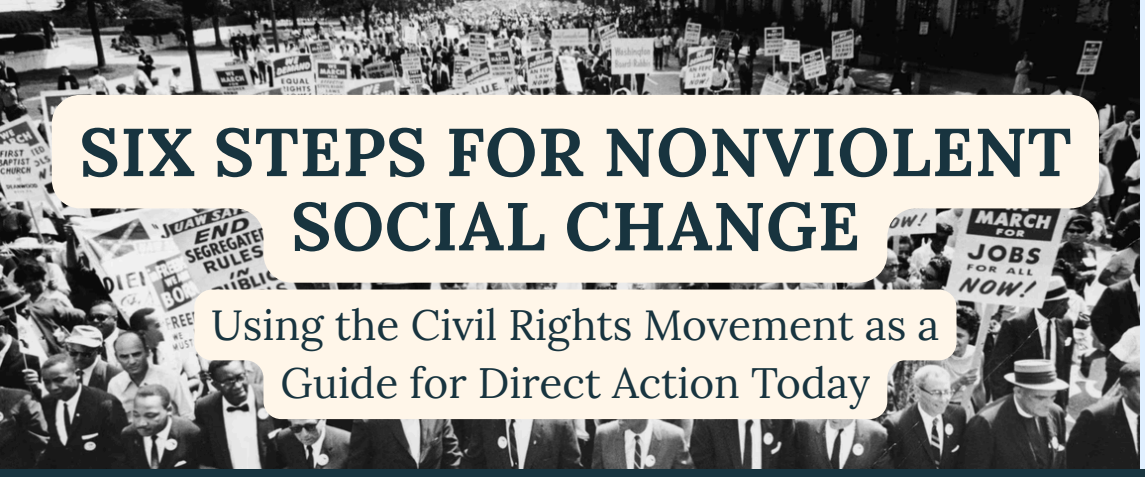

SIX STEPS FOR NONVIOLENT SOCIAL CHANGE

Using the Civil Rights Movement as a Guide for Direct Action Today

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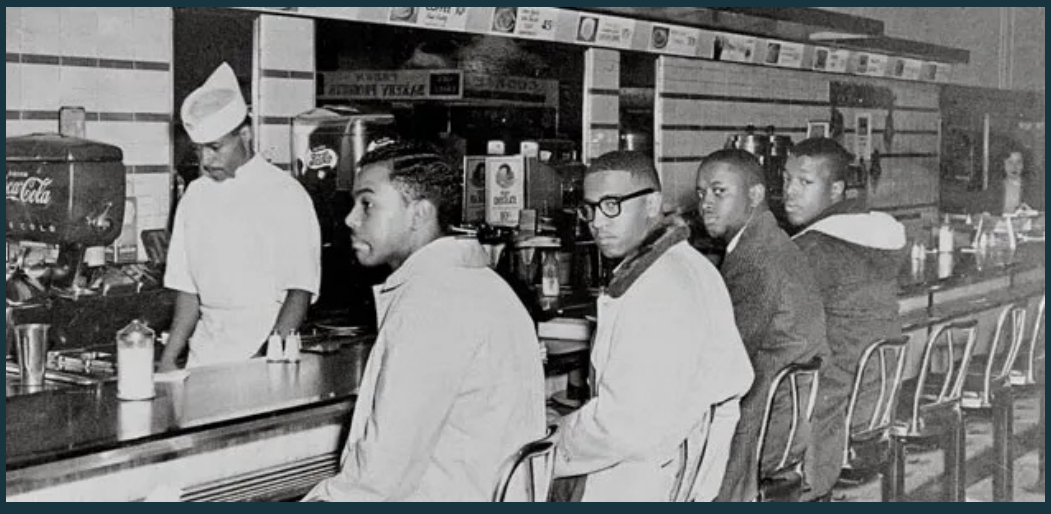
At a moment where our democracy is facing profound threats, the U.S. is in need of a mass social movement with the ability to spark generational change. Indeed, we face not only democratic backsliding driven by the Trump administration but deeply rooted structural issues from the role of private money in politics to voter suppression. There have been promising starts to resistance from the #NoKingsDay protests to the #TeslaTakedown movement, but we have yet to see truly widespread grassroots activism dedicated to fighting for a stronger democracy.

In the face of powerful systems and a strong opposition, building a goal-oriented mass movement that actually effects change may seem impossible. Thankfully, there's much to learn from our history. Progress in the U.S. has been driven by citizens fighting for their rights against tremendous structural oppression. In this mini-report, we'll pull critical insights from the success of the Black Civil Rights Movement, and in particular, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)'s work towards integration in the 1960s. Framed through Martin Luther King's "Six Steps of Nonviolent Social Change," we examine the strategies and tactics employed by those activists and think through how those principles are already or can be implemented in 2026 as we continue to fight for justice. These steps establish the framework that allowed the movement to become so successful, encompassing the seeds of education and personal commitment and allowing them to grow into direct and impactful action.

By studying the mechanics of the Civil Rights Movement, we can learn valuable tactical lessons to apply to our 21st Century context.



Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., Joseph McNeil and David Richmond at the Woolworth Lunch Counter. From *Smithsonian Magazine.*

Pillar 1: Information Gathering

Before SNCC students ever sat down at a segregated lunch counter, they engaged in careful observation and research. In 1959, four students from North Carolina A&T, Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil began months of planning. They examined the local social and political climate, identifying sites of segregation where nonviolent action could have the greatest impact. Greensboro, North Carolina, became a target because local lunch counters, such as Woolworth's practiced strict segregation and were highly visible. The students studied previous protests, learned from earlier sit ins conducted by organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality, and anticipated possible responses from store managers, police, and hostile crowds.

Thorough information gathering also linked local protests to a national framework of organized resistance which had a coordinated strategy.

"I was not angry at people in particular. I was angry at a system that I thought betrayed me." -Franklin McCain

Woolworth's Counter; Image from *Historic Union County*

Current Applications

The principle of information gathering remains as vital to modern movements as it was in 1960. Today's organizers draw from this same tradition, using data, storytelling, and community mapping to understand systems of inequality before confronting them.

For example, climate justice groups often begin their campaigns by documenting patterns of environmental racism, using strategies such as mapping where pollution is concentrated and who is most affected. Similarly, movements like Black Lives Matter rely on public records, video documentation, and social media data to expose police misconduct and demand accountability. This investigative groundwork mirrors the careful reconnaissance done by SNCC students in Greensboro, updated for a digital age.

Just as 1960s activists studied where to sit to make segregation visible, today's organizers study where to act, whether it's a city budget meeting, a zoning board hearing, or a viral online campaign, to make injustice impossible to ignore.

Pillar 2: Education

Once sites were found, the next step was education and training. Support came from far and wide for the movement, with SNCC members canvassing around cities to find potential activists. Civil Rights leader Julian Bond recounts his experience, remembering “The two of us and our friend, Joe Pierce, canvassed the cafe, talked to students, invited them to discuss the Greensboro events and to duplicate them in Atlanta. The Atlanta student movement had begun.” It was through this 1-on-1 small scale relationship building that SNCC built its base. As the movement expanded, it became necessary to educate new members so that they could be effective activists. Pivotal to this was Reverend James Lawson who led workshops that taught the philosophy and practice of nonviolence, where participants role-played harassment scenarios to learn how to remain calm in the face of verbal abuse and physical assault, skills that students learned in the face of an oppressive opponent.

SNCC student activists were not only learning tactics, but they were also developing a moral framework for change. These trainings connected students to the global tradition of nonviolent struggle, drawing on Gandhi’s teachings and the Black church’s spiritual foundations. Education also created shared purpose. Students were taught that their struggle was not against individual store clerks or police officers, but against the system of segregation itself. As historian Clayborne Carson notes, Lawson’s workshops “forged the movement’s disciplined character” (King Institute, James Lawson Biography). By 1965, SNCC boasted the largest number of field staff of any civil rights group in the south.

Current Applications

Education continues to serve as a foundational tool for social movements today. For example, training sessions organized by local groups help prepare community members to respond to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) home raids, equipping them with legal knowledge, community solidarity, and ways to band together in the face of oppression.

However, beyond legal education alone, activism demands support for people who are just beginning to dip their toes into social justice movements. Stepping into direct action can be daunting, so educational processes from workshops to values conversations create safe entry points, build people’s confidence, and foster a sense of belonging and community. By combining knowledge of rights, tactics and systems with shared values of solidarity and protection of others, these trainings are foundational to movement building.

Pillar 3: Personal Commitment

Personal commitment was a defining force behind SNCC's nonviolent campaigns, as the decision to participate in sit-ins required significant of courage. While education and preparation shaped the structure of the sit-ins, it was the individual resolve of the students that made these actions possible. Activists faced arrests, physical attacks, and social ostracism, yet their belief in the principles of nonviolence and their cause allowed them to make it through resiliently. This unwavering dedication won public sympathy and inspired others to join, expanding the reach of the movement beyond individual participants.

This kind of personal vow extended beyond was the key to a powerful collective force. A powerful example is the 1961 Freedom Rides, where activists traveled into deeply hostile territory, enduring beatings, mass arrests, and even fire-bombed houses. Yet they carried on. Such commitment "helped shift public opinion and forced federal action," proving that individual resolve could catalyze national change. Personal commitment was not simply emotional conviction, rather a sustained willingness to endure for a moral principle.

Freedom Riders; Imaqge from *Picturing Black History*

Current Applications

Today, personal commitment continues to shape social movements, though its expression has evolved for a new era. Modern activists working for issues such as racial justice and reproductive freedom have sustained their work over decades, rather than during a more condensed campaign. Many contemporary organizers may describe this activism as a responsibility to their communities, such as climate-justice groups highlighting the importance of intergenerational commitment, forecasting a struggle that will require the energy and dedication of youth beyond just activism today.

In this current climate, activists have shifted to building psychological resilience techniques to avoid burnout, helping people process trauma, and maintain commitment to the cause. Across long periods of time, care systems that are put in place and sustained by those involved in social justice campaigns, such as the RAIN method (Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture) to spur climate activism with decreased anxiety and burnout, may prove to be the key to unlocking longevity and national impact. Remaining committed even when threatened is vital. As Lawson taught--and activists showed--sustained moral courage creates lasting change.

Pillar 4: Negotiation

Across the Civil Rights movement, negotiation was often a precursor to direct action, and sometimes even rendered it unnecessary. In 1966, Chicago schoolteacher and activist Tim Black, alongside the Negro American Labor Council began negotiations with one of the largest employers in the city, aiming to increase the amount of Black people within the workforce. Motorola, an electrical equipment company that supplied to the U.S. government, had only fifty Black people within their ten-thousand-person workforce. Black and the NALC advocated for an employment office in neighborhoods that were predominately Black, as well as a written policy commitment to hire an increased number of non-white workers. The vice president of human relations of Motorola asked Black to "help me solve this problem," and the negotiations proved to be extremely successful as both requests were met.

SNCC organizers negotiation functioned somewhat differently. It was more than just a formal meeting at a table: it was embedded into the very structure of their nonviolent actions. Before any agreements were ever drafted, negotiation took place through presence, discipline, and moral pressure. When Ezell Blair Jr. David Richmond, Franklin McCain and Joseph McNeil sat down at the Woolworth's Lunch Counter on February 1, 1960, they did more than refuse to leave. They issued a silent but unmistakable demand for dialogue. Their stillness challenged store managers, customers, and city leaders to confront segregation directly. In this sense, the earliest sit-ins themselves functioned as a form of negotiation, a persistent insistence on equal treatment.

Current Applications

In modern movements, negotiation may set the stage for direct action to happen but has often required demonstrations in tandem. A striking example is the fossil fuel divestment campaign at Harvard University. Students and activists sought to negotiate with the university's president directly, but the negotiations could not stand alone. Timothy Wirth, an alumni advocate for the cause, stated that the administration and students "fundamentally disagreed," leading to large barrier within their conversations. Following this discussion alumni organizers with *Divest Harvard* built momentum through petition drives, public events, and sit-ins. September 2021, Harvard's President announced that the university would allow its "legacy investments" in oil and gas to run out rather than being renewed. Through this process, divestment organizers echoed civil-rights era negotiation: they did not merely call for change, rather they forced their institutions to engage, and they transformed a moral campaign into policy shifts.

Pillar 5: Direct Action

On February 1, 1960, four students from North Carolina A&T, Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond, walked into a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, and sat down at the "whites-only" lunch counter. They politely asked to be served but were refused, yet they did not leave. That day, the lunch counter closed early, unsure of how to handle the peaceful protestors. As McCain later recalled, "I felt this could be the start of something big...I felt liberated." Day by day, the original four were gradually joined by dozens and then hundreds of students who sat peacefully despite facing violence, harassment, and arrest. "We knew that responding with anger would only escalate the situation," one SNCC activist remembered, "and our goal was to show that justice could be pursued without hatred." Within months, sit-ins had erupted in cities all over the South, forcing local leaders, store managers, and the public to face the contradiction between segregation and American ideals.

Direct action was a key tactic in the Civil Rights more broadly movement. One pivotal example is the Birmingham Campaign of 1963, led by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Local activists organized marches, boycotts, and sit-ins aimed at segregated public spaces and downtown businesses. Children and teenagers participated in the "Children's Crusade," filling jails when arrested, and attracting widespread media attention. As King wrote in *Letter from Birmingham Jail*: "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue." The campaign's combination of persistent local protest and national media coverage created pressure that extended far beyond Birmingham. Local direct actions forced municipal leaders into negotiation, ultimately resulting in desegregation agreements, while the national attention generated momentum for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Direct action here demonstrated how the moral authority of disciplined protest could transform public awareness into legislative change — showing that local acts of resistance can ripple outward to reshape national policy.

Current Applications

In modern movements, direct action continues to be a vital tactic, not as random disruption, but as strategic and symbolic negotiation through presence. Activists today use occupations, mass demonstrations, and other forms of disruptive yet nonviolent protest to force stakeholders to address deep injustices.

Global climate strikes such as the school strikes inspired by Greta Thunberg combine symbolic acts (young people skipping school) with physical presence (marches, roadblocks) and digital mobilization. These tactics generate enough momentum and public awareness that institutions (governments, corporations) feel pressured to negotiate around sustainability, carbon reductions, or investment in green infrastructure. It's going to take a clear set of demands and committed direct action across the U.S. to build an effective mass movement for democracy.

Protesters in front of a Woolworth's in Harlem in 1960. From International Civil Rights Center and Museum

Pillar 6: Reconciliation

As the Greensboro sit-ins grew and the students remained steadfast in maintaining dignity in the face of hostility, their vigilant direct-action campaign brought national interest and eventually forced Woolworth's to take action. Indeed, by July, they faced "sales' losses of more than $200,000 ($2.1 million in 2024)." As pressure mounted, Woolworth's faced no choice. They integrated their Greensboro lunch counter in July of 1960. Not only was the Greensboro location successfully integrated, many other locations across the South followed suit as a result of similar sit-ins.

SNCC's Greensboro campaign brought momentum and energy to the Civil Rights movement, spurring direct action campaigns across the nation. Activists fought for justice across many venues and in many settings from the ballot box to schools to public facilities. And they were largely successful. Their organizing led to pivotal legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Current Applications

Today, white supremacy still runs rampant in our culture and politics. We have a long way to go before our society embodies the vision fought for by many Civil Rights leaders. We've also seen significant backsliding in areas where these activists made strides: the 1965 Voting Rights Act has been all but gutted, for example. We may have a lot of work to do when it comes to fighting for a strong democracy, but we can learn key lessons from the real successes of the Civil Rights Movement. From Greensboro and beyond, the 6 steps of nonviolent direct action provide a clear and effective roadmap for making large-scale change. The task may be daunting but as these leaders show, we can begin by learning, activating our friends, and joining in shared passion for a better world.