[Student’s Name]

Nonviolence Dialogue
Draft 1

[Student 1] and [Student 2] are both undergraduate students at the University of Michigan. Both come from upper-middle class households in-state, though how they got there is considerably different.

[Student 2]’s family has been poor in the United States for generations. His grandparents were not very well off and raised his parents in tough working class neighborhoods. It was his father and uncles who had lifted the family out of poverty by opening up a successful chain of delis. Not all of the delis are in nice neighborhoods, and in order for the staff to feel safe working there, [Student 2]’s father has ensured that many of the deli’s have a gun behind the counter. [Student 2] spent his childhood growing up in and around the delis, he knows the regulars, and many of the older staff members are like his family. On weekends, his father would take him to a shooting range to teach him how to shoot a gun. [Student 2] has taken numerous firearms courses through the State and he feels that he is able to operate one safely. Before college, he considered joining the military as two of his uncles had done, but his parents convinced him to study business instead, hoping one day to pass the family business on to him.

[Student 1] is also from an upper middle class family. Her parents are immigrants who were transferred from France in the mid nineteen eighties to work in [City]’s then booming automotive industry. Both of her parents are highly educated and work in engineering and finance. [Student 1] has two older sisters who have gone to college and a younger brother still in high school. Whenever possible, they all travel back to France to stay with family. [Student 1]’s parents, like many Europeans, do not understand America’s gun fixation. From a young age, [Student 1] has heard her parents occasionally discuss their neighbor’s choice to keep hunting rifles in the house despite having very young children. When there have been mass shootings at schools and universities, her parents bring up their doubts about the availability of guns to the general public. There has never been a gun in [Student 1]’s house, nor does [Student 1] believe that she could ever live with a gun in her own house after she marries. [Student 1] is currently taking class on non-violent political theory.

The University of Michigan’s cafeterias are recognized as centers of learned debate on all topics from religion to politics, but today the topic is whether violent or nonviolent tactics are more effective at creating political change

[Student 1]: It seems like the world is falling apart these days, [Student 2].

[Student 2]: What do you mean?

[Student 1]: Well, what with the Middle East conflicts and all, it seems like everyone thinks that violence is the right way to solve things.

[Student 2]: And you don't agree?

[Student 1]: No, I don't. Do you?

[Student 2]: Well, what other choice do they have? In the Middle East, a lot of the people participating in the Arab Spring have been subject to severe repression by brutal dictators for decades. Can you blame the people in Syria for wanting to fight back?

[Student 1]: No one can blame people for wanting to be in charge of their own lives, but there are other ways to achieve that control.

[Student 2]: Like what?

[Student 1]: Well, there are always non-violent methods to achieving political change.

[Student 2]: You mean standing around holding placards? That seems like a bit of a cop out to me. If you were really serious about making changes, you would have the courage to do it with a gun.

[Student 1]: First off, holding an unarmed protest in public, in the open against a regime known for kidnapping or even killing those who oppose them is one of the most courageous things I think you could possibly do. Could you imagine standing out there, being willing to sacrifice your life, put your family in danger of repercussions, all to cause a political change?

[Student 2]: No, I don't think that's something I could do. But besides being cowardly, I don't see how a protest like that could possibly work against a brutal regime like Assad's. He'd probably just have his soldiers shoot the protesters. If they can't fight back, then anyone who wants to make a change risks being slaughtered like sheep. Hundreds of people would die for nothing. If you want to change a regime that will not listen to you, you have to fight.

[Student 1]: Holding a protest is only one part of an active, organized non violent campaign. The class I'm taking on non violence, we read about a strategy of nonviolent resistance called political jiu-jitsu, which basically is to use an opponent's strength against them(1). In this case, One of the things that the protest would do is bring international attention to their plight if many of the unarmed protesters were killed by the army. They wouldn't necessarily have to change the regime's mind about killing them so much as show the world what he's actually doing to them.

[Student 2]: What good would that do for the people dying on the ground? If they had weapons, they'd at least have a chance of defending themselves.

[Student 1]: That's the point, a massacre of unarmed civilians would get more international attention than an armed group. The regime could pass an armed group off as dangerous vigilantes. Then they would look completely justified using military force to crush them.

[Student 2]: That sounds like it relies pretty heavily on outside intervention, which is risky. What if other countries don't pay attention, or don't care? What if the dictator suppressed news of the massacre, and no one outside ever found out? Even, supposing that outside media got a hold of the story and thought it was important, what could international attention do to help the protesters achieve their goal? You remember all those photos of Tiananmen Square that were published in The Atlantic recently? Well, all those students were petitioning non violently for Democratic reforms of the Communist System. Even though hundreds of them died, none of those reforms has ever taken place (2).

[Student 1]: When international media got a hold of the story, the protests in Syria got a lot of international attention. In South Africa, when the government began to crack down on the protests brutally in 1987, many outside nations and international banks put economic sanctions on South Africa and refused to renew loans, which ended up creating enough of an economic crisis that some white leaders began to advocate changing the Apartheid laws (8). Maybe this tactic could work for Syrians.

[Student 2]: I have some serious doubts about how effective those sanctions could be. If Assad cared about the welfare of his people, he would not have committed the atrocities that lead to the protests in the first place, and if he wants to get western products for himself or his family, I'm sure he could get them on the black market. What I'm saying is that relying on outside intervention for sanctions doesn't help the people who are suffering the most. If anything those sanctions make it worse for those on the ground. I still say in that case, violent revolution is the best solution. The people need a change and they need it as fast as possible so that they wouldn't be suffering under the sanctions for very long. They simply can't stand around protesting expecting outside sanctions to force Assad to talk to them, much less expect him to just give up power. They have to take matters into their own hands.

[Student 1]: I agree that the protestors have to take matters into their own hands rather than just wait for the regime to step down, but the best way to do that would be for an organized nonviolent campaign to employ a variety of strategies. Protest is only one of the tactics that they can use.

[Student 2]: You said tactics, but I've never thought of a nonviolent movement as operating in the same way as a military before. I've always thought that nonviolence meant that a group was pacifistic, that they wanted to avoid conflict. What tactics could be more effective than direct military action? How else can you force them to take you seriously?

[Student 1]: A nonviolent campaign is certainly not trying to avoid conflict, in fact quite often the reverse is true. A non-violent campaign seeks to disrupt the established order. That creates conflict with an often far more powerful military-political force. In order to maintain credibility and effectiveness, the only thing a nonviolent campaign can do is meet that opposition with strategies other than violence. One of these other strategies is to identify the pillars of support that the regime relies upon, like civil servants, and having them strike in order to cause the maximum disruption to the regime's day to day operations (1).

[Student 2]: That sounds like an interesting strategy, but has it ever really worked? Most of the time, even when they are acting as an organized group, it seems like non-violent groups are just banging their heads against a door that will never open.

[Student 1]: In Chile one of the major pillars of the non-violent resistance to the dictator Pinochet were the Copper Miners' Unions. Since the miners carried out such an essential part of Chile's economy, when they went on strike, although there were difficulties, they were able to get some real policy changes. Their successes helped to bring about the greater non violent anti-Pinochet movement that eventually succeeded in removing him from power (4).

[Student 2]: Huh, that really is an achievement, I guess. What I want to know is, from a practical standpoint, isn't it quite difficult to keep a movement non-violent? Most of the nonviolent movements that I've heard about in history classes did have incidents of violence on the part of the opposition. In South Africa, anti-apartheid forces got so angry at people that they thought were spying on them that they killed them by burning tires around their necks(5). I mean it makes sense that when you feel threatened by your own you want to lash out. Violence is a part of human nature in that way.

[Student 1]: I don't agree that Violence is an integral part of human nature. (6) Those incidents did happen in South Africa, and they were horrible, but I don't think that they were necessarily representative of the movement as a whole. One of the major accomplishments of so many nonviolent movements is their commitment to educating their members in nonviolent strategies. There are so many publications out there about non-violent strategy, almost always put out by the activists themselves.

[Student 2]: What about cases in which some or most of the members who are organizing are illiterate, or don't all speak the same language? This would be a really big challenge to the type of organizing you're describing. In South Africa, a lot of the violence that occurred between anti-apartheid happened in the areas with the poorest infrastructure and government sponsored resources like schools. Would that have been a result of lack of communication of non violent principles?

[Student 1]: Many non-violent organizations have run into similar problems and have come up with several creative solutions. The United Farm Workers Union, addressed that by incorporating information about non violent tactics into educational skits and songs that were performed in both English and Spanish (7). They helped to cross the cultural divide and make essential information available to everyone.

[Student 2]: What did they do in South Africa?

[Student 1]: In South Africa, many anti-apartheid movements relied heavily upon the oral tradition that had already been established as part of the black consciousness movement earlier in the century (8). They took that even further by incorporating information about non-violence into songs that were performed not only by prominent members of the movement in front of large crowds, but also by the people that involved on a grassroots level. Many churches incorporated the non-violent anti-apartheid songs into their sermons, helping the movement gain a foothold in local communities (South Africa Music Documentary that we watched in class (NAME?)).

[Student 2]: Do you think that this community organizing approach had an impact
on how effective the movement was at creating change?

[Student 1]: I do, not necessarily because community organizing forced the government to take more notice of the movement, although it did, but because it gave people the feeling that they finally had some say in their lives. The street councils brought a system of government to the people outside of the government system. It reminds me of a quote by Buckminster Fuller, *"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, you build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."* and I think what community organizing in South Africa was just that. It made the entire system of the oppressive regime redundant and proved that the people could rule themselves. That's when things really began to change in South Africa. Not before.

[Student 2]: That's funny, because what you're suggesting reminds me a lot of another community-based organization that operates outside of what is normally considered governmental jurisdiction. They build schools and hospitals and enforce laws. They run their own social services and work towards the aim of removing a violent and oppressive regime that has been occupying their country for over sixty years (9). Some people call them heroes and others call them terrorists, but whatever their label, they are using violent methods to resist a militarily superior occupying force. The organization Hamas in the Gaza Strip have been employing community building techniques at the same time as making the governing authority and services of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) redundant. I think this brings up the question that maybe a group like this, which is employing many of the techniques you have previously mentioned, could be justified in using violence.

[Student 1]: Just because they are using some of the tactics employed by nonviolent activists does not mean that their method of resistance can be morally justified. Something that I think has to be mentioned here is that while Hamas builds hospitals and other community resources, the level of Violence that the Israeli government has been using against the civilian population of the Gaza strip has been enormously increased due to the missiles fired by Hamas into Israel. Although the damage done to Israel has been superficial at worst, the use of force has given Israel the excuse it needed in order to 'justify' a massive retaliation against Gaza to its allies in the west. The Israeli attacks have been far more damaging to civilian populations living within the Gaza Strip than the damage to Israeli populations largely because Hamas fire their weapons from civilian areas, essentially using the population there as a human shield (10). Although this argument isn't really about Israel and Palestine, I'd like to make the point that violence cannot, should not ever, be considered morally justified. No matter what side you are on.

[Student 2]: Okay, you've got me there, as much as people talk about justifying violent repercussions, it's always been one of the more morally shaky arguments for the use of violence. But what about long term efficacy? Aren't violent revolutions more likely to be successful at holding power once they've gotten it? In Russia, for example, after the October Revolution of 1917, where the Tsar Nicholas III was overthrown violently, the Bolshevik regime had enough military power to hold and keep political power until the country slowly and deliberately transitioned into Democracy in the 1990's. I would say that was a pretty successful use of violence to create political stability. The same thing Happened in Egypt during the 2011 Arab Spring. Despite the protests, it was the Army that actually brokered the transition from Mubarak to Morsi. The Army was able to keep both the Mubarak and the Anti-Mubarak supporters in line and relatively stable by using violence and arrests against both when necessary during the transition period.

[Student 1]: In Egypt, not only were there monthly days of rage protests held against the violent force being exerted by the military against the protestors, the use of violence in Egypt caused a lot of social disruption and harm to Egypt's economy, especially to the tourist based sectors (11). Rather than stability violence actually causes massive civil disruption. Not only the deaths caused by the violence, but fear and grief cause members of each side to blame one another. People stop buying things, and stock values within the country decrease (12).

[Student 2]: Speaking of the economy, if it were possible, and I'm not saying that it is, but if it were possible to make a transition away from using military force in the US and beginning a policy that relied far more heavily on diplomacy to solve our international problems, what would that do to our own economy? The US-military suppliers provide a huge chunk not only of government spending but in terms of employment of highly skilled workers and engineers. It represents a large portion of our GDP and sales of weapons overseas contributes to that significantly. Could *our* economy survive without that support?

[Student 1]: I honestly think that not only could it survive, our economy could actually thrive if we shifted our public investment away from violent conflict resolution. The US was a manufacturing giant before WWII, which is when the military-industrial complex got started, and I think that if necessary, we could go back to that, however, what is far more likely way forward I think, is if the Government invested as heavily in education and research as they do in the military, if they diverted the 673 billion dollars spent by the department of defense alone in 2012 to these essential services, then I believe that within a few short years the US could be revolutionizing the fields of science and technology (13). Investing in intellectual capital like basic science research and in math, science, and technological education for our nation's children is the most sustainable way to build our economy today and in the future.

[Student 2]: Well, that was a speech! I agree that our country needs to be a global leader in science and technology if we want to compete in the future, but if we were going to make that shift towards non violence by disinvesting in the military-industrial complex, where does that start?

[Student 1]: With people like us.

[Student 2]: How can college students like us be a part of the solution to such a big problem?

[Student 1]: By exercising our rights to vote, and making informed decisions about the candidates that we elect to office, and by having honest, open discussions like this one, about what we want to see out of the world, and how we want to get there.

[Student 2]: And if that wasn't enough? Could we try non-violent activism ourselves?

[Student 1]: I think we certainly could, after all, anyone can become a grassroots organizer. Gandhi said “Be the change you want to see in the world.” and I firmly believe that that is something we can do using nonviolent methods. The first step would be to gather as much information as you could about what you wanted to change, then to begin to educate others. Remaining committed despite hardships, and continuing to practice non-violent action and negotiation as you continue to struggle for your change. Finally, once you have achieved your change, to reconcile with your former opponent to ensure that the change is stable and lasting. Martin Luther King Jr. used these principles as the basis for his own non-violent campaign for full civil rights (14).

[Student 2]: I’m going to think about what you said, and I’m definitely going to have to talk to my father. I think that maybe if I could get him to agree to take some conflict resolution classes, I could convince him to take the guns out from behind the counters at his deli. If we want to make the world a safer, less violent place, then I think the best place to start is in our own lives. But I can tell you, for sure, that I’m going to need every one of those tactics you described today to get him to agree to try it!

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