

Protest as Terrorism?

The Potential for Violent Anti-Nuclear Activism

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This article examines the potential threat of terrorism toward the Nevada Nuclear Test Site and the proposed Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository by domestic protest groups, particularly anti-nuclear activists. The analysis is based on the history of direct action anti-nuclear campaigns against the facilities, particularly the Nevada Test Site, and suggests that violence as a form of protest, particularly the type of violence that is aimed at jeopardizing human safety (as opposed to violent destruction of property), is very unlikely. It is argued that the normalized relations between authorities and protesters that occurred at the peak of direct actions is critical to maintaining the nonviolence that has characterized activism at the facilities. But, the current climate of heightened government scrutiny and repression toward various types of perceived terrorist threats may affect future forms of protest and engender violent responses on both sides.

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One of the concerns in the wake of September 11, 2001 is the prospect of terrorism against U.S. nuclear facilities. Two major nuclear facilities in Southern Nevada, the Nevada Test Site (NTS) and the Yucca Mountain High-Level Nuclear Waste Repository, are among those said to be at risk. The NTS is a proving ground for nuclear weapons that was originally created in 1950 by the Atomic Energy Commission.¹ The test site ushered in the atomic age and saw more than four decades of nuclear weapons testing before a moratorium in 1992. Since its inception, the NTS has been a major target of anti-nuclear protests, with the peak demonstrations coming between the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. Yucca Mountain also has been a focal point of anti-nuclear activism since its designation in 1987 as the only site to be considered as a geologic repository for the nation's high-level radioactive nuclear waste. Recent federal actions raise the potential for increased activism at the facilities. The Bush administration's

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interest in overturning the 1992 moratorium on nuclear testing has already led to an increase in protest activity at the site and, if lifted, could well revive activism among wider anti-nuclear forces. Similarly, the recent congressional approval of the Department of Energy's (DOE) recommendations to proceed with the Yucca Mountain project has begun to invigorate a new phase of protests at that facility.

This article examines the potential threat of terrorism² toward the NTS and Yucca Mountain by domestic protest groups, particularly anti-nuclear activists.³ We base our analysis on the history of direct-action anti-nuclear campaigns against the facilities, particularly the NTS. Specifically, we highlight three main phases of actions toward the NTS: early protests from 1951 to 1984, the peak protests from 1985 to 1992, and the moratorium years from 1993 to the present. Our analysis of these phases suggests that violence as a form of protest, particularly the type of violence that is aimed at jeopardizing human safety (as opposed to violent destruction of property), is very unlikely. This is particularly true if the normalized relations between authorities and protesters that occurred at the peak of direct actions at the test site remain similar in the present context. We see this relationship as critical to maintaining the nonviolence that has characterized activism at the facilities. But, the current climate of heightened government scrutiny and repression toward various types of perceived terrorist threats may affect future forms of protest and engender violent responses on both sides.

Below, we begin with a conceptual overview of violent and nonviolent protest. Next, we discuss the phases of activism at the NTS and Yucca Mountain facilities focusing on the nature of groups, their repertoire of actions, and the nonviolent normalized relations that developed between protesters and authorities during these periods. We conclude by discussing two factors that could alter this normalized balance in ways that could provoke violent actions.

FORMS OF PROTEST: TERRORIST VIOLENCE AND NONVIOLENT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Social movement scholars have typically focused on two main issues in their attempts to understand the role of terror and violence in protest: the causes of political violence (Tamura, 1997)⁴ and the stage of the protest cycle in which violence is likely to occur (Blumer, 1939; Della Porta, 1995; Feagin & Hahn, 1973; Hopper, 1950; McAdam, 1983; McAdam & Moore, 1989; Miller, 1983; Tarrow, 1993, 1994, 1998; Turner & Killian, 1987). We first want to concentrate on the "stage" arguments because they provide an initial working hypothesis for analyzing the prospects for violence by anti-nuclear activists.

There are two contrasting arguments. "Collective behavior" perspectives argue that social movements generally shift from a dispersed stage of sporadic, uncoordinated actions toward increasingly organized and coordinated strategies and tactics. Violence is thought to occur in early stages of sporadic and unorgan-

ized behavior (Blumer, 1939, pp. 259-260; Hopper, 1950, p. 271).⁵ On the other hand, the political process variant of the resource mobilization perspective argues that violent actions tend to occur in later stages of a social movement's career. For instance, Tarrow (1993, 1994, 1998) and Tilly (1993) have found a prevalence of low-risk, conventional tactics (Tarrow, 1993, p. 289) in the early stages of many movements, which minimize the potential for alienating mainstream audiences. Violent actions and high-risk activism, they argue, become prevalent at later phases when social movements lose support for their aims, lose resources, and face repression from the state and countermovements (see also Della Porta, 1995, p. 162; Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p. 43; McAdam, 1983, p. 311; 1986, pp. 68-71; Tarrow, 1994, p. 103).

This late-stage conceptualization is most worthy of examination in this case because wide support for activism toward the NTS and Yucca Mountain has dropped precipitously from a peak in the mid- to late 1980s. As we discuss in more detail below, anti-nuclear protests in Nevada have ebbed and flowed through three successive phases. The first phase roughly spans the opening of the NTS and the beginning of nuclear weapons testing in 1951 to 1984. These early years were marked by small, sporadic demonstrations by pacifist religious groups protesting nuclear bomb detonations (Solnit, 1994). The second phase, 1985 to 1992, drew in a wide range of large professionalized social movement organizations (e.g., the Freeze Campaign, American Peace Test, Greenpeace, Citizen Alert, and the Alliance movement) and led to more than 500 demonstrations, involving 38,000 participants and 15,740 arrests for various forms of non-violent civil disobedience (Rogers, 2000). The third phase began with the 1992 U.S.-Russia moratorium on nuclear weapons testing. Because opposition to nuclear weapons proliferation was the major focus of most direct action, the halt in weapons testing led to a shift in priorities for a number of anti-nuclear groups who had participated in protests against the NTS and Yucca Mountain. Funding sources diminished, groups such as American Peace Test were disbanded, and anti-nuclear activism in Nevada went into a period of "abeyance" (Taylor, 1989). The moratorium also led to a decline in media attention on and public support for anti-nuclear efforts in southern Nevada. We think that a fourth phase of the anti-nuclear movement could now emerge as the Yucca Mountain repository moves closer to completion, nuclear waste shipments begin, and the Bush administration seeks to reverse the 1992 moratorium on testing at the NTS. But because of the postmoratorium abeyance, the initial resurgence of anti-nuclear protest may come from very resource-poor organizations. According to late-stage arguments about protest violence, we may then expect to see violence emerge as a primary tactic.

However, the literature also suggests a number of major constraints against violence as a protest strategy, which may work against it emerging in this case. First, social movement organizations rely heavily on perceived legitimacy, and violent actions tend to alienate sympathizers. As Tarrow (1998) explains, violence can rapidly polarize a conflict, transforming "relations between chal-

lengers and authorities from a confused, many-sided game into a bipolar one in which people are forced to choose sides, allies defect, bystanders retreat, and the state's repressive apparatus swings into gear" (p. 97). Violent tactics that may harm an innocent public often disenchant rank-and-file participants and can lead to a weakening of ties within movement ranks. And although a lack of resources may encourage the use of more extreme tactics, "this impulse is constrained . . . by the erosion of support occasioned by repression and moral backlash" (DeNardo, 1985, p. 219). A key dilemma lies in the contradiction between threatening disorder on one hand while, on the other, seeking to avoid mobilizing the public against the very cause that it is hoped they will be persuaded to support. Second, violence and extreme action often leads to an escalation of conflict that works against the aims and goals of both social movement groups and the targets of protest. As Della Porta (1995) has noted, in democracies where the state holds the monopoly on the legitimate use of force, most violent challenges are almost impossible to win because the state has the greater firepower. Merely the likelihood of violence gives authorities a mandate for repression (Eisinger, 1973). This is one reason why conventional protest strategies in democratic states are decidedly nonviolent and tend to focus on winning hearts and minds instead of being struggles of force with the intention of inflicting material damage (Tarrow, 1998). Indeed, significant debate has arisen within social movements in the United States and Europe over the acceptable degree of "disruptiveness" of their direct actions. Violence against both persons and property, that is, terrorism, is almost unanimously condemned by contemporary social movements with close ties to the left in the United States.⁶

At the same time, there are also constraints against the state's use of violence to suppress protests. State-sponsored violence that may harm "innocent" protesters often brings sympathy, attention, and support to the protester's cause. For example, public support of Vietnam War protests increased dramatically after the student shootings by the National Guard at Kent State. Overly repressive responses also make news and may bring an otherwise obscure protest into the limelight.

In some instances, then, the relationship between protesters and authorities may develop into a normalized, even choreographed, game involving the threat of violence from both sides without its actual use. Rallies, marches, demonstrations, occupations, and the like may disrupt routines of opponents and bystanders and even appear to (or actually) forewarn of the potential for violence and terror. The state also may threaten violent responses to suppress these protests. But in most cases, these tactics are part of an institutionalized pattern that both challengers and the state understand and readily play their parts, posturing but not acting on the threats (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Tarrow, 1998). As Rochon (1988) notes of the U.S. peace and anti-nuclear movements, during direct actions such as blocking access to military bases and nuclear facilities, both activists and police were experienced in avoiding escalations to violence.

Demonstrations are carefully choreographed in advance. Similarly activists who expect to participate in actions of civil disobedience, such as blockades, are usually required to undergo training in passive resistance and nonviolence. The police they face have been trained in crowd control and in dealing with nonviolent protest. The image so frequently broadcast of police carrying a demonstrator off to jail looks like an image of conflict. It is. But it is also an instance of two sets of professionals carrying out their jobs with precision. (Rochon, 1988, pp. 186-187, as quoted in Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 187)

Thus, if protesters give authorities no pretext for violent repression, and police strategies are aimed to refrain from such actions, then violence is less likely from either side. However, in the post-September 11 climate of fear and the Bush administration's targeting of groups suspected of harboring violent elements (e.g., Earth Liberation Front [ELF]), the type of actions that may now be seen as pretext for violent response may have shifted.

Finally, alongside protest strategies based on the logic of inflicting damage (terrorist violence) and those based on the logic of numbers (marches, rallies, and petitions), a new and increasingly prevalent protest strategy has developed since the 1970s based on the logic of winning hearts and minds. Highly symbolic tactics, based on the "logic of bearing witness" (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 178), are designed to show publics and authorities the extreme commitment of activists to an objective seen as critical for society's future. Bearing witness is expressed through actions that involve serious personal risks or cost, such as direct action civil disobedience in which activists knowingly break what are considered unjust laws. Della Porta and Diani (1999, p. 179) note numerous examples from anti-cruise-missile protests of the peace movement during the 1980s (obstruction of missile base entrances, vandalism of Trident submarines) (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 179; Meyer, 1990) to Greenpeace activists' peaceful invasion of the exclusion area around the French nuclear test site at the Mururoa Atoll in 1995. Likewise, civil rights sit-ins and anti-nuclear protests of groups such as the Clamshell Alliance reinforced the movements' moral messages through the examples of personal risk that activists were willing to take. As we will demonstrate, past actions at the NTS and Yucca Mountain are almost solely actions based on "bearing witness." Beginning in 1957 and accelerating through the 1980s and early 1990s, anti-nuclear and peace activists breached exclusion zones around the NTS to protest nuclear testing and to oppose construction of the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository. The actions were not intended as a physical threat to others but were aimed to demonstrate the seriousness of the issues by putting their personal safety (e.g., radiation contamination, exposure to military ordinance, etc.) on the line for their convictions.

Based on prior patterns of actions we will argue that anti-nuclear activists at the NTS and Yucca Mountain are much more likely to continue bearing witness through acts of civil disobedience as the main form of activism rather than committing terrorist violence as protest. We see several interrelated reasons for this.

First, bearing witness has been the sole logic of protest strategies and repertoires of action at the NTS since the 1950s. Second, violence against property and/or persons works directly against the basic ideological commitments expressed by the anti-nuclear activists who have protested against the NTS and the Yucca Mountain repository. Third, bearing witness requires time and commitment from relatively few activists more than it requires major organizational resources. Moreover, the Nevada state government is waging capital-intensive legal battles against Yucca Mountain, leaving resource-poor activists to wage the symbolic protests. Fourth, normalized, institutionalized relations between authorities and protesters have defined NTS protests and prevented violence in the past. Of course, the potential for violence always exists. We argue that if violence does occur, it would most likely come first from authorities under the auspices of post–September 11 homeland security efforts. Violent actions toward nonviolent protests could lead to violent responses from some activists, producing an escalation of conflict.

ANTI-NUCLEAR ACTIVISM IN SOUTHERN NEVADA

This section provides an analytic overview of anti-nuclear activism in Southern Nevada through three phases since 1951, illustrating the nature of groups, their repertoire of actions, and the nonviolent normalized relations that developed between protesters and authorities. It is this relationship, in which familiarity with and perceptions of certainty about each side's tactics were reasonably clear, that was crucial to maintaining nonviolent interaction through these phases. The continuation of this relationship is critical if nonviolent interactions are to continue during future phases of protest.

THE EARLY YEARS: 1951–1984

The first protests of nuclear testing at the NTS began in 1957. Peace activists led by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) had formed a coalition to press for the end of nuclear testing and to promote disarmament. Two organizations were created that year from that coalition to lead the campaign: the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA) and the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) (Katz, 1986; Kleidman, 1993, pp. 98-99; Wittner, 1997). CNVA “brought their direct action tactics to the anti-nuclear movement, while [SANE] educated and lobbied for a test ban” (Kleidman, 1993, p. 27). On August 6, 1957, following 12 days of picketing at the Atomic Energy Commission offices in Las Vegas, 25 activists demonstrated at the gates of the test site. Risking their lives to camp in an area of the bomb detonation, 11 activists breached NTS exclusion zones at the entrance gates and were arrested for trespassing. The group consisted largely of Quakers, activists from the Catholic Worker in New York City, and others (Butigan, 2000, pp. 191-215). The protesters were taken to

Beatty, Nevada, just north of the NTS, where they were cited and released (Kleidman, 1993, p. 99; Rojecki, 1999, p. 57). This was the first of what, by the mid-1980s, would become a fairly routine pattern between activists and authorities consisting of symbolic civil disobedience, routine arrests, citations, and releases.

The CNVA-SANE coalition had weakened by 1960, and as a result there were only two other major protests at the NTS during the next 20 years. Responding to worries about Strontium 90, a radioactive isotope released in nuclear tests that human bodies mistake for calcium, the Women's Strike for Peace (WSP) staged a national strike in November 1961 in which an estimated 100,000 women in 100 cities and 25 states across the United States participated (Solnit, 1994, p. 100). WSP representatives came to Las Vegas in July 1962 and picketed the Atomic Energy Commission office in Las Vegas and pushed baby carriages through Las Vegas casinos to symbolize the risks of nuclearism to future generations. The next day, 44 women protested at the NTS gates without incident (Solnit, 1994, p. 104). In August 1963, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain signed a Limited Test Ban Treaty moving all tests underground. Quick on the heels of the treaty, the WSP came back to the test site in January 1964 demanding a full test ban. However, the limited treaty "robbed the issue of its immediacy" (Kleidman, 1993, p. 27) and WSP, SANE, and other peace movement organizations almost immediately shifted their emphasis to protest the growing military action in Southeast Asia. Anti-nuclear protests at the NTS stopped until the end of the Vietnam War.

As the United States began to withdraw from Vietnam in the mid-1970s, nuclear issues began to resurface, first in Western Europe and then in the United States. This time concerns refocused on the issue of nuclear power. Demonstrations began in earnest in France and West Germany in 1971 (Joppke, 1993; Rudig, 1990). By 1977, U.S. anti-nuclear protests had coalesced around nuclear energy issues and became a national concern when 3,000 protesters from the Clamshell Alliance nonviolently occupied the Seabrook, New Hampshire, nuclear power plant leading to the arrest of 1,414 activists (Barkan, 1979; Rudig, 1990, p. 313). According to Rudig (1990), "Seabrook became the symbol of a new type of national anti-nuclear movement in the USA, a movement which specifically set out to use civil disobedience and direct action tactics" (p. 196). Seabrook, along with the Three Mile Island accident in 1979, led to a proliferation of new anti-nuclear groups that focused on nonviolent civil disobedience as a primary protest strategy.⁷ Nonviolence training before each direct action was a staple of the movement. Their "polite protests" (Lofland, 1993) created a surplus of potent dramatic images that had some, albeit limited, policy impacts (Rudig, 1990, pp. 199-200). Whereas West German anti-nuclear protests repeatedly escalated terrorist violence, U.S. protests seldom went beyond nonviolent direct action (Joppke, 1993).

The peace movement refocused on the arms race in the early 1980s and anti-nuclear energy protests became part of a broader anti-nuclear movement. The

Carter administration's push for Trident nuclear submarines, MX and cruise missiles, and the subsequent Reagan administration's militant foreign policy prompted widespread dissent. Peace and pacifist groups, along with environmental organizations, again led by the American Friends Service Committee, built a coalition around demands for a nuclear weapons freeze between superpowers (Chatfield, 1992, p. 152).⁸ Between 1979 and 1984, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign (NWFC) built on existing local organizations and grassroots peace networks established in the 1970s and grew rapidly. NWFC as a central organization relied on traditional tactics of lobbying, education as well as demonstrations, rallies, and some direct action. The organization was always leery of direct actions because it sought to garner mainstream support, yet its decentralized organization meant there was wide variation in tactics. Western Freeze chapters, much more supportive of direct action than Eastern chapters (Zisk, 1992, p. 134), organized civil disobedience at a Trident submarine base in Bangor, Washington, Rocky Flats weapons production facilities in Denver, and Lawrence Livermore nuclear research labs in California.⁹ However, the Freeze actions did not focus on the NTS until 1985.

In 1977, prior to the Freeze's entry into direct actions at the NTS, California and Las Vegas Franciscans, lay Catholics, Quakers, and others began initiating protests. Led by Sister Rosemary Lynch, these groups began their actions on the 20th anniversary of the first CNVA protest by holding an extended prayer vigil and teach-in at the NTS gates. There were no arrests and the prayer vigils continued several times a year between 1977 and 1984 (Butigan, 2000, p. 215). The vigils grew in scope and in 1982, at the height of the national Nuclear Freeze Movement, Sister Rosemary Lynch organized the first "Lenten Desert Experience." This was a 40-day vigil at the test site during Lent that involved about 50 people each day. The event ended with a nonviolent direct action by 18 protesters who walked arm-in-arm onto the test site grounds. All were handcuffed, arrested, bussed 60 miles to Beatty, NV for processing, and jailed after they refused to pay bail. Five days later, charges were dropped because, as Nye County District Attorney Peter Knight said, "There was no harm done to people or property, and based on the nature of the protest and the conduct of the demonstrators, I decided not to prosecute. . . . We have a lot better things to spend money on" (Butigan, 2000, p. 320). The yearly Lenten actions catalyzed other periodic nonviolent protests throughout the years involving Quakers and other pacifist resisters, both religious and secular (Solnit, 1994, p. 15). This growth in activism led to the formation of the Nevada Desert Experience (NDE) in May 1984, which has since been the most enduring activist presence at the NTS (Butigan, 2000; Solnit, 1994).¹⁰

In sum, the first 25 years of actions at the test site mainly involved local and national religious-based pacifist organizations committed to nonviolent civil disobedience. All of these actions were nonviolent and provoked only minimal arrests and very few actual prosecutions. It was clear during this time that protesters did not intend to strike at the NTS with anything more than symbolic

gestures. This set the initial grounds for the normalized relations between authorities and protesters involving “polite protests” (Lofland, 1993) and routine monitoring and arrests for trespass. These initial relations were critical for limiting the degree of repression by authorities as the protests grew during the “peak years” of activism at the NTS.

THE PEAK YEARS: 1985–1994

By 1984, the national Freeze Campaign was losing momentum among mainstream audiences while the intensity of anti-nuclear protests grew (Chatfield, 1992; Kleidman, 1993; Rojecki, 1999). NDE activists in Nevada were beginning to bring the attention of the peace and environmental community to the test site. In 1983, Greenpeace staged their first backcountry action at the NTS (Butigan, 2000, p. 366) designed to halt a nuclear test by sending activists on a several-day hike toward ground zero and then alerting NTS officials just before the test. In October 1985, the Freeze campaign, largely at the urging of Western chapters, organized their first major demonstration at the NTS (Zisk, 1992, p. 134), in which nearly 500 activists came to the test site over a 30-day period and almost 100 were arrested for civil disobedience (e.g., trespassing) (Bergel, 1988). Following this major action, growing tension among groups in the Freeze Campaign came to a head in a narrow vote to stop sponsoring civil disobedience tactics (Kleidman, 1993, p. 159). In response, pro-direct-action activists in the Western chapters of the campaign created the American Peace Test (APT) in 1986 to organize civil disobedience campaigns at the NTS and other nuclear facilities (Lofland, 1993; Zisk, 1992, p. 134). In 1987, the Freeze Campaign merged with SANE and became less influential on the direct action branch of the movement.

The impact of APT’s formation on test site protests was dramatic. Between 1986 and 1993, there were a total of 536 demonstrations, 37,288 participants, and 15,740 arrests at the NTS (Rogers, 2000). The NTS became the center of anti-nuclear activity in North America. In 1987, in the United States and Canada, nearly 5,300 were arrested for anti-nuclear civil disobedience, half of that number coming from protesters at the NTS (Cohen-Joppa, 1988).

APT was adept at capitalizing on the loose coalition of anti-nuclear groups that had been a staple of the Freeze Campaign and the alliance movement. NDE’s actions were supplemented by APT. The Western Shoshone nation, whose tribal lands span the test site, became active in demonstrations in 1984. In 1986, Shoshone leaders began issuing tribal permits to protesters to allow them to enter test site boundaries (Butigan, 2000, p. 368). APT used “calls to action” to alert Freeze chapters and other groups outside Nevada to protest at the test site. Many outside groups chartered busses that brought thousands of activists, mostly from Western states, to the NTS for protests (Lofland, 1993, p. 151). The largest APT demonstration, Reclaim the Test Site, in mid-March 1988, brought more than 8,000 protesters to the NTS. On March 12 alone there were 1,260 arrests,

making it the largest act of civil disobedience in the United States at that time. In all, more than 2,000 arrests for trespass and blockades were made during the week, but there were no reported incidences of violence toward persons or property by the protesters (Rogers, 2000; Solnit, 1994). There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that some violence did occur around the protests, but it was not committed by activists. Rather, NTS and Nye County, Nevada, security forces acted with unusual aggression during a few arrests. In addition, some locals attacked activists after they had been cited and released in nearby towns of Beatty and Tonopah.¹¹

Indeed, despite the numbers involved, the intent of APT was to make the demonstrations resolutely nonviolent to promote the virtues of peace. Direct action did not mean violent militancy for APT organizers but peaceful demonstrations and, for some, breaches of test site boundaries to bear witness to the problems of nuclearism. According to APT organizer Chris Brown (personal communication, July 8, 2002), "This was clearly a nonviolent movement in the sense of having many, many hours of discussion of what does nonviolence mean." Organizers worked to keep the protests within nonviolent bounds by holding workshops and publishing pamphlets on nonviolent training. The Peace Camp, established at the test site gates in 1986, was where some of the workshops were held to confirm with activists the routine rules of engagement (Solnit, 1994, p. 32). The rules of engagement

were first and most crucially those of nonviolent direct action. . . . Nonviolence means not merely refraining from violence, but of working for change without violence—which means embodying the ideal that you work for. . . . By making such change part of their means rather than simply their end, such activists have already begun to realize their goals. . . . Nonviolence also makes a qualitative rather than merely strategic distinction between sides: To take violent action is to endorse violence as a means. And nonviolence disrespects violence, undermines force and might as arbiters of fate. (Solnit, 1994, p. 9)

NDE created a Nonviolent Covenant that all participants were to respect. The covenant urged activists to not damage property, carry no weapons, pour no symbolic blood, share plans with authorities, follow directions of organizers, and demonstrate peace and respect to all workers (Butigan, 2000, p. 329). This resulted in colorful, sprawling, and staged symbolic actions with names like Reclaim the Test Site. As Lofland (1993) reports, one activist characterized the events "Woodstock in the desert" (p. 47).

In addition to protests at the NTS gates, backcountry actions also were undertaken, especially on the eve of impending nuclear tests, in the hopes of hiking to ground zero in time to halt a test. These backcountry direct actions were also decidedly nonviolent, although the risk of injury to the participants lent symbolic potency characteristic of acts of bearing witness.¹² Most of the back-country actions were not organized by APT but by the Rocky Mountain Peace Center

and Greenpeace and by local affinity groups. According to Chris Brown, back-country actions were “all very loose knit,” although they did require some resources, communication, and equipment to coordinate what could be a 2-day hike to a test. Most of the actions received little media attention but did often slow the tests. The action that received the most attention was by the “Princesses of Plutonium,” a collective from San Francisco who did guerilla theater. One member hiked to ground zero in 1988 and locked her neck to a steel pole. Their performances won some notoriety and even landed the troupe on the cover of *Life* magazine (Butigan 2000).

Movement activists were certainly not interested in violence against persons and took pains to take into consideration the concerns of workers and even test site security, as we will discuss below. They also did not engage in acts of property damage. Recalls Chris Brown (personal communication, July 8, 2002), “On the question of property damage . . . there was pretty much consensus that that was not where we wanted to go.” The only incident that can be considered damaging to property did not occur at the test site but at a National Association of Broadcasters Convention in 1992. Longtime activist Rick Springer was an organizer of the Hundredth Monkey Event, a several-day-long concert and test site demonstration cosponsored by APT and Greenpeace. In an unplanned and unsponsored action, Springer walked on stage while Ronald Reagan was giving a speech, smashed a crystal statue, and tried to take the mike to tell the world about nuclear tests. He was immediately arrested. Both on “CBS This Morning” and in federal court, Springer stressed nonviolence,

In the process of taking the stage I was inspired to destroy this crystal eagle, sacred symbol of freedom for our nation and indigenous people as well, and some of the glass shards inadvertently flew through the air and hit Mr. Reagan. I'm definitely guilty of not having thought out what was going to happen with those shards, and I'm also guilty of neglecting to consider that the Secret Service would be prompted to respond. I was so overtaken by the issue of nuclear testing. (Lincoln, 1994, pp. 154-157)

Local APT and Greenpeace activists were not supportive of his actions, even though it brought brief national press coverage.

In 1987, a new focus for anti-nuclearism in Southern Nevada began to emerge when Yucca Mountain was chosen by Congress as the only site to be considered for a national geologic high-level nuclear waste repository. However, protests concentrated mainly on nuclear weapons testing at the NTS until 1991. Citizen Alert was the one major grassroots organization that organized over the Yucca Mountain issue in its early stages. The group staged demonstrations, marches, and other small protests in Las Vegas and also became participants in test site actions. But the group stood clear of direct action at either the Yucca Mountain or the NTS. Because the construction at the site was officially

characterized as mere study of the Yucca Mountain's potential as a repository, there was little interest to breach boundaries or to "monkeywrench."

NORMALIZATION OF AUTHORITY-ACTIVIST INTERACTIONS

Protest during the peak years of activism at the NTS has been characterized as "polite" civil disobedience, just as the wider peace movement was "marked by a remarkable degree of civility, restraint, and even affability" (Lofland, 1993, p. 7). Actions involved very large numbers of very loosely organized, diverse people from a variety of locales. That can sometimes draw a radical fringe that can overstep the bounds of civility and the tenets of nonviolence. In such cases, authorities can and often do respond to the perceived threats with their own violence. However, violence by activists toward the NTS and Yucca Mountain facilities or toward activists by authorities was hardly ever seen.

What kept the peace was the normalized relations that had developed between authorities and protesters. As Solnit (1994) explains, the protests were "neatly staged conflict[s] in which both side played by the rules" (p. 9), which for the activists meant, first and foremost, nonviolence. Several strategies were used to normalize the interaction between activists and officials, which led to a great degree of certainty about what each side could expect of the other. As protests grew at the NTS, activists were provided a white line and later a cattle guard at the entrance to be crossed for arrest. The direct actions carried out by most protesters involved an orderly ritualized parade where lines of protesters held hands and crossed the cattle guard into the waiting arms of NTS security. Protesters were politely fitted with plastic handcuffs and ushered into large, open air, chain-link holding pens. The much more dangerous marches to ground zero were carried out by very few people, and even these were partially choreographed affairs in which NTS officials began to plan for delays in the tests from last-minute reports of demonstrators in the area. In addition to trespass, blockades of the test site gates were common. Authorities would often tolerate the blockades and site occupations for a short time and then move to arrest law-breakers. These arrests were usually not violent confrontations. Some activists passively resisted and some had to be carried to the holding pen but most acceded without incident. As Solnit (1994) explains, the interaction between authorities and protesters "resembles a cattle roundup, more than a criminal arrest process, what with the quantity of people, the logistics of large-scale cuffing and busing, and the general lack of animosity between the parties" (p. 28). In most cases, nonthreatening protest has evoked nonthreatening response, creating a pattern of normalized, nonviolent relations between activists and the NTS.

This ritualization of interaction between authorities and protesters was anchored in both the pacifist orientations of the activists as well as the strategic decision by Nye County, NTS, and DOE officials not to provoke confrontations. In fact, Bob Nelson, deputy manager of the DOE's Las Vegas office for the NTS,

told an interviewer that he used the Nevada Desert Experience's own non-violence covenant to train DOE security personnel and Nye County authorities (Butigan, 2000, p. 264). Even at earlier direct actions in 1982, NDE organizer Michael Affleck remembered,

Part of what our script required to get our point across was to have a confrontation—and [Nye County Lieutenant Sheriff Jim] Merlino wasn't giving us that. . . . We wanted to set up that [us and them] dynamic and he wouldn't do it. He was the "peace person." He played that role throughout the entire time. . . . We began to understand that if testing was going to end, it would end on that day that the workers joined our side. (Butigan, 2000, p. 259)

On the few occasions that authorities were violent with protesters, they were quickly quelled by others in charge. Nye County Lieutenant Sheriff Jim Merlino told an interviewer a story of one deputy who maced a protester who was shaking the chain-link fence in the holding pen: "I got him aside and explained that we don't do that at all here. I always tried to treat the protesters as if they were my sons or daughters; they had the right to express their opinion" (Butigan, 2000, p. 262). NDE organizer Julia Occhiogrosso recalled the Lieutenant Sheriff's approach similarly,

There was a time at the NTS where there was a group of people who were organized test site workers. They would protest against us. They were very vocal, and they were very abusive, and violent in the sense of screaming at people, that sort of thing. And it was this one year we had the action where people were laying on the road, like a "die in" on the road going in to the test site. It was extremely hot out there—so they were laying on the hot pavement. You had the test site workers with placards, screaming and yelling on one side of the road, and then you had the folks who were part of our Nevada Desert Experience action on the other side, looking down at these people laying on the street as if they were dead—and I remember one of the police officers, security, came up and started to spray the demonstrators laying on the street with water to cool them. . . . When the test workers were putting the bullhorn in the Buddhist monk's face and blowing, Jim Merlino came up to that person and said, "You do that one more time you'll be arrested." The consistency of NDE's rituals and approach, that consistency over time built this kind of [atmosphere]. (Butigan, 2000, pp. 330-331)

Another protester recalled,

The ceremony of arrest at the cattle guard is deeply moving, however. The sheriff greets people as they come in their small groups, looking into their eyes and asking them if they really want to do this, that they will be arrested. He does so with great dignity and they answer with equal dignity. I see him not at all as the "enemy" but as an integral part of the witnessing we are doing. (Weil, as quoted in Butigan, 2000, p. 384)

NDE activists and authorities fashioned a ritual at the site that held two crucially important elements in tension: The actions were significant enough to be meaningful for the movement and activists were relatively safe (Butigan, 2000, p. 268). This undoubtedly contributed greatly to the lack of violence during protests at the site.

POST-TESTING YEARS: 1993–PRESENT

President Clinton signed a moratorium on nuclear testing in October 1992. Afterward, actions at the test site declined dramatically and the anti-nuclear movement went into a period of abeyance (Taylor, 1989). The Freeze Campaign, which had merged with SANE in 1987, became Peace Action in 1993 and shifted focus to arms exports. American Peace Test saw contributions fall from \$100,000 a year to \$15,000 in 1993, leading to the disbanding of the group in 1994 (Solnit, 1994).

Actions at the test site have not ceased. Hundreds of protesters continue to arrive for nonviolent demonstrations at the site several times a year. Two local organizations remain key to the actions—Nevada Desert Experience and the indigenous Western Shoshone Nation. In 1994, the Western Shoshone along with other nuclear disarmament activists formed the Shundahai Network to consolidate nonviolent direct action opposition to all nuclear weapons programs at the NTS and nuclear waste dumping at Yucca Mountain and the Skull Valley Reservation in Utah. Shundahai staffers include some of the same individuals who staffed American Peace Test and maintain connections to similar organizations. However, unlike the separate peace and environmental organizations before it, Shundahai is more centrally connected to environmental, peace and justice, and indigenous land rights communities across the globe. Shundahai has taken over APT's style of calls to action and has been able, along with NDE, to maintain a consistent presence at the test site. In 1996, the test site began subcritical testing, explosions not prohibited under the moratorium. There have been demonstrations after each test where anywhere from 10 to 200 people have been arrested for blockades, backcountry actions, or line crossing. On New Years Eve 1999, 341 people were arrested as part of a three-part series of actions coordinated by peace and antiglobalization activists. The other two actions were at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, where 12,000 protested and 4,000 were arrested, and in Seattle, Washington, at the World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings (Shundahai Network, 2002). There remains a coordinated network of peace and, increasingly, environmental and globalization activists now with international connections who can respond to an increase in activities at the test site with calls to action. Also, like the prior phases, the protest at the NTS continues to be nonviolent.

Actions at the test site have been directed not only at nuclear tests and weapons but against what has been called the “nuclear chain,” particularly as indigenous peoples have played much more central roles in protests and demands to

halt all uranium exploration, mining, milling, conversion, testing, research into weapons, military production, use, and waste disposal have become a part of the demonstrations. A protest known as Healing Global Wounds, which has a decidedly environmentalist vision, has occurred yearly at the test site since 1992. Healing Global Wounds activism has thus far occurred at the NTS gates, but the direct action campaign included the Yucca Mountain site in October 2002.

CONCLUSION

Scholars arguing for a stage approach to understanding violence in social movements suggest that violence is most likely either in the early stages or the late stages of a movement's career. In the case of NTS and Yucca Mountain protests, violence has neither been prevalent in the early period nor later as activity declined in the early 1990s. We also do not expect it in the future. There are several reasons for this. First, the movement is rooted in the pacifist peace movement and has expressed a clear philosophy of nonviolence that they have embodied in their actions. This long standing commitment to nonviolent ethics makes terrorist violence highly unlikely at either facility, even if support recedes, allies defect, or unorganized and unformulated actions become more common. Thus, to damage the facilities, especially in any way that would risk radioactive contamination of humans and the environment, would be to damage the foundation on which protesters' actions rest. If any material damage is directed toward the Yucca Mountain facility, we expect that it would likely be sabotage to railways or highways leading into the facility on which the wastes would be transported. It is most likely that such actions would be accompanied by enough early warning that any oncoming rail traffic laden with nuclear waste would be easily stopped or diverted without risk of wreck and exposure. In short, the damage would be primarily symbolic in intent, not intentionally harmful.

Second, the normalized relations that developed between the protesters and authorities have prevented violence in the past and we expect the same in the future. Although there has been some violence by authorities toward some protesters during the peak years, the main reaction was one of mutual respect and pacifism. A basic level of trust emerged between the two sets of actors, which alleviated much of the uncertainty that can spark violent responses from authorities and a subsequent escalation on both sides.

Third, tactics of bearing witness require relatively few committed activists. Given the decline in major organizational resources among anti-nuclear groups, along with the nonviolent approach, bearing witness remains the most plausible option for future protest. Moreover, the Nevada state government is waging the capital-intensive legal battles against Yucca Mountain, leaving resource-poor activists to wage the symbolic protests. Funding for these activist organizations is likely to increase if the Bush administration resumes nuclear testing or goes ahead with plans to ship nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain. Furthermore, the link

with a broader range of organizations, including the same groups who organized the Seattle WTO protests, may likely increase the number of activists in time. However, it is unlikely their protest strategies will change, especially with increased dependence on mainstream support.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that terror and violence are not possible, only that they are not probable. Della Porta (1995) has argued protest violence is often a product of an interactive relationship between authorities and challengers that emerges in episodes of protest (also see Tarrow, 1998, p. 95). During the earlier phases of protest at the NTS, normalized patterns of nonviolence in the activist-authority relationship developed. Nonviolent resistance by protesters was met by nonviolent response from authorities creating relatively little uncertainty in the relationship on either side.¹³ The re-emergence of such normalized relations would mitigate the potential for violence and terror toward the facilities.

Of course, those relations are not ensured. Two “x” factors could alter the conventional pattern. One is government response. If the reaction to future direct action campaigns becomes highly repressive, moving beyond the show of force that we anticipate based on the prior phases of protest, then “tactical adaptations” (Della Porta, 1995) by activists could lead to an escalation in violence and terror. Indeed, any security breaches such as gate blockades and stoppage of nuclear materials into the NTS complex, whether to merely bear witness or not, might well evoke violent response from zealous authorities in the name of homeland terror defense. The climate of terrorist fear both increases the likelihood of a military-type response to actions classified as a terrorist threat and makes it much easier to justify such a response in the name of national security. Indeed, there are several efforts to criminalize nonviolent direct action dissent by defining the acts as terrorism. For example, a bill before the Pennsylvania State legislature, which has been hailed as a model bill for Congress by anti-environmental lobbies, would so broadly define ecoterrorism as to potentially cover acts such as sit-in, blockades, and other forms of nonviolent protest. If such definitions become increasingly institutionalized, we may see a decline in measured, nonviolent responses by both activists and authorities at all nuclear facilities, including the NTS or Yucca Mountain.

The second “x” factor comes from the protest side of the relationship in the form of small radical cells or individual protesters waging terror in the name of movement goals, but without broad movement support.¹⁴ Such “radical flanks” (Haines, 1984) would produce negative effects from the fear that their action provokes, precipitating reactive repression. If, as Della Porta (1995) acknowledges, political violence is an outcome of “tactical adaptations” between demonstrators and authorities, excessive action from either side might lead to increasing escalation. As longtime activist and organizer Chris Brown explains,

For the peace movement it is harder to anticipate that violence is where people are going to go. It comes out of a theological discussion of idolatry. It is harder to justify things that are not involved in spiritual discussions. . . . It is not the same

discussion in the environmental movement. There the question is whether or not the use of technology is damaging the earth or damaging people around it. That discussion is much more likely to move toward acceptable use of force against property. They are coming from a different philosophical base . . . the jump to property damage is shorter among environmental groups than in the peace movement.

To mitigate the potential for violence, maintaining a semblance of the normalized relations that existed in prior periods will be crucial, but not easy. Already, protesters are preparing for higher levels of repression. "There is a trend now that the authorities are coming down very harshly compared to the past," said Sally Light, executive director of NDE.

A few years ago I was arrested and put in the pen, held for a while and individually cited. I asked for the time frame that I'll hear from the court, and the police officer said I could go home and make the citation into a paper airplane.

However, in October 2000, Susi Synder, of the Shundahai Network, was sent to jail for 16 days for a line cross at NTS (Silver, 2001).

What can we conclude about the nature of future activist-authority relations? Our expectations can be stated in the form of a working hypothesis: The greater the disruption in the normalized authority-activist interactions at the NTS and Yucca Mountain sites, the greater the likelihood for violence and terror as a process of tactical adaptation. We do not see the actions of protesters changing significantly from the earlier phases. We do think it more likely that the way authorities see those actions may shift. Nonviolent direct actions that were not remotely equated with terrorism by authorities may now be seen differently in the post-September 11 period. This may especially be the case for high-security military installations such as the NTS¹⁵ and sites perceived to be targets for international terrorist groups (e.g., Al Qaeda), such as nuclear waste storage sites, including Yucca Mountain. This may lead to violent repression of protest by zealous authorities under the auspices of post-September 11 homeland security. Moreover, an escalation of violence toward nonviolent protesters could lead to escalations of conflict.

NOTES

1. The test site lies 65 miles north of Las Vegas, Nevada, and spans an area larger than Rhode Island—1,375 square miles. The facility sits adjacent to the Nellis Air Force Range to the southeast and expands north toward the center of the state. The proposed Yucca Mountain Nuclear repository sits on the central west side of the site near Beatty, Nevada. Together, the expanse covers more than 5,470 square miles.

2. Defining terrorism is always a bit of a struggle largely because what seems to matter most in the defining process is who does what to whom rather than the nature of the act (Cooper, 2001). This

is the sentiment of the familiar maxim, “one person’s freedom fighter is another person’s terrorist.” Regardless of who is tagged with the label, most definitions converge on the idea that terrorism involves some strategic violence to persons or property with the intention of challenging authority by invoking fear or intimidation. We work from the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI’s) definition of terrorism. The FBI defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives” (28 C.F.R. Section 0.85). Violence against persons involves military-style attacks aimed at harming and evoking fear in the target(s) of protest, whereas violence against property typically involves forms of sabotage to show a target’s vulnerabilities and to inflict economic costs. Both forms reflect a “logic of material damage” (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 176) as a protest strategy designed to raise the stakes of political conflicts beyond the disruption and notoriety of conventional demonstrations and nonviolent civil disobedience.

3. To be clear, our analysis concentrates on potential terrorist threats from domestic anti-nuclear and environmental groups toward the facilities and transportation in the Southern Nevada/Las Vegas region only. We do not focus on potential threats from international terrorist organizations or threats to the shipments of radioactive waste to the facilities coming from outside the Southern Nevada region, which we feel constitute a much more likely target for terrorist action.

4. Violence also has been explained as an effect of relative deprivation (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1970), resource allocations (McCarthy & Zalk, 1977; Oberschall, 1973, 1993), or political conditions (Gamson, 1974, 1975, 1990; Snyder, 1979; Snyder & Tilly, 1972; Tilly, 1978; Tilly, Tilly, & Tilly, 1975).

5. Violence is by no means the only type of sporadic action that may occur, and it is not necessarily sporadic and disorganized (Rule, 1988; Snyder, 1979; Snyder & Tilly, 1972), but it is certainly one of them (cf. Blumer, 1978, p. 17).

6. However, there are certainly movement branches that are committed to violent tactics. For example, the militant Earth Liberation Front (ELF) engages in planned violence solely against property in the name of environmental protection.

7. Following the Clamshell Alliance protests in 1976–1977, the Abalone Alliance rallied 6,000 to occupy the Diablo Canyon nuclear reactor in California. Nearly 500 were arrested. In the late 1970s, hundreds were arrested at Rocky Flats weapons assembly plant in Colorado. At the peak of the anti-nuclear power movement in December 1979, 100,000 were arrested. Following the Three Mile Island partial meltdown in 1978, no new nuclear reactors were licensed and the nuclear movement turned to weapons.

8. Among the most notable groups were the Fellowship of Reconciliation, American Friends Service Committee, War Resisters League, Pax Christi USA, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Clergy and Laity Concerned, Union of Concerned Scientists, and SANE after bottoming out in 1976 (Chatfield, 1992, pp. 149-151).

9. Many related pacifist religious groups were involved in nonviolent protests, vigils, actions, and blockades at these and other weapons facilities during the early 1980s. Probably the most notorious of these was the Plowshares movement, organized by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Catholic Workers, Community for Creative Nonviolence and Sojourners. Plowshares included some damage of property as part of their nonviolent actions. Their first act in September 1980 was to break into a General Electric (GE) weapons plant in Pennsylvania and symbolically disable nuclear warheads by hammering on the shells (Butigan, 2000, p. 50). This was, however, the only reported property damage to occur as part of this movement.

10. The approach to protest taken by Nevada Desert Experience was contemplative prayer and absolute nonviolent action. Contemplative silence, prophetic symbolism, and a series of planned and improvised rituals were used as part of the ongoing “campaign of prayer, education, dialogue, and nonviolent direct action” (Nevada Desert Experience, 2002).

11. For an example of the latter, one the authors, Brents, recalls a former student from the Tonopah area who admitted to her some years later that groups would lie in wait for the “hippies” from the test site demonstrations to be released from jail to attack them “for fun.”

12. The American Peace Test (APT) published guidelines for these “backcountry” actions that read as follows:

The Nevada Test Site is a highly radioactive place with many hot spots, dumps and storage areas. . . . There is little that can be done to protect your body from beta and gamma rays which are unseen and penetrate your body. Alpha particles, however, may have more long-term effects. They are found on dust particles that can be breathed in or ingested. Cover your face when walking in the wind. Do not eat food dropped on the ground. Don't use bare, dirty hands for eating. . . . A large test can throw someone three meters into the air at ground zero and kill them. There is a rippling of ground motion that goes out from this center. Detonations create limited earthquakes. The Nellis Air Force Base surrounds the Test Site on the east, west and north. Depending on which part you venture through, you will have to deal with ammunition strafing, falling bombs, unexploded bombs on the ground, maneuvering around targets, and Stealth bomber security. At the time of arrest, it is vital that team members make no sudden moves that might be considered threatening to the security forces. They are very well armed and quite capable of shooting if they feel threatened. (Solnit, 1994, pp. 16-17)

13. These types of relations are not uncommon. For instance, several decades of nonviolent direct action protest to close the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia, has produced similar normalized relations between activists and authorities.

14. Although unanticipated, a violent response also could come from a group that has used violence in the past but has remained outside the scope of our discussion. The Sagebrush Rebellion (not to be confused with the Sagebrush Alliance, the anti-nuclear alliance formed to oppose the MX missile program) is a group of Western ranchers and others opposed to the federal control of Western lands. This loosely organized movement may have been responsible for recent bombings to protest federal land control against Forest Service offices in Reno and Elko in northern Nevada. While this group may have violence in its past repertoire of actions, it is unlikely that they will see nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain or the resumption of nuclear testing as an issue to impel them to act, unless it involves the federal government's appropriation of more lands.

15. The change security and response appears to have begun even before September 11. For example, in May 2001, 15 Greenpeace activists and 2 journalists were arrested at Vandenberg Air Force Base for protesting the Star Wars missile defense plan. They face felony charges, 6 years in prison, and fines up to \$250,000 for an action that was all but ignored in the past (Silver, 2001).

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