Introduction:

What if there were means to counter violent oppression, and win, without using violence to do so? What if there was an approach to engaging conflict that offers as much expectation of success as if we used violence, but that still allows us to uphold our highest conduct toward other people? Is there a force that can take us out of the revolutionary cycle of violence that simply shifts who is in power and instead allows us to transform our countries into freer, more democratic, and more compassionate societies? Are there ways we can still fight for our beliefs and honor people, our future, and the planet over greed, corruption, and political expediency? Many people think so, and the research suggests they are right. Given our world’s current state of perpetual war and the inevitable conflicts looming ahead from climate change, is there anything more important to our survival, the sustainability of our planet, and possibly our collective soul than finding less destructive ways to resolve our differences?

The purpose of this article, an excerpt from my book with the same name, is to provide an introduction to nonviolent conflict that is both accessible to the informed public and rigorous enough to be used by activists and students wishing to investigate the field further. In a subsequent book, I will extend this introduction and use integral theory, specifically the all quadrants all levels (AQAL) model created by the philosopher Ken Wilber, to reduce the debates now dividing activists and scholars, and show how each side has value and brings greater truth to the discussion.

Nonviolent conflict is a form of positive peace that can break the link between the personal and structural violence now defining our world and manifest both the values and social justice goals of a society without either. Atheists as well as followers of all religious faiths have used nonviolent methods to resist oppression. In fact, these people have become such “an integral force in shaping…the political direction of their societies” that it has been said only the “intellectually lazy” or those wishing to maintain the status quo continue to default to violent options.

Aside from the people who are unwilling to question their assumptions and those who are interested in maintaining their power regardless of how they do so, there are people who think they are informed on these issues but who are basing their conclusions on incorrect information. In other words, while they are attempting to be moral, responsible, and upstanding citizens their beliefs are based on assumptions and popular myths, not valid knowledge. Violence is so ingrained in our society it is seen as normal, and it is hard for many people to consider that conflict can be won without it. Whether intentional or not, ideas we now know to be wrong - specifically beliefs suggesting that humans are violent by nature, that war is inevitable, and that violence is the ultimate force only chosen as the last resort - are still being promoted by our leaders and reinforced through the news-media.

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5 ibid., p. 33.
increasingly subservient to government control. Those ideas, mixed with fear of others who act, look, think, and believe differently than us have, in my opinion, resulted in the horror we are witnessing today. This combination of general confusion about nonviolent conflict and a media promoting wrong information that supports war is obstructing our path to a more fair, just, and compassionate world.

Does it have to be this way? As we will discuss, one of the most telling signs that humans are not violent by nature is that very few people have an innate capacity to kill another person, even in defense of their own life. In other words, to get most of us to take another person’s life first requires breaking down our natural aversion to the act and then conditioning us to where killing becomes right and normal. This research counters the idea that humans are hardwired to violence or that war is inevitable, and it gives us insight into one of the reasons for the high suicide rate in our armed forces tasked with killing the enemy.

It has also been claimed that by using nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki we “rendered the global war system unworkable beyond any hope of repair,” and that shifts in humanity and advances in weapons technology have brought us to a point where we have both our greatest risk of destruction and our greatest chance for peace. One of the world’s foremost experts on nonviolent conflict has even claimed that we can reduce or eliminate war from the world system if we could find a nonviolent alternative “by which people can defend liberty, their way of life, humanitarian principles, their institutions and society, at least as effectively against military attack as can military means.” These ideas counter the assumption violence must be overcome with even greater violence.

While many of us would agree with the statement that today’s weapons technology has brought us to “our greatest risk of destruction,” how many people would even consider that we are also at the point where we have “our greatest chance for peace?”, or that humanity could ever reduce or eliminate war from the world system? Are these people crazy? According to our popular media they would be, or worse. When nations are at war, populations can become polarized, and people who do not support the aggression can be as vilified as the enemy being fought. At times even suggesting that there are other ways to resolve the conflict besides violence can result in the person being discounted as either weak or naïve, or possibly complicit or sympathetic with the enemy.

What we do know is that the wars fought since the beginning of the twentieth century have increased the destruction to our cultures and global environment to a level never before witnessed. Those events are then in turn being used to reinforce the myths supporting war - that we are violent by nature, that war is an inevitable part of our experience, and that violence is needed to beat violence. In other words, we are in a horrendous cycle where non-truths are used to get us into wars, and then those same misbeliefs are then used to justify our actions; but a closer look at the topic shows a different story.

For example, research now shows that over the last one hundred years nonviolent campaigns against violent oppression have been almost twice as successful as violent insurgencies, that using nonviolent methods results in greater levels of freedom and democracy in the country after the conflict, and that by not using violence there is a greater chance of reconciliation between the opposing groups and less chance that the conflict will

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7 ibid., p. 10.
eventuate into a civil war. These studies show that more people, not just fit younger men best suited for armed conflict, can take part when nonviolent methods are used. Nonviolent conflict gets its strength, just like democratic action, from massive public involvement; it includes many different tactics and strategies designed to allow anyone to participate. These tactics can range from simply slowing down at one’s government job, to boycotting certain products, services, or events, to standing in nonviolent protest against an armed opposition. When this increased level of participation takes place across all sectors of the society, it can undermine the superiority of modern weapons. In other words, yes, the regime has the ability to kill all the protestors, but doing so works against them. They need the people to keep the society functioning, and using violence against nonviolent protestors increases the chance that third-party actors outside of the country will align with the nonviolent campaign, which can be one of the most important factors for its success. Nonviolent methods also work to facilitate reconciliation after the conflict: it is much easier to come to peace with someone who was unwilling to hurt you during the actual conflict than with someone who killed your family and friends - which, may be one reason for the “War on Terror” fueling the violence in the world not mitigating it. Finally, by choosing not to use violence against violence, we reduce the destruction of the country’s infrastructure and its cultural heritage, and we limit the devastation to our global environment.

None of this is meant to imply that nonviolent conflict has or always will work. The research showing that nonviolent conflict has become more successful than violent insurgencies relates to campaigns that actually germinated and took on a national presence. How many times were campaigns squashed before enough people got involved is difficult to know; but when a nonviolent campaign *can* generate massive participation across most sectors of the population, the results are often dramatic and very different than what can be achieved by using violence.

One of the requirements when using integral theory to examine a topic is for the researcher to state their position. Violence feeds on itself, and if we do not find an alternative: it will eventually consume us. For many people, especially those embracing the myths of violence, there is no other future available. For them, war “is an inevitable and enduring institution of human society.” Yet it seems that if we look at the world stage like a child’s game of King of the Mountain, then at some point, we too will lose our place at the top and the cycle will continue under different leadership.

Does this have to be our world’s fate? A critical paradox is now taking place - while the twentieth century was the bloodiest the world has ever known, it was also the period when nonviolent conflict overtook violent insurgency as the most effective way to relieve oppression and create a more free and democratic society. Somehow, despite the incomprehensible violence witnessed the last hundred and fifteen years, a new path emerged and we achieved the “greatest century of nonviolent activism” our world has ever seen. This means that we now have a choice in how we fight. We can continue to kill one another, destroy our cultures, and devastate our planet, or we can choose to use means that transform the world system and bring us a more free, democratic, and sustainable future. The former leaves power with a handful of people willing to pit entire countries against one another for their benefit, while the latter transfers that power to humanity and

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opens the door for us to eventually dictate, based on our highest cross-cultural values, how we expect our governments and corporations to conduct our business on the planet. This argument is compelling enough to warrant further research into the dynamics of effective nonviolent conflict and to help more people break free of the myths supporting perpetual war.