

Should We Be Compliant Lambs or Nonviolent Gadflies?

Written by John W. Whitehead
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"We must see the need for nonviolent gadflies." -- Martin Luther King Jr.

When it comes to the staggering loss of civil liberties, the Constitution hasn't changed. Rather, it is the American people who have changed.

Once a citizenry that generally fomented a rebellion and founded a country, Americans are no longer the people they once were. Americans today live in a glass dome, says author Nicholas von Hoffman, a kind of terrarium, cut off from both reality and the outside world. In his words, they are "bobbleheads in Bubbleland. They shop in bubbled malls, they live in gated communities, and they move from place to place breathing their own private air in bubble-mobiles known as SUVs."

Quite simply, most Americans, having been beguiled by materialism and technology, are more or less compliant lambs, only protesting when someone takes away their cell phone or causes them material discomfort. And if the specter of a terrorist attack (no matter how tenuous) is raised, most are willing to give over their rights to feel safer. Indeed, while the government inches ever closer to authoritarianism, many Americans are blissfully oblivious to the fact that a police state -- even martial law -- may be one terrorist attack away.

Whether the danger comes in the form of martial law being declared or the emergence of a 24/7 surveillance society, there is little hope that most Americans will resist. Why? Because the

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average American, young or old, knows very little about history and lacks even a rudimentary knowledge of the Constitution or Bill of Rights. Like lambs to the slaughter, too many march in lockstep with whatever the government dictates, believing that to be patriotism. And those who do get a bit rowdy in voicing their disagreement with government policies, such as the Tea Party protesters, find themselves labeled "troublemakers" and made into easy targets for attack by the media, politicians, and the like.

In the past, however, it has been the so-called troublemakers -- those rowdy protesters who challenge the status quo -- who have actually changed things for the better in America. When Birmingham, Alabama, became the epicenter of the civil-rights struggle for African-Americans, Martin Luther King Jr. and others participated in peaceful protests such as mass marches and sit-ins. The police response was repression in the form of tear gas, dogs, fire hoses, and arrests, including that of King.

Yet as King acknowledged in his April 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail," demonstrations and objections to the status quo are sometimes necessary. Still, King was opposed to violent protests, preferring instead to encourage "tension." As he wrote: "There is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. ... We must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood."

King's philosophy was undergirded by civil disobedience. This means of nonviolent resistance was used to great effect by Gandhi in his campaign for Indian independence from the British, in South Africa in the fight against apartheid, and of course by the civil-rights movement, to name but three examples. Civil disobedience was also used to great effect at the Boston Tea Party.

Protests can take the form of stopping traffic, sit-ins, and other nonverbal forms of expression. The key, however, is standing on principle without wavering. As Henry David Thoreau wrote in his *Resistance to Civil Government, or Civil Disobedience*, inactivity by citizens can be more harmful to society than revolution: "There are thousands who are
in opinion

opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing. ... They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret."

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Thoreau goes on to note that for protest to be effective, it doesn't need to use force: "If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a bloody and violent measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution."

Peaceable or not, the United States has a long history of revolutionary and reactionary behavior. Thomas Jefferson was one such rebel. "What country before ever existed a century and a half without a rebellion? And what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance?" Jefferson wrote. "Let them take arms. ... What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."

The figurative message of Jefferson's words should be heeded by all. His words illustrate the importance of political action. Jefferson, like Thoreau, like Martin Luther King, hated inaction and stasis. Each of these men believed that the status quo should be challenged when it was found lacking, and overturned when it yielded unjust results. Embracing that spirit today might lead to civil disobedience, but surely from time to time that is necessary. Without it, the civil-rights movement would never have succeeded, the colonies of the United States would never have broken free from their British oppressor, and India might never have gained her independence.

Thomas Jefferson and those who followed took it as a rule of thumb that political progress stems from dissent. Under the First Amendment, people have a right to dissent. The great dissenters such as Martin Luther King Jr. were even willing to commit civil disobedience to force the government to assume its constitutional role.

But as author Howard Zinn points out all too well: "Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience."

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