

## **Civil Rights, Social Movements, and Domestic Policy: The 1960 Nashville Student Sit-In Movement**

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*“I thought nonviolence would not work,” Diane Nash recalled, “but I stayed with the workshops for one reason....they were the only game in town.”<sup>2</sup>*

In the 1950s in the southern U.S., segregation of whites and blacks was still the official and unofficial law of the land. But this American-style apartheid, known as the “Jim Crow system,” was soon to change, albeit grudgingly. Several key events, including the Baton Rouge, Louisiana bus boycott (1953), the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision ending racial segregation in public schools (1954), the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott (1955-56), and President Eisenhower’s intervention in the integration of a high school in Little Rock, Arkansas (1957) proved that the time had come to fight against inequality. The success of bus boycotts had demonstrated that the nonviolent techniques utilized by Gandhi’s followers to gain Indian independence in 1948 would also work in the U.S. South.

In the winter of 1959-60, Nashville, Tennessee became an important stop on the road to civil rights. College students staged sit-ins at the segregated lunch counters of major downtown department stores. Although these department stores would allow black customers to shop, blacks were forced to use separate bathrooms and were not allowed to eat in the store restaurants. Bathroom facilities were often in inconvenient locations and there were many stories of small children wetting themselves before they could reach them. One mother described an event that perfectly captured the hopelessness of the situation when her young son climbed up on a stool at the juice bar of one store and the man behind the counter said, “Get that nigger kid off that stool!” (Limbo 2006: 165) The relentless humiliation that came with segregation helped these students decide it was time to actively resist. As 19 year old James Bevel put it, “I’m sick and tired of waiting” (Morris 1984: 206).

An important component of the disciplined focus on nonviolent action was also an economic one. Businesses that depended upon black consumers could not afford disruption of day to day business or prolonged boycotts. As demonstrated in the case study that follows, success in Nashville depended on this disciplined focus on the political, social and even economic dimensions of nonviolent action. The case also provides an opportunity to examine the steps involved in a nonviolent campaign. In particular, we will apply Adam Curle’s conflict progression matrix as a framework to analyze the Nashville campaign.

### **Background**

During the early months of 1960, sit-ins and related acts of nonviolent resistance to segregation blossomed across the South. The Nashville sit-ins serve as a prime example of the

organization, disciplined execution, and rigorous adherence to nonviolent action principles required to achieve the end result of policy changes. The nonviolent action campaign in Nashville was strategic, requiring months of education in nonviolent tactics, the identification of targets, and test sit-ins. The Nashville case was important to the movement for a number of reasons. First, it was not led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and thus proved that others following the principles of nonviolent action could succeed unaided by the power of a famous name and the resources that came with it. The case is also important because the students involved became important leaders in the civil rights movement for years to come.

Nashville provided a distinctive setting for a civil rights battle. Although segregation was a fact of daily life in the city, it was carried out “not with the passion of angry racist officials, but more as a cultural leftover from the past” (Halberstam 1998: 110). Self-titled “The Athens of the South,” the city and its white residents thought themselves reasoned and progressive. The mayor, Ben West, was a moderate; he had increased the number of blacks on the police and fire departments and had helped integrate the restaurant at the Nashville airport. *The Nashville Tennessean* was a liberal newspaper that frequently covered civil rights issues and supported the end of the discriminatory poll tax. Unusual for the times, there were even black representatives on the city council and Nashville had a large group of educated black elites (Ackerman & Duvall 2000).

Although this case is grounded on student activism in the face of daunting odds, many adults were critical to the success of the Nashville sit-ins. The students received months of training in workshops on nonviolent action by Reverend James Lawson Jr. Lawson was a conscientious objector to military service who had been imprisoned for 11 months for his refusal to register for the draft during the Korean War. Paroled to do Methodist mission work, he spent three years in India. There he learned about Gandhian nonviolence before returning to the U.S. and enrolling in the master’s program for theology at Oberlin College in Ohio where he met Martin Luther King Jr. when King spoke there. King was impressed with Lawson’s knowledge of nonviolence and urged him to move south immediately to promote nonviolent change. Employed by the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) as a southern “field secretary” to promote racial justice through nonviolent action, Lawson moved to Nashville and enrolled in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University.

In 1958, Lawson initially held workshops on nonviolence in the basement of the church pastored by Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, who had founded the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC) earlier that same year. Smith’s acceptance of Lawson into the community immediately gave Lawson and his message about the power of nonviolent resistance increased credibility (Halberstam 1998). Use of the church also gave the sit-in movement a built-in communication conduit and base of support in the community, a common role played by the black church throughout the civil rights movement.

Participants in Lawson’s earliest workshops were mostly black adults. After learning about nonviolent resistance, they discussed how to apply it in the Nashville context. It was black mothers who provided the target:

“They told of how [when shopping downtown] they and their children were exhausted and had no place to stop, except to sit down in the street. They talked about how painful it was to be in the children’s clothing floor at Harvey’s where there was a carousel where

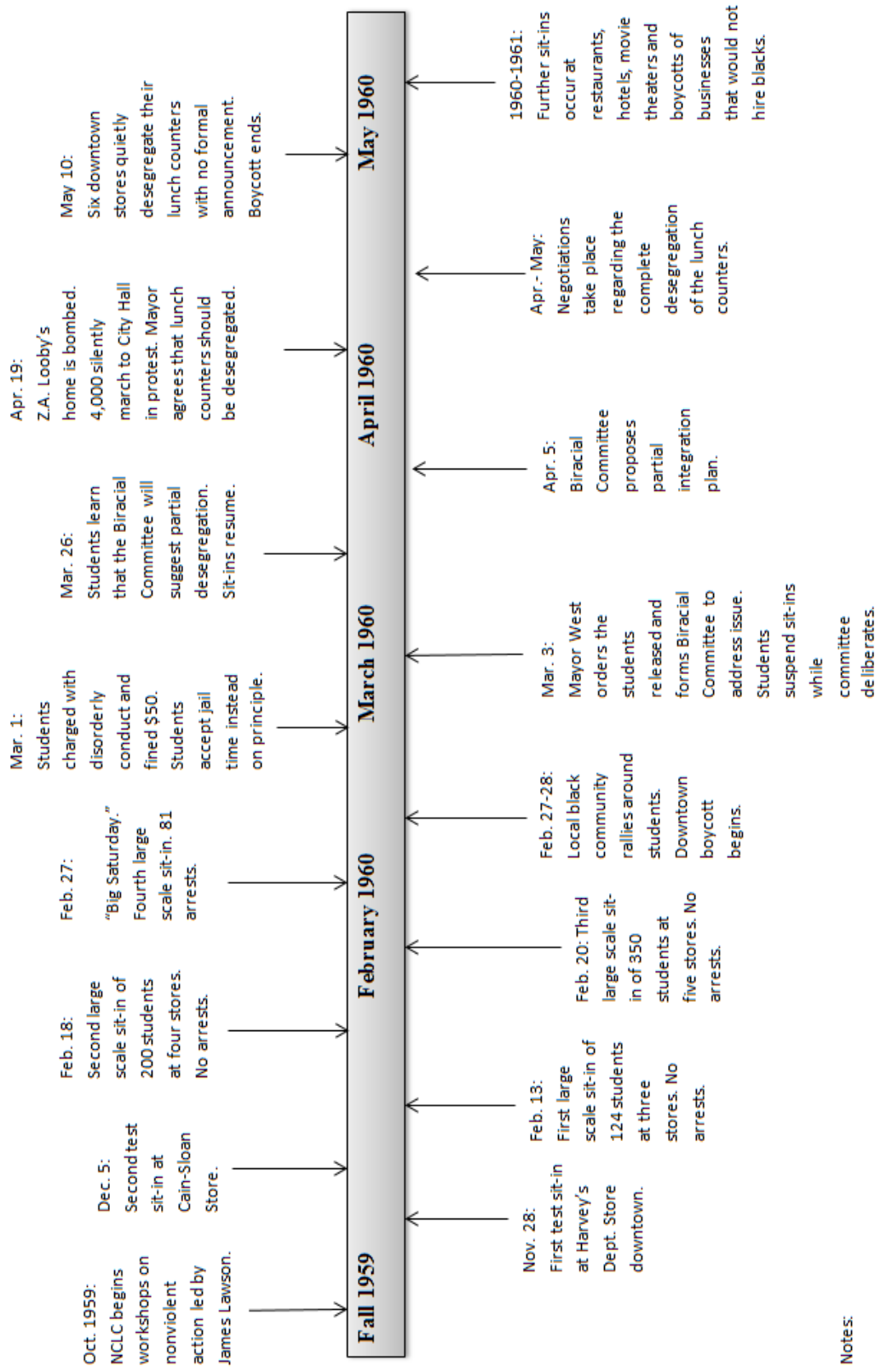
children could play while mothers had coffee. They talked about having to tell a child you can't play on that but they see other children on it. And so as a result of those descriptions, I knew by the end of the workshops we had to go after downtown and we had to begin with pulling down those signs and with restaurants and lunch counters ” (Lawson, cited in Lee 2010: 134).

The downtown lunch counters were a tactical target with a larger strategic goal since they were seen as an “opening wedge” (Isaac et al 2012: 167). In effect, they were a soft spot susceptible to being pried open, making it possible to lay bare the entire Jim Crow system. The lunch counters were a good place to start for several reasons. The student protestors would quickly have the support and backing of the adult black females in the community. Also, they were focused targets and located within stores that already served the black community. How could store owners take money for other goods sold in the stores while refusing to serve a 25 cent hamburger to the same patrons?

Student mobilization can be an effective strategy for nonviolent action due to the fact that students often have free time, most do not have families to support, and many are willing to take risks for social change (Morris 1981). In the fall of 1958, Lawson moved his nonviolence workshops to a church closer to Fisk University and started recruiting students. Since the Nashville area was home to four black colleges, including Fisk University, Tennessee State College, American Baptist Theological Seminary and Meharry Medical School, it provided a pool of ready recruits. Nashville also had a high number of black college graduates, which created “an enlightened new black middle class” (Halberstam 1998: 109). The mobilization of this “enlightened” community would later prove to be integral during the height of the sit-ins. This was possible because of the early cooperation between the community’s adults and its students in identifying shared goals, thereby avoiding the competition and “turf wars” that bedeviled sit-in campaigns in other cities.

Diane Nash, a Chicago-raised freshman at Fisk University in 1959, had never experienced the overt segregation of the South. What she encountered as a student in Nashville, however, soon propelled her to the workshops because she “felt stifled and boxed in since so many areas of living were restricted” (Carson 1981: 21). James Bevel, Bernard LaFayette, and James Lewis were students at American Baptist Theological Seminary. All three had been born in the South and were eager for change. While a majority of the students were black, there were white students and local white religious leaders who took part in the sit-ins as well. These students later became dynamic leaders of the civil rights movement, participating in sit-ins across the south, the Freedom Rides, and the March on Washington. In the fall of 1959, however, they had defined targets in downtown Nashville and they began to strategize to desegregate lunch counters in earnest. Before moving to a narrative description of Nashville’s sit-in campaign, we offer a timeline of its major events.

## 1960 Nashville Student Sit-in Movement



## Actors and Forms of Power

Participants in nonviolent action need to identify “pillars of support,” both for their own group and their opponents. Pillars of support are the institutions and organizations that are sources of power for either side; weakening the pillars of support for one’s opponents erodes their power and may even cause collapse of the status quo (Helvey 2004). On the other hand, strengthening relations with one’s own supportive pillars increases one’s own clout and ability to act effectively. Lawson and his group of nonviolent activists leveraged several pillars of support in their fight against segregation, including the concentration of black colleges in and around Nashville mentioned earlier, national and local religious institutions, influential white sympathizers, Nashville’s black adult community, the support and training in nonviolent action provided by established civil rights and peace movements groups, and a supportive media presence in the form of the *Nashville Tennessean* and eventually national media coverage (see Figure 2).

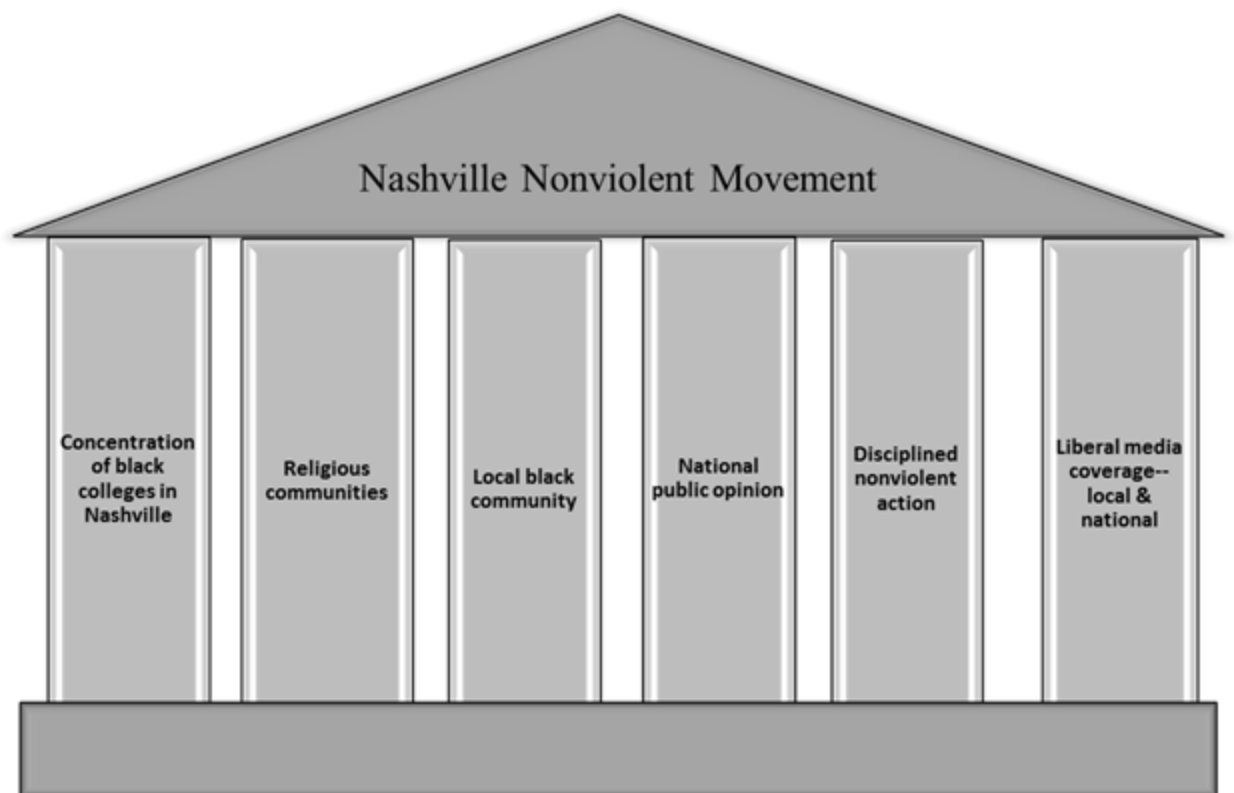


Figure 2. Pillars of Support

The larger civil rights movement was successful in part due to the power and influence of black churches. The black community had little influence in the traditional institutional centers of power such as the police force, local governments, and business and trade associations. Black churches provided the organization, financial management, and leadership skills that whites were receiving from the above sources (Morris 1984). The student movement had great support among the religious community, white and black, in Nashville. For example, the First Baptist Church led by Reverend Smith, in addition to hosting Lawson's workshops, regularly reached out to the congregation and the broader adult black community to raise awareness of the sit-in campaign and collected money for bail in the event of arrests.

Will Campbell, a white Baptist minister working with the National Council of Churches, was a staunch supporter of Reverend Smith and James Lawson. His connections to prominent white community members in Nashville would become crucial during the height of the sit-ins. In addition, a young white reporter from *The Tennessean*, John Seigenthaler, wrote many articles explaining the injustices surrounding white reaction to the sit-ins, drawing regional and national media attention, and influencing the choices made by some white Nashvillians. For example, during the height of the black community's boycott of the downtown shopping area, several white female shoppers turned in their store credit to show their disdain for the store owners' stance on the situation (Lewis 1998).

Mobilization of the adult black community would become integral to the success of the sit-ins as well. Smith regularly called the college students "the children" in his sermons and meetings with the adult community. He wanted to remind the congregation that these were comparatively young people taking risks for the whole black community of Nashville. As such, the young students were deserving of the community's support and protection. This regular imagery of "the children" gave the adult community the impetus to support the students as they could imagine that they were their own children. For example, when the police finally cracked down during the third sit-in and massive arrests were made, the adults closed ranks behind these students, whom they saw as members of their community and even their own families. In fact, Smith said that he had "never seen the black community so united" (Halberstam 1998: 177).

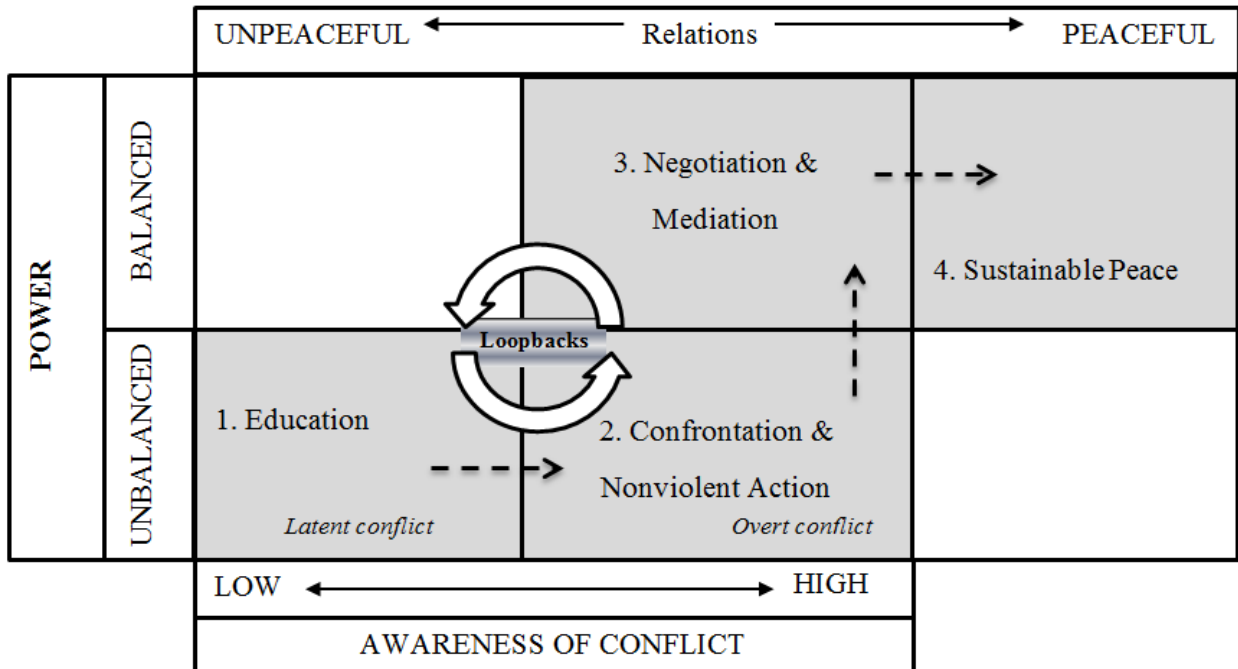
The Nashville Nonviolent Movement consisted of two subgroups: the Student Central Committee and the NCLC. The Student Central Committee conducted the sit-ins, while the NCLC took care of financial and logistical support throughout the greater community. The NCLC working groups participated in painting protest signs and handling the funds collected. Local black attorneys, including Z. Alexander Looby, offered their services to the arrested students; teachers and students from Meharry Medical School provided medical care to students injured during the sit-ins (Morris 1981). The adult black community also began a boycott of the downtown shopping area after the third sit-in resulted in mass arrests of the peaceful black students and no arrests for their white attackers (the boycott will be discussed in more detail below). Radio stations, ministers, and groups of women quickly spread the news about the boycott, which shortly reached nearly complete participation in the black community.

The students' focus on remaining nonviolent became an important source of power for them as well. Through their training, they learned to maintain their decorum and never fought back, even when physically attacked themselves. They did not resist arrest but went quietly and proudly to jail and refused to pay fines, opting instead to serve time in the county workhouse. The images of the best and brightest black students in Nashville unjustly jailed for wanting to be

served a simple meal increased the pressure on the authorities. The media, in particular, would play an interesting role in Nashville on both sides of the conflict. Of the city's two main newspapers, the *Nashville Tennessean* and the *Banner*, the more liberal of the two was the *Tennessean*. The *Tennessean* had a history of supporting liberal issues, such as the abolition of the poll tax, and had a large base of readers in the black community. Mayor West also had taken liberal positions on racial relations. He had helped integrate the airport restaurant and had supported a law that allowed councilmen to be chosen by local residents while he was a state senator, thus enabling black city councilmen to be elected. However, despite their similar leanings on racial issues, due to a long history of animosity over election outcomes, the mayor and the *Tennessean* "hated each other" (Halberstam 1998: 113). This rift caused the mayor to depend on the segregationist Jimmy Stahlman and his newspaper, the *Banner*, for political support. Being tied to the conservative Stahlman caused the mayor to change his tactics in dealing with the students and probably drew the process out longer than it needed and, in a way, was antithetical to West's true feelings. In addition, the movement's pillars of support extended far beyond Nashville. National pressure, including a telegram from former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, began to bear down on the mayor in response to the treatment of the students (Ackerman & Duvall 2000).

### **The Stages of Nonviolent Conflict**

The Nashville student sit-ins case is an excellent example of how nonviolent action can be used to move a long simmering injustice and latent conflict from a community's back burner to the front, forcing it to finally boil over and making it impossible for community members to continue to ignore or to acquiesce to the injustice. In the process, a nonviolent action campaign can redistribute power within a community, bringing about greater justice and increasing the possibility of a sustainable peace. Analyzing the campaign's strategies and the reactions of Nashville's white power structures through Adam Curle's conflict progression theory will shed light on how this process works longitudinally, i.e. over time in the life of a nonviolent action campaign. Based in part on his experiences working as a behind the scenes mediator in African and Asian liberation conflicts, Adam Curle devised a matrix upon which social conflicts can be usefully charted to recognize and understand the stages they go through. The matrix compares the levels of power the parties possess and the levels of awareness of the conflict and the action campaign. It provides a useful way to analyze the nonviolent dynamics of the Nashville case and the remainder of this chapter will be structured according the primary stages in the matrix (see Figure 3 below).



Source: Adapted from Adam Curle, *Making Peace*, 1971

Figure 3. Curle Conflict Progression Chart

### Stage One: Education

Curle's social conflict matrix includes four stages, with the first stage being education. Injustice and conflict can be occurring but it is latent and unrecognized by too many people. Lawson's workshops on nonviolent action were not only a place for training on nonviolent tactics; they also became a safe social and political place for like-minded people to gather and discuss their own experiences with segregation and their desires to confront it. People shared personal stories of injustice and realized they were not alone. Consciousness was raised, which is an integral dimension of the first stage in the matrix.

As Angeline Butler, a student at the workshops, remarked, "It had been six years since the Supreme Court had ruled on *Brown* and nothing had happened in any of their lives. *Nothing*" (Halberstam 1998: 76). The students were no longer willing to accept the status quo as their parents had and wanted to see change in their daily lives. As another student put it, "We weren't having it anymore... We're trying to eradicate the whole stigma of being inferior" (Doyle 1985: 87). Learning occurred at multiple levels: workshop participants were developing shared understandings about why ongoing segregation was unacceptable in 1959 Nashville; they were learning how to confront the conflict in a nonviolent way; and they were discovering together their shared power in and through nonviolent action.



The workshops were based on a synthesis of Christian nonviolence and Gandhian philosophy. Many of the attendees were black students and members of the local black community, however, there were several white students involved as well. Lawson's calm and methodical manner turned some of the students off at first. However, as Lawson connected the Gandhian training with the student's religious and cultural traditions they began to believe not just in their purpose and mission, but also in the nonviolent methods he was proposing (Halberstam 1998). In what was at the time a somewhat novel approach to education and training, Lawson created what turned out to be remarkably realistic and prescient simulations with some students playing the parts of the protesters and some playing the parts of angry antagonizers. It was a no holds barred simulation because Lawson wanted the young students to be prepared for the significant mental and physical abuse they would encounter during the actual sit-ins. These young and neophyte activists were taught how to protect their vital organs from punches and kicks by curling into a ball when they were torn out from their seats. They also had to learn the hard won self-discipline required not to fight back when lighted cigarettes were stubbed out on the necks and not to verbally reply if someone got in their face and tried to provoke them. Most important, they were taught to always get back up and resume their rightful place at the lunch counter, and to do this with a quiet dignity that was designed to win the grudging respect of their oppressors. Joe Goldthreate, a student at the workshops, said:

We went to the meetings and we started to learn how to be nonviolent, people knocking you around... I could handle everything but spitting, the white guy walked by and spit in my face, if you want to be a part of the program at that time, you couldn't fight back. You put everyone in jeopardy of getting hurt or killed. So I had to accept it if I wanted to a part... Don't give them a reason to turn to violence. That was the number one thing that was preaching. I guess when they knocked me out of the chair and spit on me and drug me, I was prepared for that because I'd been trained day in and day out" (Isaac et al 2012: 173).

The training required the students to develop alternative understandings of both the nature of courage and of power. These activists were not just being educated on the technical aspects of nonviolent tactics before using them, but also on the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of a nonviolent approach to securing social and political change. The longer the group prepared through the workshops the more their individual and collective confidence levels grew. They soon created a new organization called the Nashville Student Movement. Bernard Lafayette encapsulated the educational and preparatory aspects of the workshop when he insightfully called them "a nonviolent academy, equivalent to West Point" (Ackerman and Duvall 2000: 316). This volunteer troop was being prepared for the next stage of the conflict, i.e. to wage a nonviolent battle, confronting the injustice by escalating the conflict nonviolently and thereby making it impossible for the Nashville community to continue to do segregated business as usual. For Jim Lawson, whose studies in India had convinced him of the need to take risks in order to secure social and political change, the sit-ins were also "a judgment upon the middle-class conventional, half-way efforts to deal with radical social evil" (Carson 1981: 23).

Lawson and his students conducted two test sit-ins in November and December of 1959. The small integrated teams went into the department stores, made minor purchases to establish their credentials as paying customers, and attempted to sit at the lunch counters and order. They were extremely polite, and, when refused service, they simply asked for the manager and asked

to have the policy explained to them. The student teams were doing reconnaissance—gauging the mood and level of resistance in each store before starting the actual battle. Some stores, such as Harvey's, were polite to the students and seemed uncomfortable with their store's national policy. Others, such as Cain-Sloan, treated the students with contempt and stood fully behind the segregation policy. This intelligence would be vital when the real sit-ins occurred because the students knew which stores might need to be targeted with more forceful resistance (Halberstam 1998).

The education stage of a campaign lays a foundation upon which later stages are built. As such, it is critical. Yet since activists wage nonviolent conflicts because they are motivated to end injustices, there is, therefore, often a sense of urgency. Consequently, it is easy for a campaign to give insufficient time to stage one, the educational stage, and move too quickly to stage two, confrontation. But doing so can have perilous results if the activists are not fully prepared for the rigors and risks of nonviolent action. Absent proper preparation, resisters may answer violence with violence, turning potential supporters away. If improperly prepared for the severe repression they will face, activists may also drop out of the campaign and recruitment of replacement resisters is made more difficult. Finally, the education stage is important because it can prepare activists and the larger community of supporters to weather the inevitable ups and downs of a strategic campaign that is focused on both short and long term goals. In short, proper preparation keeps hope and vision alive no matter what happens in the confrontation stage. Angelina Butler describes the Nashville movement's patient education stage:

Students in Nashville were testing downtown area restaurants in small groups, going back to the workshops, reporting what happened to them on the journey, reporting how they felt about the interaction where the people had threw something at them on a counter or put a cigarette butt out on their back, or whether a person spat on them for sitting at the counter. But [initially] the idea was not to get arrested, it was to go back to the workshops when threatened with arrest and now let's talk about what happened, because that's part of the training for preparedness of having a nonviolent demonstration and movement. So we'd not only go back and talk about it, we would then place ourselves [in role plays and simulations] in a position of pretending to be on the demonstration where now people would do even worse things to you than had happened to you on that day that you went downtown to practice...Now the problem is how do you feel, what's your reaction, this is how it's going to be" (Isaac et al 2012: 171-172).

As Butler describes above, the test sit-in period blended the education and the confrontation stages of the conflict. In order to understand the dynamics of a nonviolent conflict it is helpful to break it down into its key parts or stages, as Curle's matrix does. But we still must remember that each stage is a complicated process, not an episode or a one-time event, and the boundaries between the stages are somewhat fluid. A campaign may also engage in more than one stage at a time, as we just saw with the Nashville movement. In addition, the overall process and the progression between stages may seem somewhat linear but there are often loop-backs; such is the nature of all complex multi-party social conflicts.

For example, throughout the sit-ins the activists were also attending nonviolent action trainings and community meetings. These meetings (weekly at times, nightly at other periods) were open to the whole community and held in Reverend Smith's church, ensuring that the adult

community understood the motivations and techniques the students were using. The meetings emphasized the strategic, long-term nature of the campaign for change and prepared the activists for the momentary setbacks that are present in every campaign. This regularized education not only kept the students committed to their tactics, it also solidified the support of the adult black community. For example, after the first round of negotiations failed to net a satisfactory result, the students were able to quickly move back into confrontation in part due to the ongoing education component and the emphasis on the long-term goal.

## **Stage Two: Confrontation**

The second stage of Curle's conflict progression is nonviolent confrontation. For the oppressed low-power party, this stage is all about their empowerment, about demonstrating to themselves and others the nonviolent power at their disposal. Yet deciding when to move from the education stage to overt confrontation is always a delicate decision, one dependent on local dynamics and context. An important strategic decision in this case was to hold off on large scale sit-ins until after the Christmas holiday. The organizers felt that disrupting the traditional Christmas holiday shopping season—which was both economically and symbolically important to white Nashville—would evoke an unnecessary backlash and take attention away from the main goal. A key aspect of successful nonviolent campaigns is reaching out to non-participants on the multiple “sides” of the conflict, gaining their sympathy, and eventually their support and involvement. In Nashville in 1959, doing too much too fast could alienate the bystander public in both the black and the white communities, rather than making them potential allies and even active supporters. In addition, holding off until February gave the movement more time to prepare, and slated the sit-ins for a less busy time of the year, both socially and economically.

The first large-scale sit-in occurred on February 13, 1960, moving the campaign into the confrontation stage. Following best practices in nonviolent conflict, Lawson and the students paid attention to minute details, including the power of symbols and of disciplined targeting. For example, each student was dressed in their best Sunday clothes, making it doubly difficult for them to be dismissed by their white oppressors in the Jim Crow south as uppity rabble rousers. Black and white pairs were also not mixed by gender since the issue being confronted in this campaign was racial segregation at the lunch counters, not mixed dating or marriage. Over one hundred well-dressed, quiet students took their places at the lunch counters of several downtown stores. After they were refused service, they remained at the counters, some quietly studying, thereby sending another symbolic message that they were deserving of respect, and service. The white store owners, not knowing how to respond, closed the counters. No arrests or violence occurred at the first sit-in. The success of the first sit-in buoyed the spirits of all the students. As they returned to the church that night to debrief and to plot strategy, John Lewis said “It was like New Year's Eve- whooping, cheering, hugging, laughing, singing” (Lewis 1998: 96).

A second and third sit-in occurred within the next week, following a similar pattern of response from the stores. However, store owners were getting increasingly nervous and did not like the instability and cost that even the test the sit-ins were creating. City officials had quietly begun talks with prominent black clergy members about the situation. By the third sit-in, white protesters began to increase in number and the threat of violence against the students was escalating. Several members of the clergy, worried about the possibility of actual violence against the students, had tried to talk them into suspending the sit-ins while negotiations between city officials, local business owners and the black community leaders could be worked out, but

the students were not going to settle for just talk (Stollman 2006). This is a common danger many campaigns fall prey to: moving too quickly from the confrontation stage to the negotiation stage. If resisters go to the negotiating stage too quickly, i.e., before they have fully demonstrated their considerable power through nonviolent action, they risk co-optation and demobilization, which leads to unachieved goals (Coy and Hedeon 2005). In this case, the young students showed more strategic wisdom than their more timid elders.

On February 27, 1960, the fourth sit-in and its aftermath became the turning point in how white Nashville responded to the sit-ins. Will Campbell had heard through his connections to City Hall that the police in the downtown area would be pulled back on that Saturday to allow the white protesters to verbally and physically harass the students (Houston 2007). Then, the police would return and arrest the students. Over 300 students participated in “Big Saturday,” as it became known. Groups of white protesters verbally abused and physically attacked many students that day, but not one took the bait and fought back. Student protesters were knocked off their chairs and kicked, some had cigarettes stubbed out on their bodies, and others had ketchup and mustard emptied on their heads. Through it all, they remained true to their training and remained disciplined and outwardly calm. Nonviolent tactics used that day included a human wave technique similar to that deployed by Gandhian satyagrahis at the Dharasana Salt Works in 1930 during the Indian independence campaign. As soon as one group of students was arrested, another group would take their place at the counters. Eighty-one completely nonviolent students, but not one violent white attacker, were arrested.

In nonviolent theory, the “paradox of repression” refers to the fact that when a dominant repressive force uses its power violently or destructively against a nonviolent opponent, the effectiveness of that power is degraded, if not lost. Excessive repression may result in many consequences that advantage the challengers, including: previously uncommitted bystanders may rally to the cause of the nonviolent underdogs who are perceived to be undeserving of the overreaction or violent repression; defections may occur within the repressive force; public opinion turns against the repressor; movement activists are confirmed in their cause and further emboldened to do more; and power shifts from the dominant oppressor to the nonviolent challenger.

In a classic example of the paradox of repression, the spectacle of Nashville jail cells filled with educated, respectful, well-dressed young black students—who were the pride of the black community—and who merely wanted to purchase a sandwich at a public lunch counter, was a public relations nightmare. Mayor West reduced bail to five dollars, but the students refused to cooperate with the injustice of the situation and would not pay the fine; they were released that night without bail. Two days later, the students were fined, but again declining to cooperate with injustice, they refused to pay. They instead opted for thirty-day sentences in the county workhouse, using the paradox of repression to highlight the inequity of the situation. Years later John Lewis reflected on his first arrest for nonviolent civil disobedience: “I had never had that much dignity before. It was exhilarating—it was something I had earned, the sense of the independence that comes to a free person” (Halberstam 1988: 140).

Mayor West, realizing that increased negative national attention was hurting the reputation of the city of Nashville, released the students from their sentences within two days. He based the release on the condition that the students would suspend the sit-ins while he created a Biracial Committee to address the situation. While the Biracial Committee included local

white business leaders, the mayor, and several black university presidents, it did not include any of the student leaders. Further seeking to defuse the conflict, Mayor West also met with about 75 black ministers who were angry that the Nashville police did not protect the nonviolent students from thuggery. All of these developments show that the confrontation stage of the conflict was working, the whole of Nashville- white and black- was now highly aware of the conflict, power was beginning to be rebalanced, and the adult black community was also about to escalate the conflict significantly.

### **Stage Three: Negotiation (with loopbacks)**

The campaign then entered the third phase of Curle's conflict progression: negotiation. As Curle theorized with his conflict matrix, education and disciplined nonviolent confrontation had somewhat equalized the historic imbalance of power. The sit-ins, the backlash from violence perpetrated against the nonviolent students had forced the issue into the open, revealed the movement's considerable strengths and drove the city into negotiations. As frequently happens in nonviolent movements, this campaign moved back and forth between confrontation and negotiation.

The beatings the students endured and their subsequent arrests mobilized and radicalized many adults in the black community. If these students, epitomizing the community's best and brightest members, were willing to take such risks, the adults would support them further and bring more pressure to bear for desegregation by launching a total boycott of all the downtown stores, even while the mayor's Biracial Committee was negotiating.

Although several myths abound about how the idea of a shopping boycott of the downtown area began, the clearest account is articulated by James Bevel. He states that Fisk University's economic department head, Dr. Vivian Henderson, brought up the idea at one of the regular evening meetings at Reverend Smith's church (Morris 1981). The economic losses incurred as a result of the boycott, coupled with white avoidance of the downtown area due to the violence of white protesters, pushed the business community into a more amenable stance towards negotiation. Rev. Smith reported that shortly after the boycott began white merchants started showing up at his home wanting to "talk" (Morris 1984).

Meanwhile, other elements of Nashville's white power structure were moving in the opposite direction and increasing pressure on the movement. Such lack of unity in the response strategy [of the oppressor] is often a sign that the nonviolent campaign is having an effect. For example, the trustees of Vanderbilt University expelled Jim Lawson from the Divinity School for his role in sit-ins; however, this move backfired as many faculty members resigned in protest. Then on March 16, Diane Nash and a few other students sat-in at the lunch counter of the Greyhound bus station, a locale not covered by their agreement with the mayor. They were served without incident. This tactic not only kept up pressure on the Mayor, but it also represented sound strategic thinking as it expanded the field of action onto the national legal level by challenging unlawful segregation in interstate commerce facilities.

The students heard through their contacts that the Biracial Committee was going to suggest only a partial integration plan for the lunch counters: one half would be for white customers, the other open to black customers. This unacceptable outcome caused the movement to reconvene the sit-ins at downtown stores on March 26, 1960. Since the students suspected that

store-owner John Sloan was blocking a settlement sought by other stores, 120 students sat-in at his store. As suspected, the Biracial Committee report was released on April 5, calling only for partial integration. Now the failure of the negotiations coupled with the ongoing boycott and the restarting of the sit-ins represent a complete loopback into the second Curle phase: confrontation. By this time, the downtown shopping area boycott had firmly taken hold. Businesses that were already bleeding financially from the boycott now faced the prospect of also losing important Easter holiday dollars. As Bernard LaFayette stated, "It was a ghost town down there...the only people you saw were the demonstrators" (Ackerman & Duvall 2000: 324).

The situation remained at a stalemate for nearly another month, with the sit-ins and the boycott continuing. All this changed dramatically on April 19, 1960. Early that morning, the home of Z.A. Looby, a prominent and well respected black attorney who was one of two blacks serving on city council, was blown apart by dynamite. Attorney Looby had been helping the students after their arrest and during their court appearances. He and his wife were unharmed, but the powerful bombing that blew out windows all across the neighborhood shocked the people of Nashville. According to Will Campbell, its backlash even extended to Nashvillians supportive of segregation. "Mr. Looby, my God, he was a Republican. He wasn't a dangerous radical...People, even a lot of the racists, would say, now, 'dynamiting a man's home, you know, that's his castle.' That did help some [in shocking the larger white community into supporting the students and wanting an end to the violence]" (Houston 2007).

Campbell's analysis is an understatement. In fact, the bombing undercut any political legitimacy still protecting the immoralities of segregation. The movement saw the opportunity the bombing created to exploit the paradox of repression, show their strength, and further escalate the conflict nonviolently by silently marching to City Hall that same day. There was no singing, no chanting, just the soft but steady drumbeat of the steps of thousands of determined marchers. While no previous demonstration had exceeded 400 participants, 1,500 people started the march, and by the time they reached City Hall there were over 3,000, including students and adults. Only then did they commence singing. The student leaders were met on the steps by Mayor West. After several minutes of debate and conversation, during which the Mayor agreed it was wrong and immoral to discriminate, Diane Nash asked the crucial question to the mayor, "Then, Mayor, do you recommend that the lunch counters be desegregated?" The mayor simply answered, "Yes" and soon Nashville was never the same (Halberstam 1998).

With that answer, the mayor of Nashville, along with the white business owners and student leaders, entered into the negotiation stage again. After several weeks of negotiations, the business owners and the movement agreed that full desegregation of the lunch counters would occur on May 10, 1960. However, no public announcements were made regarding the plan and the students agreed that, in the beginning, only small numbers of black people would ask to be served. These concessions enabled the white business owners to save face and feel protected from the backlash from white segregationists (Ackerman and Duvall 2000). In a little over six months, the stringently nonviolent campaign had achieved its primary goal.

#### **Stage Four: Sustainable Peace**

The campaign to desegregate the downtown lunch counters approached the final stage of Curle's conflict progression chart, sustainable peace. At least on this single issue the campaign was successful as the lunch counters were desegregated and power was partially re-balanced

such that the black community's needs and aspirations were at least taken into account via negotiation. But like so many protracted social conflicts, the conflict over the lunch counters was "nested" inside a larger conflict over racial injustice more generally, and this larger conflict was still to be waged in innumerable ways both in Nashville and beyond. In this way sustainable peace was not achieved even in Nashville. But something else, equally important, was accomplished, because the success in Nashville, especially the demonstration of effective nonviolent power, spurred Nashville activists and the larger movement on to confront other aspects of racial discrimination in Nashville and across the country. Moreover, these subsequent campaigns occurred in multiple social arenas from housing to employment to schooling to transportation. This case therefore demonstrates the dynamic nature of social conflicts in that even the successful resolution of one conflict may prime the pump for other related conflicts to be engaged and waged nonviolently.

## Outcomes

The success of the student led sit-in movement to integrate the downtown lunch counters in Nashville is a strong example of how nonviolent direct action can lead to substantial change. However, the students' victory was only the first step in the long battle for equal rights. Other dimensions of segregation were later confronted and Curle's conflict progression began again numerous times in many places, including in Nashville. After the lunch counter sit-ins the Nashville community was aware of the segregation system's vulnerability to challenge and further demonstrations occurred. Sit-ins happened at restaurants and cafeterias outside the downtown area; "sleep-ins" were staged at hotels and "stand-ins" in movie theaters (Ackerman and Duvall 2000). People protested and even expanded the boycott tactic to stores on the basis of their hiring practices. Some stores hired African-Americans for first time in positions other than menial workers (Morris 1984).

Step by step, other institutions of segregation fell across Nashville and across the country until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 finally made segregation in public places illegal. Nash recalled hearing the news that other student groups across the country were also holding sit-ins and that made her feel powerful and validated the importance of the Nashville campaign: "So when we heard these newscasts, that other cities had demonstrations, it really helped. Because there were more of us. And it was very important" (Nash 1990: 58).

The downtown shopping environment of Nashville was not the only thing that changed due to the sit-ins. The history of Vanderbilt University was forever changed as a result of the events in early 1960. Due to pressure from Jimmy Stahlman, editor of the conservative newspaper *The Banner*, and the university's board of trustees, James Lawson had been expelled from the Divinity School on March 3, 1960 for his part in organizing the sit-ins. This expulsion immediately precipitated a backlash from the faculty and students at Vanderbilt. Eight of the sixteen Divinity school professors handed in their resignations when their proposal to readmit Lawson was rejected by Vanderbilt Chancellor Harvie Branscomb. Resignations of faculty in other departments followed, including several from the medical school, which threatened the University's research funds and standing (Waddle 2002). Branscomb knew he had to get the faculty back but the board would not allow Lawson's reinstatement. Finally, the stalemate between the chancellor, the board, and the faculty was resolved after Branscomb told the board he would quit if he could not reinstate the faculty. The board relented and allowed the faculty to

be reinstated along with Lawson. However, Lawson had already moved to Boston University to complete his degree.

Many feel that the Lawson expulsion allowed Chancellor Branscomb to push his integration plans for the entire university much sooner than he had originally wanted and others feel that it at least brought a serious conversation about race and student relationships to the forefront at Vanderbilt (Waddle 2002). Although Vanderbilt's Divinity School had been quietly desegregating since 1953, Vanderbilt University itself did not become fully integrated until 1962 and black students did not begin enrolling until 1964. Many years later, demonstrating the transformative power of a social conflict waged nonviolently, Vanderbilt publicly apologized to Lawson and welcomed him back to campus as a Distinguished University Professor.

Many scholars have researched why the use of nonviolent direct action was so successful in Nashville and why this tactic was able to diffuse throughout the civil rights movement. One of those reasons was the group of young unknown students in Nashville leading the sit-ins. These students later became some of the most respected leaders of the civil rights movement. One of their most important moves was the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960 at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina during the Youth Leadership Conference organized by Ella Baker. Many colleges had sent student representatives to the conference, usually one or two; however, Nashville sent 16 students. The students made a commitment to "militant nonviolence" and participatory democracy in the charter of the SNCC. SNCC inspired many other groups to form in northern cities and among white students as well (Isaac et al 2012). SNCC lived up to their promise of militant nonviolence when they took over the leadership of the Freedom Rides campaign. The Freedom Rides consisted of biracial teams who rode together in the front seats of interstate buses, thereby challenging segregation in interstate travel. After extreme violence threatened the safety of the riders, the original sponsors, the older Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), suspended the rides in May 1961. Diane Nash stated, "The students [Nashville group] have decided that we can't let violence overcome... If they stop us with violence, the movement is dead" (Arsenault 2006: 181). The SNCC was credited not only with the continuation of the Freedom Rides, but with keeping the momentum of the civil rights movement itself going after the 1960 sit-ins. This was accomplished thanks in part to the Nashville activist's diffusion of Lawson's workshop training model in cities and campaigns across the south and beyond (Isaac et al 2012).

As a group, the students were a formidable force, but they were also individual warriors. Diane Nash became a field worker for the SNCC, directing its direct action wing and participating in numerous campaigns including Rock Hill, SC (1961), Jackson, MS (1962) and Birmingham (1963). She actively participated and helped plan the Freedom Rides in 1961 and the Selma marches in 1965. John Lewis became chairman of the SNCC, participated in the Freedom Rides and the Selma marches and was recognized as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the Civil Rights movement. In 1985, he was elected to Congress from the state of Georgia, only the second black elected to Congress since Reconstruction, and continues to serve at time of writing. James Bevel has been credited with the idea of the March on Washington, which culminated with Martin Luther King Jr.'s infamous "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, and was instrumental in building up the movement in Birmingham, Alabama (Halberstam 1998). These young leaders all brought with them the lessons of nonviolent direct action learned in the Lawson workshops in



Nashville. This is evidenced by the fact that the Nashville rules of conduct for staying disciplined and nonviolent became a model for future campaigns across the South (Carson 1981).

Another notable outcome spurred on by the sit-ins in particular and by the movement in general was the reversal of decades of black support for the Republican Party. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy would cross paths during the 1960 Presidential campaign. King was not an early supporter of Kennedy due to Kennedy's somewhat lackluster civil rights record. In October 1960, King participated in a restaurant sit-in in Atlanta that was part of the wave of sit-ins that followed after Nashville; King was arrested and incarcerated. Kennedy's campaign made several key moves regarding King's jailing for the sit-in that changed the direction of Kennedy's campaign and solidified his reputation as a civil rights supporter. His brother Robert Kennedy made a call to a judge in Atlanta to try to get King out of jail, while John Kennedy personally called King's wife, Coretta, to express his concern. Kennedy's embrace of the sit-ins was unequivocal: "...it is in the American tradition to stand up for one's rights—even if the new way to stand up for one's rights is to sit down" (Branch 1988: 314). On the other hand, the Republican presidential candidate and sitting Vice President Richard Nixon's refused to even comment on King's arrest, alienating black voters. Although King did not participate actively in the presidential campaign, the significant shift in black votes towards the Democrats ensured a Kennedy win in the Electoral College battleground states of Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas and therefore the presidency (Branch 1988). This made it possible, in turn, for the subsequent Democratic presidencies of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson that transformed the civil rights policy arena in the United States, a simply stunning contribution for the not so simple nonviolent tactic of sitting-in at a lunch counter.

The fields of nonviolent studies and conflict resolution have been too disconnected for too long. This analysis of the Nashville case applies a classic theoretical framework from conflict resolution—Adam Curle's matrix describing the progressive stages of social conflicts—to an equally classic case of nonviolent action, the Nashville sit-in movement of 1960. This chapter builds not only bridges between the fields, but also builds theory. This case demonstrates the utility of analyzing nonviolent campaigns in relatively discrete stages. It also shows that effective nonviolent strategy depends upon sound analysis that matches appropriate tactics to the various stages of the conflict. For example, initially using test sit-ins that moved back and forth between the confrontation and the education stages while the subsequent actual sit-ins escalated gradually and in a structured way. In addition, the non-cooperation and refusal to make bail, the mounting of the downtown economic boycott only after negotiations failed, and using a silent march to City Hall in response to the home bombing were all appropriate and effective tactics for the respective stage of the conflict and campaign. The Nashville case also establishes the importance of education and preparation through training so that activists understand the dynamics of social conflicts, and are able to maintain nonviolent discipline. Both are critical in order to benefit from the paradox of repression and to redress traditional power imbalances between challengers and authorities. This case also demonstrates that social conflicts waged nonviolently do not tend to travel in a straight linear line from one stage to the next. Thus, we have adapted Curle's theory to include and specify the loopbacks that often occur in campaigns, including looping back from unsuccessful negotiations to nonviolent confrontation and from confrontation to education and back again. These are all lessons that can be adapted and applied in nonviolent action campaigns waged now and in the future in a wide variety of settings.

### *Discussion Questions:*

- 1) What do you see as the key factors influencing success in the Nashville case? Why were these factors so critical?
- 2) What is the relationship between a social conflict's stage and the nonviolent tactics a campaign chooses to utilize? Provide multiple examples from the Nashville case to demonstrate your answer.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors contributed equally to the research and writing of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall. (2000). *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Palgrave.

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