

Nov 04, 2016 by [Sarah Ellen Graham](#)

Gandhi, Public Diplomat ^[1]

India's great nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi coined the term *satyagraha* as a philosophy of non-violent political struggle in 1906, while he was engaged in the early anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. His political philosophy, refined over subsequent years as he returned to India to lead its struggle against British imperialism, had far-reaching impacts. Gandhi's philosophy helped to fuel independence struggles not only in South Africa, but in India, a host of other post-colonial countries, as well as the African-American civil rights movement in the United States.

Initially framed as "*sadagraha*," a portmanteau of the Gujarati words *sad* (truth) and *agraha* (firmness), Gandhi slightly modified the term to *satyagraha*: *satya* meant both truth/soul and love. Today the term is often translated as "non-violent resistance," and Gandhian philosophy is most readily associated with techniques of non-violent civil action. But the more appropriate translation of *satyagraha* is something akin to "soul force," "truth force," or "firmness in truth." This fundamental attachment to promoting change through truth might be seen as the enlightening side of Gandhi's doctrine: non-violent resistance lays bare the reality of tyranny, but firmness in truth directs our efforts toward a process of engagement and enlightenment that will ultimately bring about political change and social harmony. In noting this truth-telling element of *satyagraha*, we can look at Mahatma Gandhi in a new way, as a significant figure in both the history and theory of public diplomacy.

As an innovator of public diplomacy practice, Gandhi's attachment to truth force and his awareness that favorable coverage in the global media of his time, particularly the relatively new medium of photojournalism, shows his sense of the significant role that public opinion could play in the decision-making of target nations. Photogenic and possessing a flair for finding affecting scenarios in which to be photographed, by the early 1930s Gandhi's image was reportedly as well known as that of Mickey Mouse. He was a pioneer in cultivating foreign public opinion in the service of political objectives articulated outside the formal sphere of government. In addition to encouraging the numerous journalists that he had invited to India in order to cover his movement, Gandhi also maintained longstanding correspondences with opinion leaders in Britain and the United States. The latter—a diverse group of influential people including preachers, writers, African-American leaders, and academics—were believed by Gandhi to be vital for his cause, as interlocutors who could relate the fundamental issues in India's struggle for freedom to an American context.

Gandhi's engagement of American ex-missionaries who had proselytized in India and with American clergy who had not visited India but sympathized with its freedom struggle was a particularly important part of his public diplomacy strategy in the U.S. Gandhi's great respect for other faiths and the truth-seeking imperatives of *satyagraha* mandated that he seek philosophical and theological common ground with representatives of American Christianity. But the cultivation of American religious leaders was also an inspired public diplomacy strategy. Christian spokespeople for the Indian nationalist struggle were able to bridge for their audiences the religious gulf between Indians and Americans, priming the latter to

express their support for Gandhi's political goals. The Indian National Congress also adopted an exchange-of-persons policy in support of its effort to cultivate American public opinion. Rabindranath Tagore, the famed Indian poet who had won the Nobel Prize in 1913, travelled to the United States several times between 1912 and 1929 and spoke on political causes. The Indian National Congress also sent the author Lala Lajpat Rai and former *Bombay Chronicle* subeditor Syud Hossain to the United States for long stretches of time to act as representatives of the independence movement available to appear in the U.S. media.

The philosophical precepts of *satyagraha* pose some interesting questions for public diplomacy as a mode of political and cultural engagement between societies. Premised on the equality and autonomy of all people, and celebrating the capacity for all faiths and traditions to encompass elements of truth, Gandhi's philosophy stresses the importance of communication processes on a number of levels. Within the exercise of *satyagraha*, the claims of the oppressed in society must be articulated to those in power in order to disrupt established regimes of domination and injustice. Dialogue is necessary to move from the partial truths experienced by individuals to a wider truth drawn from multiple perspectives. Public diplomacy—particularly cultural diplomacy and educational exchange—conceptualized as a reciprocal process that aims to found international relationships in genuine mutual understanding, suggests the possibility of achieving shared truth and the adjustment of competing political claims in a similar fashion. The possibility of establishing further ties between the philosophy of *satyagraha* and this conceptualization of public diplomacy may highlight the value of public diplomacy as an instrument of peace and humanitarianism, and is a worthy subject for investigation into the future.
