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Protests work, sometimes

By Jim Nowlan

Do public protest rallies and marches work? Sometimes. Clear goals, intensity of feeling, and the capacity to embarrass, even disrupt the opposition are factors that count.

A friend recently asked me this question. I think he had in mind protests several months ago in his central Illinois hometown of Dwight, which opposed closure of the local state prison. The protests drew 600-800 people from the town and area. Significant area media attention was generated. A sense of solidarity developed among the protesters, many of whom had jobs at the prison, and an advisory legislative panel voted against closing the prison.

Still, Gov. Pat Quinn is determined to close the prison and transfer the female inmates to a facility in Lincoln. He recently vetoed budget provisions by the legislature that would have kept the prisons open this year.

Public protests are a time-honored tactic by those with little formal power to take on the more powerful. In 1930, for example, Mahatma Gandhi led a 100-mile march across part of India to the sea to make salt, in violation of the British monopoly on salt production. Salt is precious in sweltering India, where Indians need the commodity to replace that lost to sweating.

The march generated worldwide media attention and represented the beginning of Gandhi's famous campaign of non-violent protests to gain independence from British rule, which was accomplished in 1947. Thus a single protest is often a battle within a larger, more extended struggle to force a government to make concessions it resists.

When I was in college in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement led a mass march on Washington which filled the Capitol Mall with 300,000 non-violent protesters. King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech, Mahalia Jackson sang and black and white celebrities participated. The march captivated the nation.

The March on Washington was generally credited with spurring passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of the following year.

The nationwide Vietnam protests—non-violent and violent—of the late 1960s, during which I was a soldier and then a young state legislator, aroused the nation to a fever pitch of support and opposition. Scores of colleges and universities were closed during the spring of 1969. I recall the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign at one point had National Guard troops cordoning off entry to the beleaguered campus.

Still today there are arguments over whether the protests emboldened the North Vietnamese and lengthened the conflict or instead, as I believe, brought it to a conclusion sooner than might have occurred absent the relentless protests.

In contrast, the Occupy Wall Street protests of the past year seem not to have worked. Today’s social media can generate a crowd almost instantaneously, yet if there is no clear leadership, strategy and goal, all of which seem to be lacking in the OWS movement, the effort seems to fade away. Without a specific goal or goals, a protest is just a place to vent frustrations.

But those are huge national protests; what about smaller ones? In the 1980’s a bill was introduced in Springfield that would have required consolidation of all school districts into units of no fewer than 1,500 students. Overnight, a statewide group emerged called Save Our Schools (SOS, cleverly). These advocates for small community-based schools flooded the capitol and

brought insistent, intense, emotional messages to every lawmaker. The legislation was dropped, and the issue is still with us.

What about Dwight, Illinois and its prison? “It’s a real challenge for small groups to bring about change,” says Prof. Aldon Moore, a sociologist of social protest movements at Northwestern University. “More fail than succeed. It’s always an uphill battle because of the power imbalance between the protesters and the powerful (in this case the governor).”

Gov. Quinn has a statewide constituency, not a local one. The Dwight protesters were not able to affect a statewide audience. The imbalance between the protesters and the powerful was too great.