

# How to Stop a Goddamn Oil Tanker

Presented by Zoe Blunt at Camas FreeSkool, [Camas Books](#), Victoria BC, Lekwungen Territory, spring 2012

I want to acknowledge we're guests in indigenous territory, in a place where people lived sustainably for thousands of years. In the relatively short time since settlement began, colonists have degraded and exploited the land and ocean and created an environmental crisis, and that's the reason we're here today.

This workshop is called "How to Stop A *Goddamn* Oil Tanker" for a reason. People are angry, and that's an appropriate response to this betrayal of our environment for profit, risking our rivers and coastlines for the sake of shipping tar sands crude to China. We can use that righteous anger in a good way to make change.

What I'm presenting includes old-school training material from the 70's and 80's plus more recent material and my own experience, so this is coming from more than one perspective.

The book *Deep Green Resistance* shows how **peaceful** action movements can learn from militant insurgencies. It's called "asymmetric warfare." The ones destroying the earth have all the money and power. But we have most of the people on our side here on the coast. That's one of many factors in our favour.

We'll mainly be discussing aboveground strategies here. I'll touch on underground tactics for context but we won't be going into detail. Security culture says we don't discuss underground activities in public.

The main point is, **there's no one strategy that will win every time**. If there was, we wouldn't be here – we'd be relaxing and high-fiving each other over all our victories. But there are a number of effective strategies, and we will need to combine them to get to the goal.

The tar sands crisis is enormous and overwhelming. How do we break it down? How can one person – or group of people – take on this monumental challenge? Let's talk about how to focus our energy on specific strategic areas and where to find opportunities for victory.

It's like the old joke about the fellow who decides he's going to eat a whole elephant. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. I remind myself that Rome wasn't burned in a day. It was a long siege before the empire fell.

There are dozens of groups working on different aspects of the No Tankers – No Pipelines – No Tar Sands campaign. Use these tools to evaluate what groups to join, and what tactics and strategies can be brought to bear.

## What makes a good strategy?

Strategies and tactics are traditionally classified according to non-violence and the law.

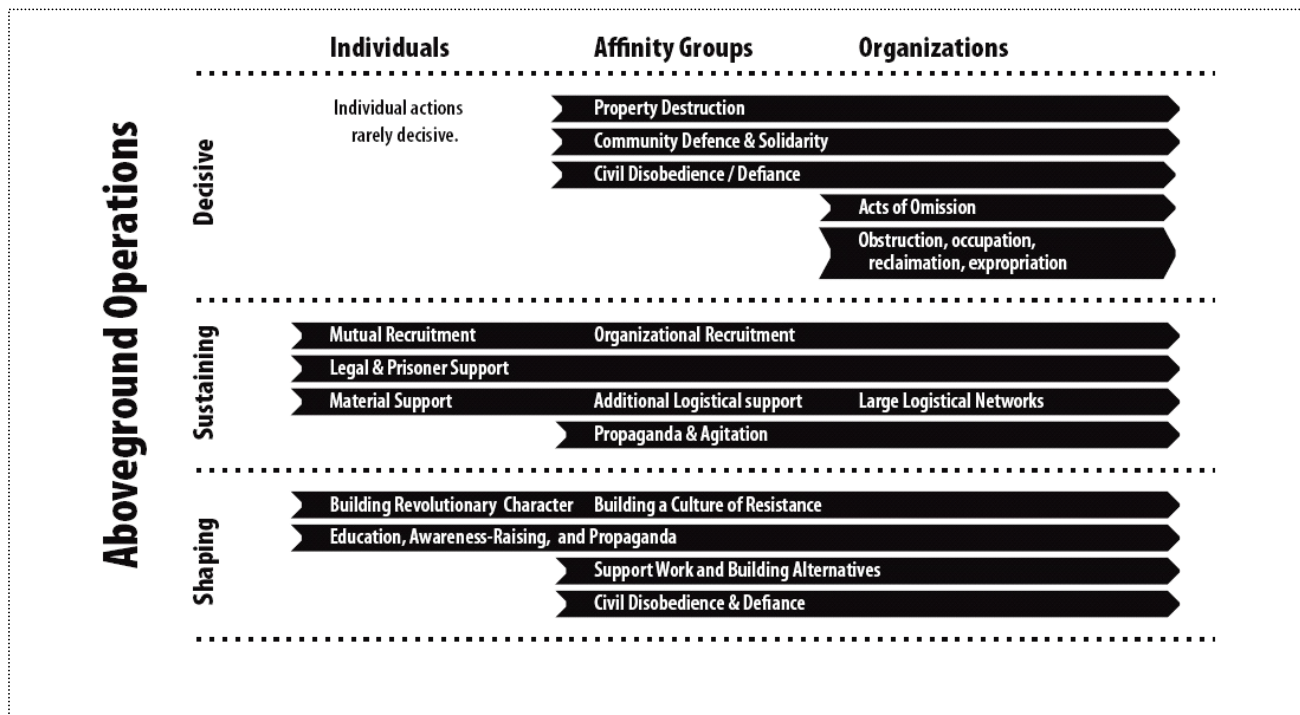
- Lawful means – lobbying, petitions, boycotts
- Peaceful means – non-violent actions, civil disobedience, blockades
- Any means necessary – sabotage, arson, militant action

Given the urgent situation, we want to consider what is effective and achieves our goals. Aric McBay says all **effective** strategies fall into one of three categories:

- Shaping (creating the conditions where effective action is possible)
- Sustaining (allowing grassroots action to continue, giving logistical support), or
- Decisive (Leading to a definite, final outcome)

McBay further breaks strategies down into aboveground and underground campaigns. Deep Green Resistance illustrates how various tactics fit into a spectrum of individual action and group action.

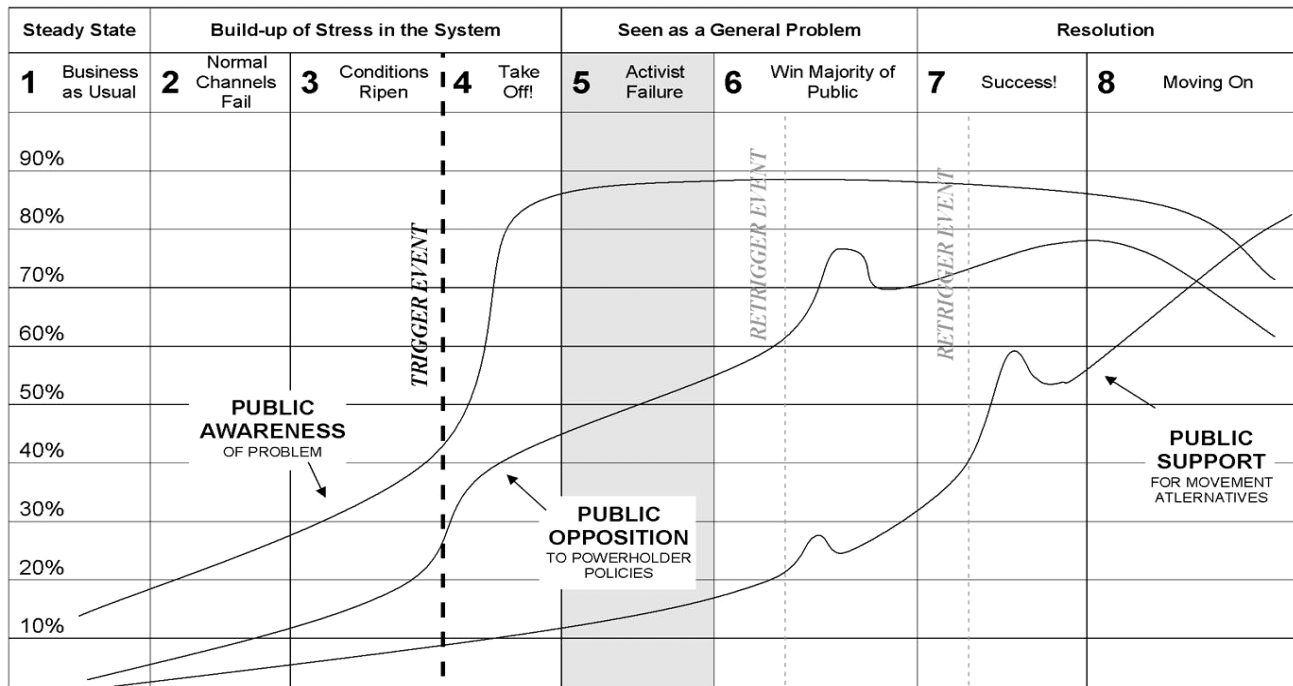
From [Deep Green Resistance](#), Derrick Jensen, Aric McBay, Lierre Keith



## Campaign arc:

The campaign arc describes how a movement grows. .

Building stress - normal channels fail – conditions ripen – (trigger event) take-off – activist failure – (trigger event) public support grows – (trigger event) win – keep going.



(Note: graph is not necessarily to scale. Your mileage may vary)

**Where are we on tankers and pipelines?** Probably at take-off. Normal channels have failed – it is clear the government is set on its destructive path and public input will have little or no impact.

What are some possible trigger events? Planned and unplanned events can act as triggers. Joint Review Panel hearings on Enbridge, final approvals for pipelines, when construction begins. Oil spills are definitely trigger events.

**Activist failure:** In every campaign, we reach a point where we've done everything: raised awareness, petitioned decision-makers, presented compelling evidence, civil disobedience, arrests and more - and yet business as usual prevails. We face a nasty and sometimes violent backlash. It seems hopeless. But then, success comes.

**Lesson: When the backlash hits, we know we're on the right track. "When you're getting flak, you've found the target."**

## Choosing goals

Our end goal tends to determine our goals, allies, strategy, targets, and tactics. The end goal might be world peace, global revolution or dismantling civilization to save the planet. Then there are long term goals and overarching strategies.

The tactics for a group that's working for an NDP majority will differ from groups working for global revolution. For example, anarchists typically won't see strategic value in working on election campaigns. Certain tactics will unite groups with divergent missions.

How do we choose goals?

- ❑ Are they achievable?
- ❑ Do we have **allies** who want this outcomes?
- ❑ Will people support these goals?
- ❑ Do we have a clear **target**?

[\*How to Plan a Campaign v1\*](#), Christine Laurence.

### Examples of long-term goals:

Stop the goddamn tankers. Stop the goddamn pipelines. Stop the goddamn tarsands. Create uncertainty for tar sands investors. Get rid of Harper. Elect a green government. Start a revolution.

### What is an ally?

To our government, "allies" are military partners in a war. To colonists, it means people with a common cause or goal. To indigenous people, allies do more than talk the talk – they give hands-on support to those who are struggling against oppression.

Who are our allies? Those who are united with the same:

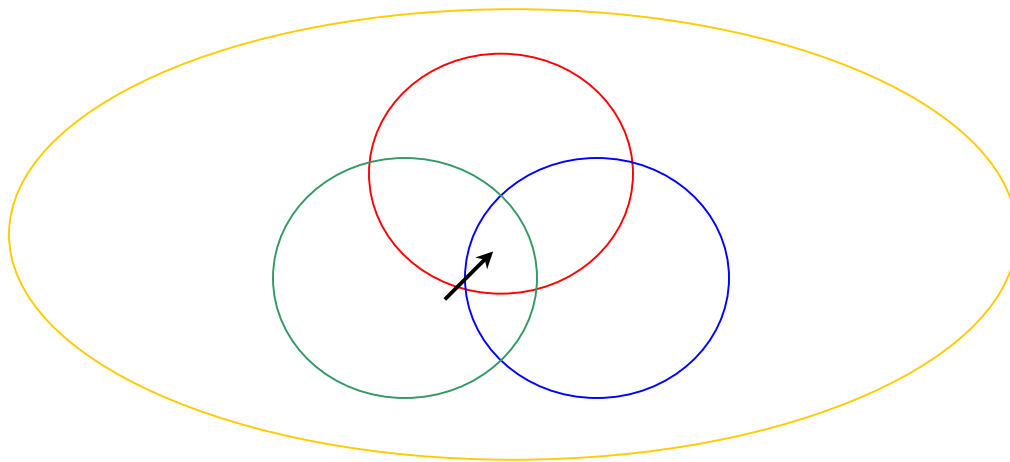
**Goals** For example: Stop the tankers (or tarsands, pipelines, Harper, etc)

**Philosophy** Anti-capitalist (or green capitalist, conservative, socialist, anarchist, etc)

**Strategy** Grassroots action (or lobby government, invest in alternatives, etc)

**Tactics** Stand with indigenous people (or start nationwide petition, ad blitz, etc)

I've represented various levels of support and affinity (unity) with this chart:



Inside the yellow line are people who share our goals, but probably won't take action. For example, there are tar sands workers who deplore the destruction but who are trapped by the economic system into the only jobs available.

In the space marked by the arrow are people who share the same goals, philosophy, strategy, and tactics. That's where we find our organizing committee or affinity group. The affinity group or organizing committee is usually about 5 to 20 people.

Also inside that small area, we have our cadre – committed, active members (in our case, 200 people or so). Moving outward is our organization (about 2000 supporters), our coalition (100,000+ with groups like Dogwood Initiative and Wilderness Committee) and the whole movement (millions of people who share our goals.)

Who should we consider reaching out to? Steelworkers, medical professionals, educators, animal rights advocates, landowners – within these groups are people who share our goals, and possibly our philosophy and tactics as well. Our job is to encourage them to move from soft support to coalition partners or cadre members.

How would we approach each of these groups? For construction workers and medical professionals, health risks are a concern. For educators, it might be the presence of corporate propaganda in the classroom. The deaths of marine mammals and sea turtles are a trigger issue for animal rights advocates.

### **How do we select targets?**

Good targets are in line with our philosophy and strategic to our goals.

**People:** In media campaigns, picking a person to represent the evils of the other side allows people to see the corporation in human form, rather than an abstraction. It allows us to name the ones who are committing the abuses.

By the way, I call these people "enemies," rather than "adversaries" or "opponents" or whatever, because it really is a war. Our enemies murder people abroad and poison us at home. It's more of a low-intensity conflict in Canada: harassment, arrests, threats, jail, etc. But meanwhile our enemies are wiping out forests, rivers, animals, and ecosystems. Let's face reality and call it what it is.

**Things:** Picking a specific thing to focus on – like a goddamn oil tanker – helps us visualize the inevitable result of this horrible technology (oil spills are one example). Beyond that, radicals can and do target technology or infrastructure and blockade it or even inflict physical damage on the apparatus of destruction. That's a form of economic sabotage that hurts investor profits and confidence.

**Places:** Where are the chokepoints? We should target the places where our enemies are most vulnerable, and where infrastructure is most crucial for the project. Get out ahead of them, if possible. Stop the road from being built, stop the bridge that breaches the valley, block the pass through the mountains. There's the chokepoint.

The best tactics are flexible and adaptable. If the company switches to heli-logging because they can't force a road in, people have blocked the helicopter pad and stopped the choppers from taking off or landing by floating balloons above it, for example.

In targeting a specific company, shareholder activism – introducing shareholder resolutions to stop unethical practices – is an option. In addition, activists can broaden the scope by targeting the parent company's shareholders and investors with boycotts and sabotage. The animal rights group SHAC perfected this strategy.

We should always be alert for targets of opportunity – places and times where we can ambush the enemy. Public events, snafus (like oil spills), Yes-Men-style mockery, etc.

**What is underground organizing?** In Atlanta at the Republican National Convention, a media collective was in town to document events on video (not participate in civil disobedience.) The group expected there would be a huge police crackdown on indy media, so they set up a top-secret safe house. No one else knew where it was.

Every activist house and media collective in town was raided. People were arrested, computers, cameras, and video seized. But the police didn't find the secret hideout, and videos of their brutality were released to the world. (See [Ground Noise and Static](#))

**Lesson: Police will target the innocent along with the guilty. Prepare for the worst BEFORE it comes. Set up safe houses, escape routes, and legal defense.**

One way to rank effective strategies is to identify weaknesses in the enemy's camp, and strengths in our own.

#### **What are our strengths?**

- There are more of us than them
- We are smarter and more creative.
- We are quicker to respond. Affinity groups can respond immediately.
- We can be more flexible and coordinated because we're non-hierarchical.
- We have the strength of our convictions.
- We are communities fighting for the planet and the survival of everything we love. They only have greed and self-interest.
- We have a variety of tactics to use – including peaceful non-violence. They only have force. And force doesn't work well against people who are prepared for it.

Back in 2000, after Interfor's loggers burned the Elaho Valley forest camp down and sent three people to the hospital, we came back a week later and set up the camp again. The loggers were in the media spotlight. They couldn't attack us again and they had no other strategy. We didn't give up because we were committed to defending the place we love. We won that campaign.

**Lesson: Never give up, even when it looks like we're getting our asses kicked.**

#### **What are their weaknesses?**

- Site-specific operations can't move. They are sitting ducks. Example: the tarsands themselves. All the corporations have offices and annual meetings, etc.
- Rigid hierarchy means it's difficult to shift plans. More than once, we were able to fox our opponents by pre-arranging to split up and go two different directions. It helped that we knew the land and they got lost trying to follow.
- Rigid hierarchy also limits communications. Info and orders must pass through several levels and get relayed back down. That slows them down.
- Our enemies aren't all-powerful; they are bound by law to hold hearings and disclose their board members and consult with communities, for example.

**Tactics** are the actions we take to carry out our strategies. Criteria for choosing tactics include:

- do they play to our organisation's strengths?
- are they able to communicate our story or message compellingly?

- are these tactics people can get excited about?
- do we have enough time and other resources to carry out these tactics? Ongoing organisational support is essential. We'll need fundraising strategies, volunteers etc
- is it something that allies and constituents would be prepared to get involved in?
- what kind of opposition can we expect? How are the decision-makers or opponents likely to respond? Are there ways to get around it?

*[How to Plan a Campaign v1](#), Christine Laurence.*

**Backcasting** is another way to break down strategies and tactics. It's the opposite of forecasting. Imagine it's the future, and the Pacific Trails Pipeline plan has been abandoned. How did that happen? Did Stephen Harper's heart grow two sizes overnight? Did the company go bankrupt? Was there a popular uprising? Was there a revolt in Parliament? Did First Nations people win in court?

Break it down further. If we're imagining First Nations win in court, it's clear what we need to do right now – help First Nations get to court. Forest Action Network is raising funds for legal fees this summer.

If we want to help the corporation go bankrupt, let's start by researching its weaknesses. (Example: people consider Enbridge the least-ethical company to invest in, according to an expert speaking to CBC Radio. Is investment capital in jeopardy?)

Again, it's a combination of tactics, rather than one single action, that wins.

### **"Think like a field general"**

That's Aric McBay's advice. We can do it; it's been done hundreds of times already, in every part of the world. To paraphrase some pointers from successful uprisings:

Set reachable goals.  
 Seize the high ground.  
 Stay mobile.  
 Know the land.  
 Get there first with the most.  
 Prepare for the backlash  
 Keep secrets.  
 Select targets carefully.  
 Strike and get away.  
 Use multiple attacks.  
 Don't get pinned down.  
 Keep plans simple.  
 Be ready to jump on opportunities.  
 Play your strengths to their weakness.  
 Follow through.  
 Protect each other.  
 And *never* give up

Thank you!