



# Sharp Attack Unwarranted

**The campaign against Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution is beyond bizarre.**

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**Gene Sharp, an 80-year-old scholar of strategic nonviolent action and veteran of radical pacifist causes, is under attack by a number of foreign governments that claim that he and his small research institute are key players in a Bush administration plot against them.**

Though there is no truth to these charges, several leftist web sites and publications have been repeating such claims as fact. This raises disturbing questions regarding the ability of progressives challenging Bush foreign policy to distinguish between the very real manifestations of U.S. imperialism and conspiratorial fantasies.

Gene Sharp's personal history demonstrates the bizarre nature of these charges. He spent two years in prison for draft resistance against the Korean War, was arrested in the early civil rights sit-ins, was an editor of the radical pacifist journal *Peace News*, and was the personal assistant to the leftist labor organizer A.J. Muste. He named his institute after Albert Einstein, who is not only remembered as the greatest scientist of the 20th century but was also a well-known socialist and pacifist.

Sharp founded the Albert Einstein Institution in 1983, dedicated to advancing the study and utilization of nonviolent conflict in defense of freedom, justice, and democracy. Long considered the foremost authority in his field, Sharp has inspired generations of progressive peace, labor, feminist, environmental, and social justice activists in the United States and around the world. In the past few decades, as nonviolent pro-democracy movements have played the decisive role in ending authoritarian rule in such countries as the Philippines, Chile, Madagascar, Poland, Mongolia, Bolivia and Serbia, interest among peace and justice activists has grown in his research and the work of other scholars studying strategic nonviolent action.

## Fabricated Allegations

Unfortunately, however, as a result of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Bush administration's open advocacy for "regime change," any American group or individual who provides educational resources on strategic nonviolence to civil society organizations or human rights activists in foreign countries has suddenly become suspect of being an agent of U.S. imperialism – even Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution.

For example, in February Iranian government television informed ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-sedaei/new-propaganda-piece-hits\\_b\\_88512.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-sedaei/new-propaganda-piece-hits_b_88512.html)) viewers that Gene Sharp was "one of the CIA agents in charge of America's infiltration into other countries." It included a computer-animated sequence of him and John McCain in a White House conference room plotting the overthrow of the Iranian regime. In reality, Sharp has never worked with the CIA, has never met Senator McCain, and has never even been to the White House. Government spokespeople and supporters of autocratic regimes in Burma, Zimbabwe, and Belarus have also blamed Sharp for being behind dissident movements in their countries as well.

Ironically, some on the left have picked up and expanded on these charges. For example, in an article about the Bush administration promoting "soft coups" against foreign governments it doesn't like, Jonathan Mowat claims ([http://onlinejournal.org/Special\\_Reports/031905-Mowat-1/031905mowat-1.html](http://onlinejournal.org/Special_Reports/031905-Mowat-1/031905mowat-1.html)) that "The main handler of these coups on the 'street side' has been the Albert Einstein Institution," which he says is funded by Hungarian-American financier George Soros. Venezuelan-American attorney Eva Golinger, meanwhile, claimed (<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/2600>) that "Peter Ackerman, a multimillionaire banker had sponsored 'regime changes' in Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia through the Albert Einstein Institute." Tony Logan insists (<http://www.notmytribe.com/2007/otpor-and-the-us-made-coup-attempts-against-chavez-in-venezuela-81260.html>) that AEI "is a U.S. government run operation designed to link Gandhian methods of nonviolent protest to Pentagon and U.S. State Department efforts to overthrow foreign governments." In a similar vein, *Counterpunch* readers were recently informed (<http://www.counterpunch.org/maher04162008.html>) that the Albert Einstein Institution plays "a central role in a new generation of warfare, one which has incorporated the heroic examples of past nonviolent resistance into a strategy of obfuscation and misdirection that does the work of empire."

Absolutely none of these claims is true. Yet such articles have been widely circulated on progressive websites and list serves. Such false allegations have even ended up as part of entries on the Albert Einstein Institution in SourceWatch, Wikipedia, and other reference web sites.

The international press has occasionally echoed some of these bogus claims as well. For example, a [commentary](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IJ17Ae01.html) ([http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/IJ17Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IJ17Ae01.html)) published in the *Asia Times* last fall accused Sharp of being the “concert-master” for the Saffron Revolution in Burma, claiming that the Albert Einstein Institution is funded by an arm of the U.S. government “to foster U.S.-friendly regime change in key spots around the world” and that its staff includes “known CIA operatives.” Though these charges were utterly false, the article was then widely circulated on a number of progressive list serves, including such academic networks as the Peace and Justice Studies Association.

Implicit in such charges is that Burmese monks and other pro-democracy activists in that country are unable to initiate such actions themselves and their decision to take to the streets last fall in mass protests against their country’s repressive military junta came about because an octogenarian academic in Boston had somehow put them up to it. One Burmese human rights activist, referring to his country’s centuries-old tradition of popular resistance, [noted](http://www.upiasiaonline.com/Human_Rights/2007/10/25/commentary_teaching_grandma_how_to_peel_onions/2167) ([http://www.upiasiaonline.com/Human\\_Rights/2007/10/25/commentary\\_teaching\\_grandma\\_how\\_to\\_peel\\_onions/2167](http://www.upiasiaonline.com/Human_Rights/2007/10/25/commentary_teaching_grandma_how_to_peel_onions/2167)) how the very idea of an outsider having to orchestrate the Burmese people to engage in a nonviolent action campaign is like “teaching grandma to peel onions.” (The *Asia Times* article also tried to connect Sharp to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in China and [another article](http://www.howardwfrench.com/archives/2008/04/22/the_crimson_revolutions_true_colours/) ([http://www.howardwfrench.com/archives/2008/04/22/the\\_crimson\\_revolutions\\_true\\_colours/](http://www.howardwfrench.com/archives/2008/04/22/the_crimson_revolutions_true_colours/)) from the *Straits Times* in Singapore even places Sharp and AEI behind the recent uprising in Tibet.)

This racist attitude that the peoples of non-Western societies are incapable of deciding on their own to resist illegitimate authority without some Western scholar telling them to do so has been most dramatically highlighted by French Marxist Thierry Meyssan. In his [article](http://www.voltairenet.org/article30032.html) (<http://www.voltairenet.org/article30032.html>) “The Albert Einstein Institution: non-violence according to the CIA,” he insists that Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution were personally responsible for the 1991 Lithuanian independence struggle against the Soviet Union; the 2000 student-led pro-democracy movement that ousted Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia; the 2003 Rose Revolution that forced out Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze; and, the 2004 Orange Revolution that forced the revote on the rigged national election in Ukraine. He also credits (or, more accurately, blames) Gene Sharp for personally playing a key role in uniting the Tibetan opposition under the Dalai Lama, as well as forming the Burmese Democratic Alliance, the Taiwanese Progressive Democratic Party, and a dissident wing of the Palestine Liberation Organization that Sharp supposedly trained secretly in the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv.

The failure of people power movements to succeed in some other cases was not, according to Meyssan, due to weaknesses within the movement or strengths in the state apparatus. Says Meyssan, “Gene Sharp failed in Belarus and Zimbabwe for he could not recruit and train in the proper time the necessary amount of demonstrators.”

Despite the absurdity of these claims and the attribution of seemingly superhuman capabilities to this mild-mannered intellectual, Meyssan’s article has been repeatedly cited on progressive web sites and list serves, feeding the arrogance of Western leftists who deny the capability of Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, and Eastern Europeans to organize mass actions themselves.

## **The Real Story**

The office of the Albert Einstein Institution – which supposedly plays such a “central role” in American imperialism – is actually a tiny, cluttered space in the downstairs of Gene Sharp’s home, located in a small row house in a working class neighborhood in East Boston. The staff consists of just two employees, Sharp and a young administrator.

Rather than receiving lucrative financial support from the U.S. government or wealthy financiers, the Albert Einstein Institution is almost exclusively funded by individual small donors and foundation grants. It operates on a budget of less than \$160,000 annually.

Also contrary to the slew of recent charges posted on the Internet, the Albert Einstein Institution has never funded activist groups to subvert foreign governments, nor would it have had the financial means to do so. Furthermore, AEI does not initiate contact with any individual or organizations; those interested in the group’s educational materials come to them first.

Nor have these critics ever presented any evidence that Sharp or the Albert Einstein Institution has ever been requested, encouraged, advised, or received suggestions by any branch of the US government to do or not do any research, analysis, policy studies, or educational activity, much less engage in active subversion of foreign governments. And, given the lack of respect the U.S. government has traditionally had for nonviolence or for the power of popular movements to create change, it is not surprising that these critics haven’t found any.

The longstanding policy (<http://aeinstein.org/AEIconsultPOLICY.pdf>) of the Albert Einstein Institution, given its limited funding and the reality of living in an imperfect world, is to be open to accepting funds from organizations that have received some funding from government sources “as long as there is no dictation or control of the purpose of our work, individual

projects, or of the dissemination of the gained knowledge.” Well prior to the Bush administration coming to office, AEI received a couple of small grants from the congressionally funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) to translate some of Gene Sharp’s theoretical writings. Nearly forty years ago (and fifteen years prior to AEI’s founding), Sharp received partial research funding for his doctoral dissertation from Harvard Professor Thomas Schelling, who had received support from the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the US Department of Defense to fund doctoral students.

Though these constitute the only financial support Gene Sharp or the Albert Einstein Institution has ever received, even indirectly, from government sources, critics have jumped on these tenuous links to allege that AEI is “funded by the U.S. government.”

## **Progressive Connections**

A look at the five members of the Albert Einstein Institution’s board shows that none of them is a supporter or apologist for U.S. imperialism. In addition to Sharp himself, the board consists of: human rights lawyer Elizabeth Defeis; disability rights and environmental activist Cornelia Sargent; senior deputy executive director of Amnesty International USA Curt Goering; and, veteran civil rights and anti-war activist Mary King, author of a recent highly acclaimed [book \(http://maryking.info/Quiet-Revolution-Flyer.doc\)](http://maryking.info/Quiet-Revolution-Flyer.doc) that gives a sympathetic portrayal of the first – and largely nonviolent – Palestinian Intifada.

During the 1980s, Gene Sharp’s staff included radical sociologist Bob Irwin and Greg Bates, who went on to become the co-founder and publisher of the progressive Common Courage Press.

Some years ago, when the institute had a larger budget, one of their principal activities was to support research projects in strategic nonviolent action. Recipients included such left-leaning scholars and activists as Palestinian feminist Souad Dajani, Rutgers sociologist Kurt Schock, Israeli human rights activist Edy Kaufman, Kent State Peace Studies professor Patrick Coy, Nigerian human rights activist Uche Ewelukwa, and Paul Routledge of the University of Glasgow, all of whom have been outspoken critics of U.S. foreign policy.

For decades, the work of Gene Sharp has influenced such radical U.S. groups as Movement for a New Society, the Clamshell Alliance, the Abalone Alliance, Training for Change and other activist organizations that have promoted nonviolent direct action as a key component of their activism.

Sharp and AEI have also worked closely in recent years with pro-democracy activists battling U.S.-backed dictatorships in such countries as Egypt and Equatorial Guinea as well as with Palestinians resisting the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation, hardly “the work of empire” designed “to foster US-friendly regime change” as critics claim.

## **The Case of Venezuela**

As part of an effort to challenge the longstanding stereotype of nonviolent action being the exclusive province of radical pacifists, Dr. Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution have taken a “transpartisan” position that cuts across political boundaries and conceptions and makes their educational resources available to essentially anyone.

Not surprisingly, a small minority of those who have taken advantage of such resources have been those whose commitment to justice and equality is questionable, including some members of Venezuelan opposition groups.

This ideological indifference on the part of Sharp and his institution has been troubling for many of us on the left, but it certainly does not constitute evidence that they are part of a U.S.-funded conspiracy to overthrow foreign governments around the world to advance U.S. imperialism and capitalist hegemony. Indeed, their [consulting policy](http://aeinstein.org/AEIconsultPOLICY.pdf) (<http://aeinstein.org/AEIconsultPOLICY.pdf>) explicitly prohibits them from taking part in any political action, participating in strategic decision-making with any group, or taking sides in any conflict. None of the institute’s critics has been able to provide evidence of a single violation of this policy.

Nevertheless, in her book *Bush vs. Chavez: Washington’s War on Venezuela*, author Eva Golinger falsely claims that the Albert Einstein Institution has developed a plan to overthrow that country’s democratically elected government through training right-wing paramilitaries to use “widespread civil disobedience and violence throughout the nation” in order to “provoke repressive reactions by the state that would then justify crises of human right violations and lack of constitutional order.” Similarly, in a [recent article](http://www.senzacensura.org/public/rivista/sc07_2406en.htm) ([http://www.senzacensura.org/public/rivista/sc07\\_2406en.htm](http://www.senzacensura.org/public/rivista/sc07_2406en.htm)), Golinger has gone so far as to claim that Gene Sharp has written “a big destabilization plan aiming to overthrow Chavez government and to pave the way for an international intervention” including sabotage and street violence. Neither Golinger nor anyone else has been able to produce a copy of this supposed plan, instead simply citing Sharp’s book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, written over 35 years ago, in which he outlines close to 200 exclusively nonviolent tactics that have been used historically, but includes no destabilization plan aimed at Venezuela or any other country.

In addition, Meyssan, in an [article \(http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/2432\)](http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/2432) posted in *Venezuela Analysis*, insisted that “Gene Sharp and his team led the leaders of [the opposition group] Súmate during the demonstrations of August 2004.” In reality, neither Sharp nor anybody else affiliated with the Albert Einstein Institution even took part in – much less led – those demonstrations. Nor were any of them anywhere near Venezuela during that period. Nor were any of them in contact with the leaders of that demonstration.

In another article (<http://www.counterpunch.org/mahero4162008.html>), recently posted on the Counterpunch web site, George Cicariello-Miller falsely accuses Sharp of having links with right-wing assassins and terrorists and offering training “toward the formulation of what was called ‘Operation Guarimba,’ a series of *often-violent* street blockades that resulted in several deaths.” Cicariello-Miller’s only evidence of Sharp’s alleged role in masterminding this operation was that a right-wing Venezuelan opposition leader had once met with Sharp in Boston and that a photo of a stylized clinched fist found in some AEI literature (taken from a student-led protest movement in Serbia eight years ago) matched those on some signs carried by anti-Chavez protesters in Venezuela.

It appears that no one who has written any of these articles or who has made such claims has ever actually attended any of the lectures, workshops, or informal meetings by Gene Sharp or others affiliated with the Albert Einstein Institution or has even bothered to interview anyone who has. If they had done so, they would quickly find that these presentations tend to be rather dry lectures which focus on the nature of power, the dynamics of nonviolent struggle, and examples of tactics used in nonviolent resistance campaigns historically. They do not instruct anybody or give specific advice about what to do in their particular situation other than to encourage activists to avoid all forms of violence.

Finally, even if one were to assume that the Albert Einstein Institution’s underfunded two-person outfit was indeed closely involved in training the Venezuelan opposition in tactics of nonviolent resistance, Chavez would have little to worry about. No government that had the support of the majority of its people has ever been overthrown through a nonviolent civil resistance movement. Every government deposed through a primarily nonviolent struggle – such as in the Philippines, Chile, Bolivia, Madagascar, Nepal, Czechoslovakia, Indonesia, Serbia, Mali, Ukraine, and elsewhere – had already lost popular support. This is not the case with Venezuela. While Chavez’ progressive economic policies have angered the old elites, he still maintains the support of the majority of the population, particularly when compared to the alternative of returning to the old elite-dominated political system.

Unfortunately, Chavez himself was apparently convinced by these conspiracy theorists that Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution really were part of a CIA-backed conspiracy against him, [claiming \(http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/06/07/america/LA-GEN-Venezuela-Chavez.php\)](http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/06/07/america/LA-GEN-Venezuela-Chavez.php) last June that “they are the ideologues of the soft coup and it seems like they’re here [in Venezuela.] They are laying out the slow fuse ... they’ll continue laying it out [with] marches, events, trying to create an explosion.” In reality, no one affiliated with AEI was in Venezuela nor were they organizing marches, events, or any other activity, much less trying to create an “explosion.”

In response, Sharp [wrote a letter \(http://aeinstein.org/Chavez.pdf\)](http://aeinstein.org/Chavez.pdf) to President Chavez explaining the inaccuracy of the Venezuelan leader’s charges against him and expressing his concern that “for those persons who are familiar with my life and work and that of the Albert Einstein Institution, these inaccuracies, unless corrected, will cast doubts on your credibility.” He also offered Chavez a copy of his book *The Anti-Coup*, which includes concrete steps on how a threatened government can mobilize the population to prevent a successful *coup d’etat*, hardly the kind of offer made by someone conspiring with the CIA to overthrow him.

With the U.S. corporate media and members of Congress refusing to challenge the very real efforts by the Bush administration to subvert and undermine Chavez’s government, the credibility of those of us attempting to expose such genuine imperialistic intrigues are being compromised by these bizarre conspiracy theories involving Gene Sharp, the Albert Einstein Institution, and related individuals and NGOs. Golinger’s books and articles, for example, bring to light some very real and very dangerous efforts by the U.S. government and U.S.-funded agencies. It is hard for many people to take her real accusations seriously, however, in the face of her simultaneously putting forward such blatant falsehoods about Gene Sharp and his institute.

## **Why Such Bizarre Attacks?**

There is a long, sordid history of covert U.S. support for foreign political parties, military cliques, and individual leaders, as well as related activities that have resulted in the overthrow of elected governments. And there are the very real ongoing efforts by such U.S. government-funded entities as the NED and IRI which, in the name of “democracy promotion,” provide financial and logistical support for groups working against governments the United States opposes. Given these very real manifestations of U.S. imperialism, why have some people insisted on going after an aging scholar whose worst crime may be that he is not being discriminating enough regarding with whom he shares his research?



One reason is that some critics of Sharp subscribe to the same realpolitik myth that sees local struggles and mass movements as simply manifestations of great power politics, just as the right once tried to portray the popular leftist uprisings in Central America and elsewhere simply as creations of the Soviet Union. Another factor is that many of the originators of the conspiracy theories regarding Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution are Marxist-Leninists who have traditionally downplayed the power of nonviolence and insisted that meaningful political change can only come about through manipulation by powerful external actors or privileged elites.

This is reinforced by the fact that many supporters of U.S. imperialism – particularly the neo-conservatives – share this vanguard mentality with Marxist-Leninists. As a result, the right has given the United States unjustifiable credit for many of the dramatic transitions from dictatorships to democracies which have taken place around the world in recent decades. This, in turn, has led some on the left to see such ahistorical polemics as “proof” of the central U.S. role because the imperialists are “admitting it.”

The attempts to discredit Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution – as well as similar charges against the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) and the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) – appear to be part of an effort by both the right and the far left to delegitimize the power of individuals to make change and to portray the United States – for good or for ill – as the only power that can make a difference in the world. (For a detailed analysis of the relationship between U.S. foreign policy and popular democratic movements, see my [article \(http://fpif.org/fpiftxt/4923\)](http://fpif.org/fpiftxt/4923) on the United States, nonviolent action and pro-democracy struggles.)

It is therefore troubling that so many progressive sources of information have transmitted such falsehoods so widely and that so many people have come to believe them, particularly given the transparent lack of any solid evidence to back their accusations. The minority of these articles that actually have citations, for example, simply quote long-discredited sources such as Meyssan and Golinger. In a mirror-image of the right-wing’s blind acceptance of false stories about Barack Obama’s embrace of militant Islam, Michelle Obama’s anti-white rhetoric, and Nancy Pelosi’s punitive tax plan against retirees, some on the left all too easily believe what they read on the Internet. The widespread acceptance of these false charges against Gene Sharp and others raises concerns as to how many other fabricated pseudo-conspiracies are out there that distract progressive activists from challenging all-too-real abuses by the U.S. government and giant corporations.

One consequence of these attacks has been that a number of progressive grass roots organizations in foreign countries have now become hesitant to take advantage of the educational resources on strategic nonviolent action provided by the Albert Einstein Institution and related groups. As a result of fears that they may be linked to the CIA and other U.S. government agencies, important campaigns for human rights, the environment, and economic justice have been denied access to tools that could have strengthened their impact. Furthermore, these disinformation campaigns have damaged the reputation of a number of prominent anti-imperialist activists and scholars who have worked with such groups by wrongly linking them to U.S. interventionism.

Fortunately, there is now an effort underway to fight back. Activists from groups ranging from the Fellowship of Reconciliation to Code Pink to the Brown Berets – as well as such radical scholars as Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and Paul Ortiz – are signing onto an [open letter](http://www.stephenzunes.org/petition) (<http://www.stephenzunes.org/petition>) in support of Gene Sharp and the Albert Einstein Institution.

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