How Shall We Fight Imperialism? A Response to Stephen Gowans

Lester R. Kurtz, *George Mason University*
Stephen Gowans’ commitment to justice and opposition to imperialism is admirable and I wish to thank him for his contribution to that ongoing struggle. I am not convinced, however, that his approach will help him achieve his goals, and I would like to offer some suggestions and a gentle critique regarding his approach to what I consider our common endeavor. I welcome a dialogue with him, as well as with anyone wishing to address these vital issues that he raises (http://gowans.wordpress.com/2011/01/06/ leftist-overthrow-advisor-lester-kurtz-%E2%80%9Ci-talked-with-the-cia%E2%80%9D/).

First, I am flattered by his inaccurate headline calling me a “Leftist overthrow advisor,” but that is not me – I am a sociology professor at George Mason University who educates people in the strategies of nonviolent civil resistance. What I teach and write about is not a recipe for taking “power from foreign governments” as Mr. Gowans suggests, but frameworks to understand better a complex phenomenon known as nonviolent conflict and a set of tools that have proved - across various historical cases - effective in resisting different types of oppression. It is a matter of educating and therefore empowering people to stand up to injustice no matter what the source – leftist, right-wing, domestic, or foreign governments, as well as tyranny within the workplace, the home, or the neighborhood.

Mahatma Gandhi, my professor in these matters and the subject of years of research on my part, in addition to being an extraordinary strategist was the genius of anti-imperialism in his day, who set in motion the forces that toppled the colonial system. He wanted everyone to be trained as a Satyagrahi, a nonviolent civil resister who would oppose any kind of injustice in any sphere or at any level, from the micro level (e.g., domestic violence) to the global (e.g., international imperialism).

What is disturbing about Mr. Gowans’ comments is that many of his facts are simply inaccurate. I have never collaborated with the CIA, nor has the ICNC on whose academic advisory board I sit. I spoke as an independent academic and in no way as a representative of the ICNC, when my government asked me to dialogue with members of its intelligence community. I feel that it is my duty as a citizen to educate others when requested, and I was glad to give my modest input, among others, into a greater understanding of nonviolent processes that I think are often so badly misguided and– as Mr. Gowans’ article proves – misinterpreted.

To be completely transparent so Mr. Gowans understands clearly that there are no hidden conspiracies, at the first event, at the Rand office in Washington, I served on a panel with distinguished scholars (including Juan Cole) and spoke about religion and violence (one area of my expertise). Later I was asked to respond to a presentation by UCLA professor David Rapoport about terrorism and then at the National Intelligence Council’s request I gave a presentation on nonviolent movements, which I had mentioned as playing a more
significant role than violent ones when examining religious movements. At no time did I provide any information that I did not already present in my publications and courses.

More broadly, Mr. Gowans has a serious misunderstanding of what is being taught by me (and by ICNC), and to whom it is being taught. It would be helpful if he would peruse ICNC’s website or obtain and read its extensive materials on civil resistance before making assumptions about its content. He might also sample my writings and books. Quite the opposite of providing tools for U.S. imperialism, we are offering content much of which is based on struggles that were conducted against regimes supported by the U.S., such as the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the movement against Pinochet in Chile, the people power movement against Marcos in the Philippines, and the first Intifada against Israel in occupied Palestine. Moreover, ICNC’s educational materials have been used, and workshops that it supported have been attended, by organizers and participants in the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation, in the Maldivians’ successful campaign for democracy, in the West Papuans’ struggle for independence from Indonesia, in the Sahrawis’ struggle for independence from Morocco, in the Egyptian and Ethiopian resistance to dictators in those countries, and in the struggle of Hondurans against the coup regime in that country. All of these nonviolent struggles have been waged against governments supported or assisted by the U.S. government.

As Mr. Gowans essentially concedes, nonviolent civil resistance is empirically proven to be more effective than any other method for bringing about change. The best study demonstrating that is Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict.” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Summer 2008), pp. 7–44. In disseminating information about this phenomenon, the ICNC is merely one of many organizations internationally working to develop nonviolent civil resistance and encouraging its exploration. Training for Change, Nonviolent International, Voices in the Wilderness, the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, and Peaceworkers in the U.S., War Resisters International based in the U.K., and Nova/Center for Social Innovation in Spain, are just a few of the other international organizations that are shouldering the work of global education in nonviolent struggle (and with all of whom ICNC has cooperated).

I wish Mr. Gowans – who I want to believe is as ardent supporter of strategic nonviolent action as I am - would join me and others in creatively developing nonviolent strategies and actions for fighting imperialism and injustice rather than attacking people who are actually providing education for oppressed peoples in hope of helping them mount effective nonviolent resistance.