

39 Ways to (Nonviolently) Overthrow a Dictator with Quaker Activist George Lakey

Jon Watts

In 1968, a group of students in Pakistan challenged their government's declaration of a "decade of development", launching nonviolent protests in major cities across the country. They sang and marched to their own song called "The Decade of Sadness."

Ten years before, in 1958, Ayub Khan had taken control of Pakistan in a military coup. His decade long rein was marked by nepotism, corruption, and suppression of free speech, free thought, and a free press.

Police opened fire on one of the demonstrations, killing several students. In reaction the movement expanded, in numbers and demands. Boycotts grew, with masses of people refusing to pay the bus and railway fares on the government-run transportation system. Industrial workers joined the movement and practiced encirclement of factories and mills. An escalation of government repression followed, including more killings.

As the campaign expanded the movement's songs and political theater thrived. Ayub Khan responded with more violence, which intensified the determination among a critical mass of Pakistanis that it was time for him to go.

After months of escalation, the army decided that its own reputation was in jeopardy as they followed orders from the president, and they demanded his resignation. He complied and an election was scheduled for 1970 — the first since Pakistan's independence in 1947.

Various

Thee Quaker Podcast: Story, Spirit, Sound.

I'm Jon Watts. Welcome to *Thee Quaker Podcast*. As a reminder, we are in an extended offseason as we seek our next podcast producer, and in that time we're releasing about one episode a month.

Today's episode: in light of the rapid shifts in our political situation here in the United States, including the rapid erosion of our system of checks and balances, I thought we'd circle back to George Lakey. George is a lifelong Quaker activist who has been singing protest songs in the streets since the civil rights movement, and has many books on the topic of effective resistance, including his most recent, "How We Win". I met with George in his home in West Philadelphia in late December, and, recognizing that things have continued to change dramatically since then, I also gave him a call two weeks ago to follow up so I hope you'll stay tuned to the end of this episode.

Music

Jon Watts

George Lakey, nice to see you,

George Lakey

Good to see you again, Jon.

Jon Watts

Last time I was here, it was last spring around May. And we had a, we had a far reaching conversation about your your life and your background and your activism and and we released an episode. It's been, you know, one of our more popular episodes. And I'm going to start here by encouraging our listeners to go back and listen to that episode.

George shares about his upbringing, his sort of first leading to activism and involvement in the civil rights movement, his first arrest, and sort of how much he learned about non violent direct action from the civil rights movement, your first encounter with Quaker meeting, and your sort of consternation at the silence, and particularly at the pacifism of Quakers, and your journey of coming to understand and incorporate passivism into your worldview and all that that's led you to—your actions during the Vietnam War. We had also had a productive conversation about polarization and the opportunity that You see in polarization.

The reason that I'm back is that something has happened between that conversation and and today, which is the election in the United States. But I just wanted to check in, because I know a lot of people are and a lot of our listeners are doing a lot of processing about the US election. And so I wanted to, I wanted to ask you, in the context of the US election, how are you feeling?

George Lakey

Well, I'm with your listeners. I think, in having found this to be a daunting time, a very serious time. Of course, polarization has been going on for a while. We talked about that in the last session, so polarization has continued to deepen and will deepen. My prediction is even more and so for anyone who's looked into 17th century Quakerism will feel in a kind of way familiar, like, oh, right, people are acting out. I mean, it's not gotten to the point that it did there where a king got killed. It's coming true, this polarization thing that I've been noting and researching, and here we are.

Jon Watts

You shared in that episode that as a sociologist, you're always sort of gaging polarization. Is it going up? Is it going down? What would you say this past election told you about polarization?

George Lakey

That it was on the increase, which is what I predicted. I'm finding when I look at the different very major variables that might influence why one period is highly polarized another period, isn't it seems to be very related to income distribution in our country, and the income distribution is getting worse and worse all the time. So it's easy to predict that there will be more polarization and the violence that goes with it.

Things are playing out the way I've expected. I'm not happy about that. My family can tell you, they sometimes walk in on me at breakfast when I'm reading the Philadelphia Inquirer and I'm crying over the newspaper.

George Lakey

So I do feel the pain that goes with polarization, but I'm so impressed by what Quakers did in the one of the most polarized periods of British history, and I think they gave us an example. And also Quakers in the 30s gave us an example, which was an extremely polarized time in the United States. We had Nazis filling Madison Square Garden, right, and the glory period of the Communist Party. We had enormous, enormous polarization and violence, and it was the most productive period in terms of social gains, economic achievement, in terms of, you know, making a more egalitarian society. It was the biggest time in the first half of the 20th century.

I don't remember that because I was a baby, but I do remember so vividly the 1960s when many Quakers were energized to participate in the civil rights movement and other movements, and again, tremendous polarization and tremendous progress. So if we play this right, we can have the biggest forward motion on questions of justice and peace and climate that we've ever had, if, because the polarization is going to be so great, and we can get that out of it.

But we'll need to act, you know, if we stay under the covers, which is tempting to me too, but if we do that, we're resigning ourselves. And I don't know why anybody would resign themselves. I have eight great grandchildren. If that doesn't motivate, I don't know what would but I'm sure we all have reason to want things to get better. And guess what? We get to do it.

Jon Watts

If we play this thing right, this could be a time of great progress. What does that look like, playing this right?

George Lakey

Well, let's take our own energy very seriously and use it well, rather than in a frivolous way. So that means, I think Quakers need to give up one shot demonstrations that simply express a point of view. Go out to the corner, stand with a sign. Well, we've witnessed. There's no evidence. I would say, as a sociologist, that witness actually matters. What matters in a polarized period is the building of social movements that are able to accumulate sufficient action, sufficient power through non violent direct action, that they can force change.

We need to expect that of ourselves, and we can do that in the way that I learned to do it as a kid in the 60s, paying attention to Quakers like Bayard Rustin, like AJ Musty, who were making a difference through social movements. So if we're not part of a social movement, and smart social movements used non violent direct action campaigns to force change, as the civil rights movement did then. Then I think we really need to take a second look about what it is we really think we're trying to do.

Jon Watts

You used 17th century Quakerism as a as a primary example of putting our money where our mouth is, of expecting that our actions will have an influence on the world. Not all my listeners will be familiar with that story. I wonder if you could. Paint us a picture here. Why is 17th century Quakerism a great example of non violent direct action having an influence on society?

George Lakey

The case that, to me, is the most dramatic of the cases that I looked at when I was researching 17th century Quakerism was when Anne Austin and Mary Fisher took a ship from Britain to New England to Puritan Massachusetts on the grounds that they really ought to develop a movement against the injustice as they saw it, of the way the Puritans went about doing things. So these two women, they were led by God, to go to Massachusetts and straighten out the Puritans. And that's, by golly, what they got on their ship to do. When the Puritans heard about Quakers coming, they rushed down to the pier, grabbed them, threw them in jail, waited till the next ship came in, threw them back on the ship, that ship so they would go back to England. However, at the time that that ship was leaving, another ship was coming with half a dozen Quakers. And also there were Quakers coming from Roger Williams' tolerance based colony in Rhode Island. And so what we had is an invasion by land, an invasion by sea from Quakers determined to shape up the Puritans. Now that's what we need.

George Lakey

We've got some Puritans around who would just as soon run a society based on injustice. What we need is a full court press at this point, because the Our future depends on it in so many ways, including, I mean, my my activism the last 10 years has been on the environmental front, where scientists give us a very grim picture for our grandchildren or even our children, actually, if we don't shape that up.

This administration provides us an opportunity, because it provides us a real contrast between Donald Trump's wish to "drill, baby drill" and our understanding of what needs to happen. What an opportunity to press for the truth. I'm so grateful at age 87 that I'm still around and still able to be helpful.

Jon Watts

I really like your basketball analogy, that it's time for a full court press. What does a full court press look like?

George Lakey

I think we need community backed participation by many people to join whatever the most promising movement is in one's area. And I would, as you know from my book, How We Win. Really emphasize the importance of campaigns as a way to focus energy folks who will be pulled into the struggle because of what will be happening the next couple of years, we could influence them to make more of a difference.

Jon Watts

I also liked your characterization of what Quakers bring to those conversations that we don't necessarily need to lead the movement, but we have lots of goodies. What are some of the Quaker goodies that we bring to these conversations of confrontation?

George Lakey

Most of all that we go back to the beginning, that we go back to spiritual inspiration, that we know that there is a power greater than us that resides, nevertheless in us, and that can be tapped. And not, not only like an energy power, but there's an intellectual power, you, you might say, or an idea power. Some of the best ideas that I've had in my life have happened when I've gotten involved with a particular movement and just ask, God, you know what's, what's the right thing here? And sometimes the answer that comes is so frightening to me. I asked for a clearness committee from my meeting.

With the tremendous individualism that has, I think, increasingly taken over the culture of the Society of Friends, it's getting, I believe, harder for folks to feel that intimate connection. We can get there too. And many Quakers do rise to the occasion once they realize, Oh my gosh, the stakes are that high, and I can really make that much difference if I act with others. Whoa, this is all possible. I've seen it, and we need to do it again.

Jon Watts

Are you concerned about the future of democracy?

George Lakey

Well, that's the biggest stake, I believe. And yes, I think if social movements don't grow, use wise strategy and combine to create very, very large masses in motion, we will lose our democracy.

One reason why I've studied so carefully the 1930s and 1960s is because those were polarized periods in which the movements did grow and grew and grew and grew and therefore increased the amount of democracy. Think of all the black people who could vote as a result of the civil rights movement who hadn't been able to vote before. So there's no reason why democracy shouldn't come out stronger out of this era that we're moving into. But it will only come out stronger if we citizens in the United States, go ahead and use this opportunity to make it come out stronger. That's going to require conflict. Now I know that a lot of friends feel uncomfortable with conflict, so it's a question of being willing to take the risk.

And one of the great things about taking the risk is that you know, if you take a risk, you will inspire others to take a risk, and they, in turn, will inspire others to take a risk. And it's that contagion, you could almost call it, that we saw in the civil rights movement right like: Rosa Parks! Rosa Parks the one person refusing to get up to let a white man sit in her seat on the bus in 1955 in Montgomery, just one person ignited 50,000 black people refusing to give up their seats. 50,000 people acting as a united movement that, of course, resulted in the change that they wanted. Well, if it hadn't been for Rosa Parks, it wouldn't have happened.

Jon Watts

Looking back at January 6, where it seemed like there was an overt attack on democracy, and short of something like that, it's almost like it's this escalation of different things to be concerned about. It's easy to be overwhelmed and exhausted by it, and it's hard to figure out the one point that we're all rallying on. I wonder what advice you have about that.

George Lakey

That is the beauty of the social invention called campaign. That is the beauty of that, because instead of reacting to something which sometimes has launched a campaign, but it's very chancy, the beauty of campaigns is you can actually plan, and I'm I'm all for that, and if you're lucky, you get to be the Rosa Parks, but maybe you won't be. So that's all right, too.

Jon Watts

After the break, George shares about the nonviolent action database and walks us through 39 cases of mass movements that overcame tyrants through strategic nonviolent campaigns.

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Jon Watts

Worst case scenario, the next election in 2028 is seriously compromised in some way, and we start to look at each other and say, maybe our fears about our democracy are coming to pass. We start to say, how. What do we do if this is if the executive branch has become something more than the American presidency has been in the past. How do we resist this? As if it, if it becomes a something like a dictatorship? You have some resources that you have put together to help answer that question. Wonder if you could introduce us to those and help walk us through how to how to use them.

George Lakey

There's a handy online resource called non violent database, swarthmore.edu.

Jon Watts

Yeah, well, we'll put the link in the show notes.

George Lakey

Oh, good. Oh, good, yeah. Which when I was a professor at Swarthmore and realized I had students who loved. So much to work. I put them to work creating a database, which at this point is something like 1400 cases. It's just remarkable. It's a database of cases of nonviolent struggle.

Not all of those are the sort you're describing. Are taking on big time things like dictatorships. Most of them are not. Most of them are more on the level the civil rights movement, but it's a global database, and therefore there are a bunch of countries where there have been very hard headed dictators who've needed to be overthrown, and where people decided, well, let's overthrow them, non violently. People in various countries not in touch with each other over many, many years, many decades have one after another, after another, overthrown dictatorships in that way. So we don't have all of such cases yet. We still have more research to do, but you can go online and find 39 cases in which, in which the people have non violently overthrown their dictator who was in charge of the military as well as in charge of the government and the police and that kind of thing. So there's no question about whether it can be done.

It can be done and when, when you see, when you read some of those cases, each case doesn't take very long to read. You will see that it verges on the miraculous that there are times when people don't have, say, a civil rights struggle in their history to remember, or something like that, when it's the first time that anybody ever knows of their people rising up, non violently to overthrow, to take on something really big, and they pulled it off. So obviously, there are weaknesses in dictatorships, in the nature, in fact of dictatorship, which can be exploited through smart, non violent strategy, and a number of peoples have discovered that.

And so and 39 nine of them are right there on your do on your online for you, in case you'd like to check them out. The some of them will be very big surprises. Some very large countries have had, have endured dictatorships, I'm sorry to say, in the history of the world, and amazing to watch those people rise up and take away the dictator's power. That's exactly what we can do.

Actually, there's so much feistiness in our country. We're not talking about, you know, a century of, you know of peasants kneeling before their masters or something. Here we are dealing with a lot of feisty people, including feisty Quakers, and so we can have a jolly old time as well as of course, we'll pay a price in the process of struggle, because struggle always has a price. So actually, I'm very much hoping I can live through the next five years, because we can own this country in a way that we have not owned it since the 60s.

We can overthrow this dictatorship that Trump dreams of in a way that enables us to know this really is our country, and then we can really face our grandchildren. Now, we did this. We did this for you and ourselves, and we will also show the rest of the world. Yes, we do believe in democracy. We're not very good on foreign policy, but at least we do believe that we should be self governed, and that's what we've restored.

Jon Watts

don't know if you're a praying for. Are you a praying person? Do you pray? Yes,

George Lakey

I pray a lot. I pray a lot. What's

Jon Watts

the prayer version of what you just offered, what is, what is your prayer for the next five years,

George Lakey

I pray most, most frequently, for courage, especially as I get older and my bones can be broken more easily. The last time I was arrested, the roadway that I lay on was extremely hard, and I didn't know what the police would be, you know, what they might have in their minds, and so, yeah, so I pray more for courage than for anything else, actually, to just be willing to keep going.

And if I get so broken by some action I'm participating in such that I die, I also know that that will actually be an inspiring thing for some people, people who are not everybody is, but some people are inspired by somebody dying in the course of struggle, and that that will be useful as well. So, but it'll be prayer that gets me through that. Because, you know what I really like life.

Jon Watts

for the last interview, we ended with the song that you were working on on the piano. I wonder if we could do a similar thing. Do you have anything that you want to share?

George Lakey

I'll sit it on the bench and see if something arises. Let's see. Let's see No this one, solidarity forever. Solidarity forever. Solidarity forever for the Union makes us the meeting makes us strong.

George Lakey

Life has a lot of joy for me, and I think without prayer, It wouldn't.

Jon

Thank you, George,

George Lakey

You're welcome. Thank you.

Jon Watts

Just a quick addendum here. As January rolled around and during the weeks after the inauguration, I found myself thinking back to this conversation with George and, in particular, his list of 39 nonviolent uprisings. I found myself wishing I had asked him to tell one of the stories he discovered. So a couple weeks ago, I called George up and asked him to tell me one story of the 39.

George Lakey

I think the East German one is really interesting, because people use the church as a kind of base, and they would often start their marches by first showing up in church and then march toward whatever they chose in that town or city as The clearest marker of the dictatorships work and and they very often

started with a prayer for peace at that church, you know, as they were gathering, and then out we go and then lead those protests. And the organizers are, of course, usually the most vulnerable to retaliation. And so the pastors of the Lutheran churches, since it was largely a Lutheran operation, would protect so people could, you know, hide in their basements or whatever, but find ways of trying to stay in their role as organizer because the pastor was fronting for them. So that's in the article. And I think it's interesting, you know, because we're a religious outfit,

By 1988 it was a million people that were gathered in East Berlin, chanting. And East Berlin was a particularly vulnerable part of Germany because it was right next to West Berlin. Berlin was divided at the time into east and west, with a wall in between. So it made it a very, very touchy place, and perfect to raise the ante in. And they were chanting and waving banners and so on. And so the government thought, Okay, well, one of the biggest, the one of the biggest things that that ordinary citizens in Germany, in East Germany, hated was the wall because it was preventing families from getting together in reunions and just all kinds of things. And so the government said, Okay, we'll let go the wall, so that they were making that concession, right?

We'll open the open the border, and you'll be able to go back and forth. Instead of the citizens trusting them at that point, they got sledge hammers and broke the wall down, which didn't hurt anybody. It was a strictly non violent, you know, crusade. But it was just so dramatic, and it really, and there was no it was so by that time, it was so, so much a mass phenomenon, that the political officials threw up their hands, basically, and said, Well, forget this, and they gave up. So it was, it was a very, very interesting so with where the weakest points will be of the Trump administration, is still a little hard to find out or to be clear about it. But what. People are studying like crazy what's going on and the impact and so on. We fortunately have a free media that give us a lot of information, so it's not going to be hard to figure out which are the strengths of the Trump administration, which are the weaknesses. And of course, going for the weaknesses is what matters.

Jon Watts

Yeah, well, thank you, George for your grounding and and calm and solid vision in a time that is that is, terrifying.

George Lakey

It is terrifying, isn't it? Yeah, that's a wonderful thing to acknowledge. I don't know if I acknowledged it before. So please, please, I'm, I'm having trouble sleeping, too. So it's, it's really, really important that we keep remembering we do have the immense advantage of being religious people.

So we do have going for us, not only all kinds of determination, but also, acknowledgement of of our, the understanding our, of our understanding of our insights, and that our, our insights, you might say, in a way, our spiritual selves, are related to the greatest power of all. And so that that is enormously reassuring to me, and I think can be reassuring to to all folks. And it won't hurt to remind each other of that either, because so much of the the new the newspapers won't remind us of that so or the TV. So we need to remind each other of that.

[Outro music]

Jon Watts

Thank you for listening and thank you to George Lakey for coming on the show. For more information about George's book, *How We Win*, and the Global Nonviolent Action Database including the 39 cases we discussed today, visit our website, QuakerPodcast.com. While you're there, check out our discussion questions and leave a comment sharing your thoughts on our conversation with George.

This episode was hosted by me, Jon Watts. I also wrote and produced the music. Georgia Sparling helped produce this episode, and I mixed and mastered it.

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