
Analysis Of Steve York'S Film "A Force More Powerful"

By nature humans have always proven to operate on an act first, think later type of mentality, especially when it comes to major political issues, or social uprisings that implicate large populations or sizeable groups of people. Unfortunately, with this being our nature, the tendency seems always to have been violence. However, in the case subjects of Steve York's film A Force More Powerful, the path less chosen is observed by the people of India, Nashville and South Africa, despite all having extremely diverse sets of socio-political circumstances as the backing for revolution, one similarity unites them, the pursuit of non-violent civil disobedience. "Non-violent protest is the way to defeat oppression" (A Force More Powerful, 1999, India). These powerful words from the Indian civil rights activist Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi open Steve York's documentary perfectly. The power observed throughout York's cases indicate that the true potential for change lies not with power of muscle and force, but the genuine belief in the movement and the ability to pay in everything but blood.

Unlike coups or riots, civil disobedience in the form of non-violent protest, requires a much more meticulous planning process, the change that it expects to create cannot be seen in a day. York's documentary opens in India in 1930, at the dawn of Gandhi's march on the oppressive British salt tax. Gandhi sought to be an image of protest for the Indian people, and his famed "Salt March" was the key to cementing himself in that image. The salt march was a double edged sword for the British to deal with, either they arrest him for his efforts as political figure and cause mass protesting throughout India by his followers, or they allow him to continue, thereby placing him above the law (A Force More Powerful, 1999, India).

The brilliant strategies he used to protest British oppression, without ever laying a finger on anyone, no matter what happened to him or his followers would eventually lead to the freedom of India in 1947. Flash forward to 1960s Nashville at the peak of segregation in America, much like many other parts of America at the time, black and white people had very little contact with one another, and segregation was rampant in everything from restaurants to parks. In need of action, the students of Fisk University and James Lawson plan a series of sit-ins on segregated 'White's Only' restaurants across Nashville. Lawson is well versed in the teachings of Gandhi and leads classes for African American students on how to peacefully protest and demonstrate in public without the risk of spoiling the cause by turning to blows. However, the white community of Nashville, are far from interested in any of this. On the 27th of February 1960, the students sit-in on six segregated restaurants, they are met with hate speech, beatings, all types of aggression and ultimately arrests, waves of African American students follow suit to each group that is arrested and they continue to flow until eventually the restaurants close. No white person is ever harmed. As the white community of Nashville grow increasingly frustrated by the

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efforts of the students, a lawyer in support of the students has his house bombed. In response, Lawson and the students of Fisk University and three thousand supporters, walk from the university to town hall, in absolute silence. The mayor de-segregates restaurants, to appease the protestors (A Force More Powerful, 1999, Nashville).

Lastly, York chooses to highlight the plight of South African's during the final stages of the Apartheid. As many black South Africans had already fallen victim to mass imprisonment and killings during the Apartheid, the people were aching for change. The white owned media was not reporting on the civil disobedience and the riots that were breaking out from the frustrated black South Africans (A Force More Powerful, 1999, South Africa). The young South African revolt against the legalized discrimination was proving unsuccessful. Much like the other two cases in York's film, South Africa, searched for a non-violent system of protest. This would be lead by the twenty-seven year old Mkhuseleli Jack (A Force More Powerful, 1999, South Africa). The plan was to boycott white owned grocery stores and crash the market. Black South Africans from all over got in on the plan to protest. The first of many boycotts began on July 15th 1987. The boycotts created massive civil unrest, as they began to bankrupt many stores. Contrary to the other cases, angry South African protestors lost sight of the goal of non-violent protest and lashed out at civic officials and soldiers, the entire movement would be threatened by these outbursts. The boycotts would carry on for nine weeks. Contrary to the experience the protestors had in India and Nashville, the South African protestors were met with major aggression and lethal force (A Force More Powerful, 1999, South Africa).

The documentary serves to brilliantly compare three cases of non-violent civil disobedience. The film makers target the fact that in each of the three examples of non-violent protest (India, Nashville, South Africa) a human is always the symbol for protest. They all needed a powerful figure head under which to follow. The three cases also all use expertly planned and thought out strategies for their demonstrations. York's focus on the behind the scenes action of each civic protest group sheds light on the difficulty that surrounds a social movement as big as the ones they were attempting to execute. The most similar systems strategy is based on finding two or more very similar social systems, typically "countries." It is based on matching up and then comparing two or more systems that share a whole range of similarities (political, social, demographic, etc..) but also differ in at least a couple of important respects (Lim, 2005, pg.34).

The most similar systems strategy is definitely implemented when comparing the cases of civic protest in India, Nashville and South Africa. Each group implores the teachings of Gandhi, and above all else, at least attempt to remain totally peaceful throughout their demonstrations. While each group do have particular circumstances that make them unique from one another, the grand idea is mutually shared. While it could potentially be argued that the most different systems design is the strategy used to compare these three cases, based on the facts that each groups struggle took place decades apart, in entirely different social and economic climates,

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oppressed for entirely different reasons and implicated governments that ran with completely different styles of leadership. It is the fact that each group despite the diversity between each case, all use the exact same style of protest. It is the realization that the non-violent protest has absolutely withstood the test of time and if properly executed, can achieve worlds more than senseless violence and killing can (Lim, 2005, pg.41).

Ultimately, there is no one way to compare political movements, as they all take place for reasons to individually specific that many arguments can present themselves for either side of the strategic spectrum of analysis. However, when taking a step back and looking at the big picture, it becomes much easier to compare select cases. In these cases the common goal is the search for equality all while assuring that violence is never used. By following powerful leaders and believing in the cause at all costs, time and time again decades apart people have proven that they can defy the most innate human instincts of violence when they are presented with an issue that appears insurmountable, they can remain peaceful and change the world without ever losing sight of the message.

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