famous autobiographical essay he published immediately after the bus boycott. “Pilgrimage” never mentions

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61 On the indictments and Rustin’s influence, see Branch, Parting the Waters, 168–80; D’Emilio, Lost Prophet, 223–48; Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 66–69; and Lawrence D. Reddick, Crusader without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King Jr. (New York, 1959), 136–37.
63 King to Gregg, May 1, 1956, in Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., ed. Carson, III, 244–45; Martin Luther King Jr., “Foreword,” in The Power of Nonviolence, by Richard B. Gregg (Nyack, 1959). On the role of the FOR in the boycott, see Branch, Parting the Waters, 143–205; Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 68–70.
Gregg, but his ideas and sometimes his language appear in King's own explanation of his philosophy. King stressed the militant, aggressive qualities of nonviolence, as Gregg had. He focused on the importance of such emotions as love, hate, and shame. At one point “Pilgrimage” even reproduced phrasing directly from The Power of Non-Violence. King wrote:

For while the nonviolent resister is passive in the sense that he is not physically aggressive toward his opponent, his mind and emotions are always active, constantly seeking to persuade his opponent that he is wrong.

Gregg had earlier written of the nonviolent resister:

Toward his opponent he is not aggressive physically, but his mind and emotions are active, wrestling constantly with the problem of persuading the latter that he is mistaken . . .

Gregg was by no means King's only source for the ideas in “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence.” The essay also drew on several other black and white Gandhians. Yet The Power of Non-Violence clearly had an influence.64

King came to understand the boycott, in part, as a dramatic spectacle designed to elicit the sympathy of opponents and onlookers, just as Gregg's theories had posited. “I tell you,” he warned black Montgomerians in a November 1956 speech, “if we hit back . . . we will be shamed before the world.” To prevent such humiliation, the MIA adopted the CORE technique of the sociodrama. After the U.S. Supreme Court ruled segregation on buses unconstitutional, the prevention of violence between white and black riders remained a daunting task. To smooth the transition, the boycott leaders rehearsed scenarios that they would encounter on the buses. In the churches where MIA meetings were held, King recalled, boycott leaders “lined up chairs in front of the altar to resemble a bus, with a driver's seat out front.” Then “actors” from the audience came forward to fill the roles of driver and white and black passengers, some pretending to be “hostile” and others “courteous.” These “actors played out a scene of insult or violence,” and a general discussion among the performers and the audience followed. The participants played their parts with the utmost conviction. “Sometimes,” King admitted, “the person playing a white man put so much zeal into his performance that he had to be gently reproved from the sidelines.” In other sessions, an actor playing a black passenger would return insults or blows; “whenever this happened we worked to channel his words and deeds in a nonviolent direction.” The MIA sociodramas brought together the religious and performative elements of nonviolence. In the sacred space of a church, black Montgomerians became “actors” practicing for a real-life show of Christian nonviolence before a world audience.65


65 Martin Luther King Jr., "Address to MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church," Nov. 14, 1956, in Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., ed. Carson, III, 430; King, Stride toward Freedom, 163; see also Coretta Scott King, My Life with Martin Luther King Jr. (New York, 1969), 144.
Indeed, the tension in Gregg’s work between the religious principle of nonviolence and its strategic spectacles proved a great resource. Niebuhr had faulted Gregg for refusing to choose between moral idealism and political realism; King too refused to choose. This ambiguity may have made the civil rights movement logically inconsistent, but it also gave that movement a unique potency. The gaps in Gregg’s theories let religious and secular proponents of nonviolence coexist and allowed its moral and strategic elements to reinforce each other.

The author of *The Power of Non-Violence* was thrilled by black Americans’ belated embrace of Gandhi’s techniques. “I can tell you,” Gregg confided to King, “he would mightily rejoice to know you have chosen this way.” Gregg’s work continued to shape the vanguard of the civil rights movement. On February 1, 1960, four students in Greensboro, North Carolina, held a sit-in at a local Woolworth’s, sparking a nationwide movement and the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC actively promoted *The Power of Non-Violence*; an early SNCC newspaper listed it as the most important book for movement participants to read, just ahead of *Stride toward Freedom*, King’s account of the Montgomery bus boycott. Gregg also shaped the civil rights movement in those years by leading training sessions and discussion groups on nonviolence. He wrote with satisfaction to John Nevin Sayre in the fall of 1960, “we have seen the full extent of the growth of the idea of loving nonviolence and the acceptance by increasing numbers of people of a belief in its power and effectiveness.”

Yet Gregg’s relationship to the method of nonviolent direct action was, finally, a paradox. In his wide-ranging studies and interpretations of Gandhi and India, he had aimed to set out the characteristics of a new civilization, not simply to write a handbook for a new political technology. Gregg cared deeply about nonviolent action and racial justice, but his broader goal was to create a countermodernity that would use modern knowledge to foster a more humane, less artificial society. To that end, Gregg turned in 1941 to organic farming. After moving around among several jobs, he finally settled in 1948 on land in Vermont owned by Helen and Scott Nearing. As longtime radical advocates of pacifism and voluntary simplicity, the Nearings had much in common with Gregg, and he remained in their agrarian community for several years.

Richard Gregg’s idea of nonviolence went far beyond the method described in his most famous book. He never stopped believing that social transformation depended on a new conception of labor. Whether he was seeking to mediate industrial disputes during World War I, defending Gandhi’s plans for a decentralized agrarian economy, or farming his way through World War II, Gregg’s life was a long search for spheres of authentic, meaningful work under conditions of modern alienation and regimentation. He maintained a certain distance from the labor movement, particularly in its

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Richard Gregg and the Strategy of Nonviolence

Communist varieties, but that was only because he saw workers’ radicalism succumbing too often to the dehumanizing logic of industrial capitalism.

The proponent of meaningful labor was the other Richard Gregg, the one not well represented in the political strategizing of *The Power of Non-Violence*. Gregg summarized his full vision of nonviolence in a 1953 essay entitled “The Structure of a Nonviolent Society.” He began by noting that *The Power of Non-Violence* was only a “first step” that “would leave most people hanging in mid-air” without further elaboration of the “entirely new civilization” that nonviolent people would have to construct. Then Gregg listed the essentials of that civilization (noting, with his usual modesty, that they were “only one person’s suggestions, incomplete and perhaps faulty”). Most of the points were unchanged from his writings of the 1920s and 1930s. He advocated “a strong emphasis on agriculture as the most important part of the life of the nation.” Economic life would be marked by cooperative arrangements and “simplicity of living,” while a new educational system would teach children “through some craft or productive and really useful manual work.” Gregg hoped not merely for nonviolent political action; he dreamed of a nonviolent society that would restore meaning and purpose to modern existence.68

In the Montgomery bus boycott, Gregg saw the opportunity to effect a moral revolution in everyday life. Praising King’s work, he suggested to the boycott leader that he “try to get going among your community some constructive work, after the fashion of Gandhi’s hand spinning.” Gregg offered that “some sort of campaign of clean-up, paint-up, tidy-up, creation of sanitation and good physical order might do.” Such a program “would add to people’s self respect, increase their solidity, use their emotions and energy on permanent constructive self-help as well as the effort of protest.” Gregg compared the situation in Montgomery to that of India: “it was the districts where much work went on constantly which offered the strongest, purest and most enduring non-violent resistance to the British rule.” In 1958 Gregg sent King a copy of his new book, *A Philosophy of Indian Economic Development*, which laid out a decentralized economic plan based on agriculture and small-scale industry. Just as in 1928, when he had sent *Economics of Khaddar* to W. E. B. Du Bois, Gregg thought that his work applied to America as well as India. Yet, like Du Bois, King seems to have dismissed Gregg’s economic views. The nonviolence of the civil rights movement was on the model of *The Power of Non-Violence*, and although many of his ideas prefigured the countercultural experiments of the 1960s, Gregg’s more thoroughgoing vision had little direct impact.69

Gregg’s life embodied the contradictions in the historical development of nonviolent direct action. Like him, the nonviolent method in mid-twentieth-century America had religious foundations while maintaining a certain distance from any sect, doctrine, or creed. It contained utopian aspirations yet also drew on calculated

manipulations of mass media and mass spectatorship. Militant nonviolence was at once authenticity and illusion, principle and spectacle. It was, in Gregg’s own juxtaposition, the “practical instrument” that could help usher in “the kingdom of God . . . here on earth.” Perhaps, then, the method of nonviolence was the ideal political form for a nation of perfectionists and pragmatists.