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Escaping the Symbolic Politics Trap: Reconciliation Initiatives and Conflict Resolution in Ethnic Wars*

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Existing approaches to resolving civil wars are based primarily on the assumption that these wars result from conflicts of interest among rational individuals. However, peacebuilding efforts based on this approach usually fail in cases of ethnic civil war, leading sooner or later to renewed fighting. Symbolic politics theory suggests the problem with these peace efforts is that they pay insufficient attention to ameliorating the emotional and symbolic roots of extremist ethnic politics. The theory suggests that resolving ethnic war requires reconciliation – changing hostile attitudes to more moderate ones, assuaging ethnic fears, and replacing the intragroup symbolic politics of ethnic chauvinism with a politics that rewards moderation. The only policy tools for promoting such attitudinal and social changes are reconciliation initiatives such as leaders' acknowledgement of their sides' misdeeds, public education efforts such as media campaigns, and problem-solving workshops. Integrating such reconciliation initiatives into a comprehensive conflict resolution strategy, it is argued, is necessary for conflict resolution efforts to be more effective in ending ethnic civil wars.

Introduction

Existing approaches to resolving ethnic civil wars have a dismal track record. Though a few studies are optimistic about resolving civil wars, there is no existing approach for resolving *ethnic* civil wars that is both reliably effective and morally acceptable. The military victory of one side can reliably end ethnic wars, but such victories are too often followed by mass killing or other severe

repression. Compromise settlements, in contrast, usually break down into renewed fighting. Peacekeeping troops can prevent such renewed fighting, but only as long as they remain in place. Peacemaking policy is therefore at an impasse: it is essential to find a way to resolve ethnic civil wars, but no acceptable means of doing so has been found.

The reason for this failure lies in the inadequacy of the rationalist paradigm underlying current conflict resolution practice. This paradigm overlooks key causes of ethnic wars and, therefore, key obstacles to their resolution. In particular, diplomats and rationalist analysts tend to assume that the sides in conflict are rational actors who recognize the costs of war and so prefer peace. They

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attribute violence solely to conflict over tangible interests and to the breakdown of institutional order, so they focus on interests and institutions in peacemaking. The reason this model has produced so few successful civil war settlements is that the parties are often not entirely rational or amenable to compromise. The main problem is often not the interests at stake, but the emotion-laden symbolic politics of defining, pursuing, and discussing them.

Effective conflict resolution, therefore, requires addressing the emotional and symbolic processes that influence how tangible issues are perceived and how they play out politically. A growing wave of literature on ethnic violence and conflict resolution using the social–psychological paradigm offers a basis for doing this, providing a new set of insights into both the causes and resolution of ethnic civil war. The purpose of this article is to show how a symbolic politics approach can build on the insights of the social–psychological school to suggest a comprehensive strategy that would make conflict resolution efforts more effective.

The missing key to conflict resolution, I argue, is to stabilize mass and elite preferences on both sides around attitudes amenable to compromise and to mobilize a political coalition in favor of it. According to symbolic politics theory (Edelman, 1971; Kaufman, 2001), ethnic wars are driven by hostile popular emotions toward out-groups, emotions harnessed by political leaders wielding emotive ethnic symbols. Playing on those emotions, however, can create a ‘symbolic politics trap’ for the leader: once a leader has aroused chauvinist emotions to gain or keep power, he and his successors may be unable to calm those emotions later, even if they wish to reverse course and moderate their policies. Therefore, the way for third parties to address these problems is to promote not just peace, but also reconciliation, addressing the emotional foundations

of hostile political attitudes, and their symbolic expression, to help stabilize peace.

In sum, existing approaches to resolving ethnic civil wars usually fail. Symbolic politics theory offers a plausible explanation for that failure and a sensible prescription for fixing the problem. This article, therefore, offers a new hypothesis. Effective conflict resolution in cases of ethnic civil wars would require something never before attempted on such a scale: a comprehensive strategy integrating the logic and practice of reconciliation initiatives with the traditional tools of international mediation and conflict resolution. Unless conflict resolution efforts address the emotional and symbolic roots of ethnic violence as well as the tangible interests at stake, they will continue to be ineffective.¹

The Failure of Conventional Peacemaking

The conventional wisdom about peacemaking in ethnic civil wars was, for a long time, pessimistic. I define ethnic civil war as a civil ‘war in which the key issues at stake – that is, the express reasons political power is being contested – involve either ethnic markers such as language or religion or the status of ethnic groups themselves’ (Kaufman, 2001: 17). In Azar & Haddad’s (1986: 1140) typically gloomy assessment, such ‘identity-driven conflicts are obstinate and do not lend themselves to traditional forms of settlement’.

Some recent studies have challenged this view, but the evidence is not persuasive. Walter (1997, 2002) argues, for example, that third-party intervention almost always results in settlement of civil wars if the third party agrees to enforce the bargain. But Walter’s analysis includes only six peace agreements in ethnic conflicts. If we understand success as

¹ Making a similar argument from a different starting point is Ross (1993).

ensuring that war does not recur among the original parties to the conflict, then three of Walter's 'successes' – Lebanon in 1958, Lebanon in 1976, and Sudan in 1972 – were really failures, collapsing into renewed fighting later. Two others are miscoded: peace in Croatia was the result of Croatia's military victory in 1995, while peace in Bosnia remains dependent on the presence of NATO peacekeepers. Only one of her cases, the Zimbabwe agreement of 1984, is truly a success.

A study by Wallensteen (2002: 134, 172) seems more hopeful, listing 24 peace agreements in civil wars or 'state formation' conflicts just in the years 1988–99, but again, few of these yielded successful settlements of ethnic civil wars. Only two of the 'civil war' cases – Lebanon (1990) and South Africa (1993–94) – represent durable settlements of ethnic civil wars, and Lebanon's peace was the result of a Syrian military victory. Similarly, of Wallensteen's ten settlements in 'state formation' conflicts, two later failed (Israel–Palestine 1993 and Philippines–Mindanao 1996), while four others were not fully implemented, leaving the situation unstable (e.g. Bosnia and Northern Ireland). Only two were successful settlements of ethnic or identity civil wars: Niger 1995 and Indonesia–East Timor 1999.

In sum, there are very few cases of successful settlements of ethnic wars since World War II: Zimbabwe 1984, South Africa 1993–94, Niger 1995, East Timor 1999, Ghana 1996, and, possibly, Northern Ireland 1998 comprise the complete list – and even they all suffer continuing violence. In contrast to this slim roster of successes, Gurr (2000: 28) finds that there were 59 ongoing ethnic 'rebellions' in 1999. The track record of resolving these conflicts thus remains abysmal: most drag on, and few end in negotiated settlements. When they end, it is almost always as a result of military victory by one side, too often followed by genocide

or politicide (Licklider, 1995) – a morally unacceptable outcome.

Thus, the current state of knowledge lacks any reliable and morally acceptable means of resolving ethnic war. The one glimmer of hope, which I pursue below, is that three of the most successful settlements – in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Ghana – involved explicit policies or large-scale efforts to promote reconciliation.

Rational and Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War

Existing strategies of conflict resolution fail in ethnic wars because they are based on an inadequate understanding of how ethnic identities work, why group members mobilize for war, and how they can be mobilized for peace. The broader literature on explaining ethnic violence is too large to survey adequately here,² but much of it is only tangentially relevant to the problem of conflict resolution. For example, the prominent conflictual modernization theory (Connor, 1993; Rothschild, 1981; Young, 1976; Newman, 1991) identifies the problem as modernization itself; the prescriptive implications of this insight for conflict *resolution* are not clear. Other theories focus on single factors that cannot be addressed by peacebuilders – such as the 'bad leaders' approach (Denitch, 1994; Gagnon, 1995; Brown, 1996). Still others, such as the notion of 'ancient hatreds' (Kaplan, 1993; cf. Smith, 1965), are now widely discredited.

The insights of other mainstream theories are already captured in conflict resolution practice. The instrumentalist–rationalist school argues that all civil wars result from a struggle between essentially rational groups of individuals over tangible interests, such as wealth and power (Bates, 1983; Collier &

² I survey the literature in more detail in Kaufman (2001: 1–30).

Hoeffler, 2004; Hardin, 1995, Lake & Rothchild, 1998). Recognizing that war is too destructive to be a rationally desired outcome, the most sophisticated of these theories explain ethnic war as an unintended consequence of state breakdown. This institutional breakdown, these scholars argue, creates a security dilemma (Posen, 1993), typically exacerbated by information failures and commitment problems that make peaceful accommodation difficult to achieve (Fearon, 1998). Related approaches identify factors that make conflict more likely (Gurr, 1993, 2000), sometimes focusing on specific ones such as geographic conditions (Toft, 2003) or action by outside states (Heraclides, 1991; Saideman, 2001).

This understanding of the causes of conflict is at the heart of mainstream conflict resolution practice.³ Mediation is primarily aimed at addressing information failures and altering leaders' incentives (Bercovitch, 1997; Rothchild, 1996); external monitoring and peacekeeping ameliorate commitment problems (Walter, 1997, 2002; Stedman, 1996); and economic and demobilization aid offers tangible incentives to the populations (Woodward, 2002; Spear, 2002). The role of external actors in causing conflict is addressed by multilateralizing the mediation process (Crocker, Hampson & Aall, 1999). The theoretical emphasis on institutional breakdown yields the peacebuilders' focus on institution-building (Lijphart, 1977; Horowitz, 1993), with particular attention to how autonomy might ameliorate – or exacerbate – the geographic dimensions of conflict (Bunce, 1999; Hannum, 1990; Kaufmann, 1996).

What these approaches miss is how the nature of ethnicity adds an additional layer of complexity to the resolution of ethnic civil wars. According to an emerging academic consensus, ethnic identities are 'socially con-

³ The range of conflict resolution measures is listed in Lund (2001: 17).

structed' by intellectuals and other elites, who develop an ideology identifying the group, its membership, and what it means to be a member.⁴ According to Smith (1986, 1999), at the core of this social construction is a 'myth-symbol complex', a combination of myths, memories, values, and symbols that defines the identity. Symbolism is, thus, at the heart of ethnic identity.

A symbolic politics approach, rooted in a social-psychological understanding of social life, can explain what the competing approaches cannot: why followers support aggressive government leaders who lead them to civil war, and why others follow rebel leaders who have few tangible selective incentives to offer.⁵ In an impressive application of psychological theory, for example, Petersen (2002) argues that emotions can act to change preferences and priorities away from tangible interests like economic prosperity and toward satisfaction of emotional resentments. While institutional breakdown is critical in providing the opportunity for ethnic violence, Petersen finds, the motivation and target are determined by emotions, most often resentment.

My previous (Kaufman, 2001) application of symbolic politics theory explores the sources of these emotions and how they can be used politically. I show that hostile emotions such as hatred and resentment tend to have roots in pre-existing ethnic myths justifying hostility against the ethnic out-group – that is, in the very 'myth-symbol complex' that defines an ethnic group's identity. These myths often involve what Volkan (1996) calls 'chosen traumas . . . the collective memory of a calamity that once befell a group's ancestors', defining the group as a victim which

⁴ Examples of the synthesis include Gurr (1993), Smith (1998), and Fearon & Laitin (2000). Young (1993) suggests the 'constructivist' label.

⁵ The pioneering work in this area includes work by Azar (e.g. Azar & Farah, 1981), Burton (1990), Connor (1993), and Horowitz (1985). A general call for attention to emotional factors is Crawford (2000).

must seek security or revenge. The myths also generate emotionally laden symbols that politicians can manipulate to evoke certain emotions – loyalty to the in-group, or hostility and fear toward the out-group. Indeed, the existence, status, and security of the group depends on the status of group symbols, which is why people are willing to fight and die for them – and why they are willing to follow leaders who manipulate those symbols for selfish goals.

In this account, when political opportunity arises, leaders or would-be leaders can manipulate group symbols to evoke hostile feelings and exacerbate fear. They use the hostility and fear, in turn, to justify extremist policies, justifying their own quest for power as ‘defense’ of their people’s status and security. Thus, in the symbolist account, it is the interaction of these hostile myths and symbols, existential fear, mass hostility, and mobilization by symbol-manipulating elites, that creates ethnic security dilemmas and turns ethnic conflict into war (Kaufman, 2001).

Hostile Attitudes as a Barrier to Ethnic Conflict Resolution

The key insight symbolist theory offers on the problem of conflict resolution is that ethnic violence is rooted in an internal politics based on manipulating ethnic symbols to generate strong hostile emotions. Indeed, according to Edelman’s classic *Politics as Symbolic Action* (1971: 19), the basic function of any political symbol is to create around conflicts of interest a myth of struggle against ‘hostile, alien, or subhuman forces’ as a way to mobilize support. Kelman (1987, 1992, 1997), in a series of works outlining the social-psychological basis of ethnic violence, extends this analysis, emphasizing that conflict is an intersocietal process – a hostile relationship between whole groups or societies, not just leaders or armies.

Based on this understanding of the nature of ethnic conflict, Kelman argues, it follows that hostile emotions, norms, and images among ethnic groups are a key barrier to the resolution of ethnic war. Peace agreements between leaders do not necessarily address these hostile intersocietal dynamics. Furthermore, the conduct of ethnic war hardens these attitudes (Kaufmann, 1996, 1998). Massacres suffered and battles fought – whether won or lost – provide new myths and symbols to be used in further demonizing the enemy, justifying further fighting and delegitimizing the idea of a compromise peace. For these reasons, Kelman characterizes these conflicts as having an escalatory, self-perpetuating dynamic.

Given that escalatory dynamic, furthermore, elites who exploit nationalist symbols to gain or keep power and to justify extremist policies often have trouble later if they want to reverse those policies.⁶ This is the symbolic politics trap. In the Arab–Israeli relationship, for example, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat spent his career affirming that ‘the struggle will continue until all of Palestine is liberated’. Trapped by this commitment, he found it virtually impossible to make peace because it would require him to give up such symbols as the ‘right of return’, the pursuit of which was at the heart of his legitimacy. When pressed at Camp David to make concessions on Jerusalem, he reportedly asked President Clinton: ‘Do you want to go to my funeral?’ (quoted in Topor, 1997: 30). Peace, ironically, comes to be seen as riskier than war.

To be sure, this hardline public opinion is also sustained in large part by organizations, such as Hamas or radical Israeli settlers’ organizations. This social and organizational component of the problem does not, however, mean that the attitudinal dimension is unimportant; it just means that

⁶ A similar point is made in Duffy & Lindstrom (2002: 70).

attitudes are harder to change because of the social context.

Some analysts object to this emphasis on the perceptual and attitudinal obstacles to conflict resolution, inferring that it denies the 'reality' of the interests at stake – political power, land, security, or resources. This, however, is a misconception. Social-psychological approaches recognize the reality of these interests, but also seek to explain *why* one group inflexibly pursues a territorial claim against its neighbor while another does not, or why one group supports killing to gain political power while another does not.

The Logic and Psychology of Preference Change

If myths justifying hostility, fears of group extinction, and a resulting symbolic politics mobilizing people for conflict are the key driving forces of ethnic war, then conflict resolution requires changing those factors. Kelman notes that often ethnic myths on one side are what underlie fears of extinction on the other. For example, Palestinian mythology denies the ancient Jewish presence in the land of Israel, while Israeli myths overlook the shattering impact on Palestinians of the creation of the Jewish state. These denials are perceived – rightly – as a refusal by each side to grant legitimacy to the other's claims, leading each side to fear that the other aims, ultimately, at their annihilation. At the same time, each side can use its myths to write off the other as mindless aggressors and dismiss the idea of compromise as unjustified appeasement. Because such rejectionism is not merely tactical but, rather, part of each group's ethnic or nationalist mythology – which defines their identity – it is extremely difficult to change.

Quoting Burton, however, Kelman (1997) points to a source of hope: the psychological needs driving identity conflicts – especially the needs for identity, security,

and recognition – are not zero-sum and can be addressed through reassurance. For example, if insecurity in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is exacerbated by each side's refusal to recognize the other's concerns, simple verbal acknowledgments of those concerns can offer reassurance at no tangible cost. Symbolic gestures implying recognition or acknowledgment, such as Sadat shaking hands with Israeli interlocutors, can also provide useful reassurance, while simultaneously working to moderate the 'enemy image' held by one's own constituents.

Stable peace, in sum, requires not just a political settlement but also reconciliation. According to an ideal definition, reconciliation 'is characterized by mutual recognition and acceptance, invested interests and goals in developing peaceful relations, as well as fully normalized, cooperative political, economic and cultural relations' (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004: 15). All of these elements are, of course, matters of degree. In this article, when I refer to 'reconciliation', I mean a political and social process aimed at promoting these goals – mutual acceptance and a commitment to a normalized, peaceful relationship. I define a *reconciliation initiative* as any activity aimed at encouraging such a process. There are many different kinds of reconciliation initiatives, including leaders' verbal or symbolic acknowledgement of past deeds, NGO-organized problem-solving workshops, cultural events, media initiatives, and educational reform.

Long & Brecke (2003: 28–31) offer a similar 'forgiveness model' of reconciliation based on four key elements. First, acknowledgment or 'truth-telling' is necessary to achieve mutual acceptance: each side must acknowledge the harm they did to the other. Second, the sides must forgive in the sense that they change their understanding of their own identity and that of the adversary – that is, modify their group mythology – so that they see themselves not merely as victims (and the adversaries merely as victimizers),

but in terms of more positive identities. Third, the sides must give up on the hope of retribution or complete justice and settle for 'partial justice', especially with regard to punishment of criminals and victimizers. Finally, the parties must agree to build a new, more positive relationship.

Long & Brecke (2003) also provide evidence that reconciliation along these lines promotes success in resolving civil wars. They study ten cases of civil war settlements, three failures and seven successes. In all seven of the successful cases, the four desiderata of forgiveness were present: public truth-telling, partial justice, redefinition of social identities, and a call for a new relationship. In all three of the unsuccessful cases, in contrast, the first three of those desiderata were absent or partially absent. Thus, every civil war settlement in which the parties worked at reconciliation succeeded, while every one that did not aim at reconciliation failed. Most of the successful cases in the Long & Brecke study involve non-ethnic conflicts, but they also include the South African (racial conflict) case and the case of Mozambique (which included ethnic elements). This is not proof of success in ethnic war, but it is suggestive.

A Comprehensive Peacemaking Strategy

While existing conflict resolution and peacebuilding approaches undertake necessary tasks, they are typically unsuccessful in resolving ethnic wars, because they pay insufficient attention to reconciliation. Furthermore, the wide range of available conflict resolution policy tools is rarely employed together in a coordinated strategy. Diplomats focus on negotiations and are reluctant to consider the interactions of their efforts with others. Peacekeeping commanders often stick to narrow interpretations of their mandates that prevent the use of their muscle to keep peace processes on track. Peace-

builders concerned with economic justice or human rights are often at odds with others focused on reconciliation, and they may not be inclined to coordinate with diplomats, military officials, or each other (see e.g. Fitzduff, 2001: 268).

The role that reconciliation initiatives could play in promoting peace can best be understood by showing how they would fit into a comprehensive peacebuilding strategy. Creating such a strategy must start with some considerations of timing and sequencing. While any delineation of phases is inevitably an oversimplification, the following four phases provide a useful starting point for thinking about how to put the pieces together.

Phase 1: Setting the Stage

Analyses typically refer to this phase as 'getting to the [negotiating] table', but this is too simple a notion. The challenge is getting to the table in propitious circumstances. If any party to the conflict believes it can benefit from continued fighting, it will act as a 'spoiler' and block the road to peace, so third parties may have to tip the balance of military power against such actors. If multiple third parties support multiple sides in conflict, resolution requires either the acquiescence of some in their rivals' military victory, or a recognition, by local parties and their sponsors alike, that they have more to gain from peace than from continued war. Once the balance of power favors those who want peace, the time is right for a ceasefire.

The second aspect of this phase is 'getting to the table', or 'prenegotiation'. The critical third-party role here is played by mediators, whether provided by states or international organizations.⁷ Early on, however, informal 'Track II' talks can play an important role.

Track II talks are a particular form of 'problem-solving workshop' of the sort

⁷ Bercovitch (1997) provides an excellent overview of the tasks of mediation; on 'prenegotiation', see Saunders (1996).

pioneered by psychologists such as Kelman (1992; cf. Fisher, 1996). The aim of such workshops is to bring together people from opposing sides of a conflict, so they can replace their mythical beliefs about the other side with better information and replace their hostility and fear with enough understanding to make a compromise peace look attractive and attainable. If successful, these experiences start to build trust among participants across group lines. 'Track II diplomacy', in particular, involves problem-solving workshops carried out by elites who have access to top leaders but are not part of the official leadership. Such talks allow for an informal, and often more creative, exploration of options than formal leaders are willing to risk. The 1993 Israeli-Palestinian Oslo process, for example, began as an informal series of discussions between two Israeli academics and some members of the PLO leadership. They were then expanded into formal negotiations (Egeland, 1999).

Phase 2: Negotiation and Political De-escalation

The issue usually neglected at this stage is political de-escalation. For example, the parties to the conflict and the mediators should make continued negotiations contingent on official steps toward reconciliation by the sides. At a minimum, this means a prohibition against hate speech by leaders, and the media they control, when addressing their own population. As long as leaders on either side are continuing to enmesh themselves in the symbolic politics trap by arousing hostile emotions against the other side, negotiations are a waste of time. Threats from mediators to withdraw their mediation are low-cost and appropriate: incumbent rabble-rousers are undermining their ability to either accept a deal or get it ratified; adjourning talks until they stop makes sense.

The country or group sponsoring the negotiations should also establish a single

fund, under the control of the mediators, to promote a wide range of peacebuilding activities. A central pot with an adequate sum of money – millions of dollars – is essential to ensure that the reconciliation effort is on a sufficient scale and that most initiatives are coordinated to prevent duplication or work at cross-purposes. The scale of the effort should be large enough that a substantial portion of the middle-range leadership on both sides eventually participates in some peacebuilding activities, so a significant network of support for the peace process is created. Compared to the hundreds of millions or billions often spent on peace-keeping and economic aid, such a level of funding represents only a small marginal increase in the costs of a major peacebuilding effort.

Cultural efforts funded from the same pot, especially aimed at the mass media, are also appropriate: television or film documentaries, 'human-interest' stories in the press, and routine broadcast news should all be encouraged to support the effort to humanize the enemy and counteract hostile attitudes. The creation of media outlets supportive of peace is also appropriate, as was achieved with radio Jambo in Burundi in the 1990s (Gardner, 2001: 308). This is *not* a call for censorship, but the mediators can fund non-profit organizations to produce these stories, films, etc., and even pay to have them printed or broadcast. They should also, when necessary, lean on the parties not to block the dissemination of the products.

Another appropriate sort of initiative is to provide training for journalists on how to reduce bias. A key goal of such efforts is to combat the hostile effects of segmented media markets, in which different media outlets each play to the hostile feelings of one party to the conflict (Snyder & Ballentine, 1996). The message for the media at this stage, and the theme of problem-solving workshops, should focus more on emotional

than substantive issues – less ‘let’s share the disputed land’ and more “‘they’ are not evil monsters but human beings who have suffered as we have, and it is possible to deal with them’.

This stage is also a good time for leadership acknowledgement of the other side’s suffering and of their own side’s partial responsibility. Such acknowledgement is critical in the reconciliation process. Postwar German acknowledgment and repudiation of the Holocaust and of Hitler’s aggression, for example – especially Willy Brandt’s emotional visit to Auschwitz – played an important role in enabling German reconciliation, not only with Israel, but also with European neighbors. Similarly, Sadat’s acknowledgment of Jews’ past suffering played a key role in building Israeli–Egyptian trust, making possible the 1978 Camp David accords.

Mediators and parties alike are justified in insisting on such actions: if leaders cannot make such statements before a deal is inked, their sincerity is subject to doubt. Their ability to implement a deal is even more dubious if their followers are unready to hear unpleasant truths about their own side. For this reason, such acknowledgments should eventually be made a condition of continued negotiation.

The period of negotiations is also the time to begin playing up symbols that can be used to mobilize support for peace and to begin undermining the myths and symbols that justify hostility. Most importantly, leaders must develop tools for gathering support without extreme nationalist appeals. That is, they must construct, usually from existing elements of their national myth-symbol complex, a language for talking publicly about peace and reconciliation that resonates emotionally with their followers, to enable them to counter emotional nationalist appeals. Efforts in the media and in other areas of popular culture can help by provid-

ing or reinforcing the symbols leaders use to evoke such a response. Rituals supportive of peace – such as Israeli Prime Minister Rabin’s attendance at peace rallies – should also be fostered.⁸

Leaders on both sides should also be expected to encourage their subordinates to cooperate with these efforts, including participating in problem-solving workshops. This need not be difficult: if the workshops are held at nice resorts, as they often are, participation in them can be made a desirable perquisite.

The way these workshops typically work is to gather ‘opinion leaders’ from both sides in ‘week-long meetings . . . in an informal, often academic, setting that permits the re-analysis of their conflict as a shared problem and the generation of some alternative courses of action’.⁹ In such workshops, the first step is often to moderate participants’ hostile mutual attitudes: if meetings begin with the participants’ sharing of their personal experiences of conflict, it helps humanize each side for the other by attaching a human face to the previously anonymous – and easy to ignore – suffering of the adversary (Natsios, 1997: 353). This is necessary, because psychologists have found that emotionally based attitudes, like ethnic hostility, are hard to change except through emotional appeals (Edwards, 1990; Edwards & von Hippel, 1995). In the best case, these experiences start to change intergroup relations by building at least cordial if not friendly relations across group lines, replacing purely hostile ones. These changes, if extended, could then work to change the public mood and political dynamics within groups, so that leaders would be rewarded for moderate rather than hostile policies toward the rival group.

⁸ On the role and value of ritual, see Ross (2004).

⁹ Christopher Mitchell, quoted in Lederach (1997: 46–47).

One potentially promising audience for such initiatives is young people, who are likely to be both more impressionable than their elders and easier to goad into violence unless dissuaded. An example of this focus is the 'Seeds of Peace' program, which brings together Israeli and Arab teenagers (including, in the past, stone-throwing participants of the Palestinian intifada of the early 1990s) for a three-week summer camp program in Maine. Mixing problem-solving workshops with summer games and sports, the program reportedly helped many participants come to an increased understanding of the other side, with many working together to promote peace after they returned home (Wallach, 2000; cf. Shamir & Shikaki, 2002).

Another target for these efforts should be the transnational support networks for hard-liners. Many conflicts are fueled to a significant degree by money and hardline attitudes from émigré or pan-ethnic groups, who often support the more extremist factions. Leaders and activists in these émigré and pan-ethnic organizations must therefore be included in reconciliation initiatives, to try to discourage them from blocking deal ratification or supporting spoilers later on.

The key point is that the various reconciliation initiatives, only modestly effective in isolation, can theoretically be made mutually reinforcing. Problem-solving workshops often have the strongest immediate effects, but they can include only a limited number who then face pressure to abandon their newfound moderation once they return to their society (this is 'the re-entry problem'). Media stories, official speeches and rituals, and cultural events might ameliorate the re-entry problem by assuring participants that their new, more moderate feelings are generally 'in the air'. At the same time, workshop participants could reinforce the effects of these cultural events by sharing their experiences. All of these forces could help to prepare public opinion

to support ratification and implementation of a settlement.

Phase 3: Deal-Making and Political Mobilization

This is the stage in which negotiators find a specific formula for settling the tangible issues at stake, and leaders mobilize their groups to ratify it. Formal acceptance of a formula should be preceded by problem-solving workshops that allow middle-range and grass-roots leaders to experience the same trade-off problems faced by their superiors. The more fully committed middle-range leaders are to an eventual deal, the easier it is for their chiefs to implement the deal.

At the grass-roots level, the ground for 'selling' a deal should be prepared in the media, through major speeches by leaders and evocative ceremonies marking the conclusion of the agreement. This must be accompanied by a continued public relations effort aimed at promoting both the emotional acceptability of a deal and the substantive acceptability of its key terms, again including art, film, and entertainment television in addition to news media. In addition to symbolic appeals, therefore, this is the time to release new information – for example, studies detailing the economic costs to both sides of continued conflict and the likely economic benefits of a peace agreement. This is also the time for leaders to fully mobilize their political parties on behalf of their efforts and to increase cooperation with autonomous peace groups. Capacity-building efforts should also be funded to help pro-peace NGOs in the region to expand.

Participation in problem-solving workshops should also be expanded to new and less likely sets of participants by this stage, to try to erode opposition to the settlement. Key constituencies might include veterans' groups and émigré groups. Additionally,

wide-ranging public relations and public education efforts are essential. One creative example comes from Mozambique, where a UNICEF-funded 'Circus of Peace' toured the country, using drama and arts to explore the challenges of war, conflict, and reconciliation (Lederach, 1997: 54). Similar sort of arts-based programs, including cultural fairs and dramatic presentations designed to foster reconciliation, have also been employed in Northern Ireland (Fitzduff, 2001).

The culmination of these efforts is ideally a referendum, election, or other formal ratification process that commits the society as a whole to implementation of the agreement. Such a process (e.g. the referendum in Northern Ireland) forces political leaders to articulate their reasons for supporting a compromise peace and therefore provides the occasion for them to create and deepen a mainstream discourse in favor of peace. It provides an opportunity for pro-peace forces to coalesce and provides the voters with the opportunity to commit themselves to reconciliation through a vote specifically on that issue – valuable, because the psychology of commitment then works to motivate them to continue to support it. A successful vote can then be used to legitimate implementation as carrying out the explicit will of the people: charges of betrayal cannot then as easily stick.

Implementing a general campaign of pro-peace public relations and mobilization is exceptionally difficult. One study finds, for example, that most of the Israeli peace lobby *demobilized* after the start of the Oslo process: even Labor governments distrusted groups such as Peace Now, while the activists restrained themselves in an effort to avoid undermining the peace process. Also counter-intuitively, trying to institutionalize these groups by providing them with permanent paid staff contributed to this demobilization, as unpaid activists' efforts at

community-based peacebuilding were sidelined (Hermann, 2002). The result was to leave the field more open to opponents of the peace process, enabling them to undermine it.

Phase 4: Implementation and Reconciliation

The problems of implementation have been well examined elsewhere, and I cannot do them justice here. Key factors that have been identified include supportive international interventions, well-designed and inclusive settlement agreements, and quick economic benefits that give ordinary people a tangible stake in peace (Hampson, 1996; Stedman, Rothchild & Cousens, 2002).

Additionally, however, there must be continued attention to the emotional bases of political activity. Hardliners often try to destroy peace agreements, and in ethnic civil wars they usually succeed. Political and cultural leaders therefore need to continue their efforts to reinforce the emotional power of their discourse in favor of peace, and of the symbols that they evoke in that discourse, so hardliners cannot force them back into the symbolic politics trap. Achieving this goal requires giving newly created institutions some symbolic power to attract loyalty and compliance.

Staying out of the symbolic politics trap also requires, as Long & Brecke (2003) point out, a redefinition of group identities – not necessarily of who belongs to the group, but of what it means to be a member. The importance of 'chosen traumas' in group mythology needs to be downplayed to reduce the importance of the group sense of victimization. For that reason, the importance of public rituals of mourning and reconciliation become more important, not less, in the implementation period, as these are what enable groups emotionally to move on from victimhood to agency. Truth commissions, like that in South Africa, provide

catharsis by providing public acknowledgment of victims' suffering. Past efforts provide only limited indications of the potential of such initiatives, however: in the case of Northern Ireland, for example, the regret of one analyst is that there was 'so much more' that could have been done in the areas of peacebuilding and acknowledgment (Montville, 2001: 141).

Efforts aimed at revision of school curricula also belong in this stage. Durably replacing myths justifying hostility requires promoting the writing and teaching of fair-minded history instead of the ethnocentric and scapegoating kind. International efforts in this direction are not unknown: Joseph Montville, for example, has helped organize national processes for writing a common, non-discriminatory history in both Bosnia and Burundi (Natsios, 1997). In the 1950s, a similar Franco-German initiative contributed to the revision of history teaching in those two countries, promoting removal of references to each country as the 'hereditary enemy' of the other (Ackermann, 1994: 242).

What must be kept in mind is that violent conflict is a relationship between societies, not just leaders or armies, and that conflict resolution means remaking that relationship into a peaceful and constructive (though certainly not conflict-free) one. This must be done primarily at the implementation stage. It should include some degree of economic cooperation, which creates numerous opportunities for constructive mutual engagement. But ideally, it should also include peaceful contacts on a range of other levels – educational and cultural contacts, professional and administrative interactions (e.g. cooperation for transportation and law enforcement), and so on. This is necessary emotionally, because the previous attitudes of hostility and fear cannot simply be excised; they must be replaced or at least balanced by some more positive feelings. It is also necessary practically, since failure to

cooperate on issues of mutual concern will inevitably engender hostility which might contribute to re-igniting the conflict.

Effectiveness of Reconciliation Initiatives

The current state of knowledge does not allow us to know to how effective reconciliation initiatives can be at promoting peace. The case for further efforts in this direction rests not on the demonstrated success of reconciliation initiatives, but on the demonstrated failure of efforts that do not include them, as well as the evidence that the absence of reconciliation is the cause of these failures. This evidence supports the theoretical argument derived from symbolic politics theory that reconciliation initiatives should help.

Evidence that reconciliation initiatives promote peace is sparse. According to one recent assessment (Prendergast & Plumb, 2002: 338), initiatives of this sort 'have escaped hard evaluation. . . . Current evaluation is impressionistic and anecdotal, with little consideration of potential ripple effects.' The best overall study of reconciliation initiatives is that of Long & Brecke (2003), which shows some correlational evidence for their success in promoting resolution of civil wars, but even that study lacks detailed process-tracing evidence showing a causal connection.¹⁰ One account of the peace process in northern Ghana in 1995 (Assefa, 2001) suggests an important role for problem-solving workshops in that case, but that study, written by a participant in the process, has yet to be corroborated by others. Another account, also written by a participant in the process, suggests that repeated problem-solving workshops contributed critically to the peace process in

¹⁰ I thank a reviewer from *Journal of Peace Studies* for pointing to the correlational nature of Long & Brecke's evidence.

Tajikistan (Saunders, 1999). The role of reconciliation in the South Africa case is highly contested (e.g. Rigby, 2001). Other evidence is more impressionistic.

There is more evidence for the proposition that problem-solving workshops can change the attitudes of their participants, sometimes (but not always) enduringly. In the Northern Ghana case, for example, some participants in problem-solving workshops were activists in the youth organizations that were responsible for most of the violence, who reportedly changed their views and began working for peace as a result of the workshops (Assefa, 2001). Similar evidence exists for the effectiveness of Tajikistan's elite-level workshops (Saunders, 1999), and for the 'Seeds of Peace' program's success in encouraging peace activism among some of its alumni (Wallach, 2000). The questions about the effectiveness of such programs concern not whether well-designed ones can help change individual attitudes, but whether the re-entry problem can be overcome to allow workshop alumni to maintain moderate views and promote that moderation more widely – or whether larger social forces block such effects.

Efforts to increase the impact of these workshops face important constraints. One is the need for a deep understanding of the relevant cultures, and in particular of regional norms of conflict management: outsiders alone are unlikely to be effective (Lederach, 1997). Another problem is that, typically, the NGOs or religious organizations carrying out such initiatives are small,¹¹ with many of them operating simultaneously, yielding problems of coordination of effort (Assefa, 2001). A third limitation is the so-called 're-entry problem' discussed above. And while the re-entry problem may indicate that reconciliation initiatives occur on too small a scale, expanding them may be

hard, because the implementing groups may lack the capacity. Expanding those groups, in turn, may commercialize them, diluting the factor that gives them their effectiveness – the personal dedication of their staff.¹²

Yet another obstacle is that it is difficult to make reconciliation initiatives work while fighting is under way. Violence is a key cause of hostile attitudes, and indeed, one formulation (Maynard, 1997) has it that establishing safety, and a sense of safety, is the first necessary step toward reconciliation. In short, the violence often has to stop before peacebuilding can be effective.

A related obstacle to any conflict resolution policy is the 'spoiler problem', the problem of subgroups who oppose compromise and violently obstruct peaceful conflict resolution. In one prominent analysis, Stedman (1997) identifies three common strategies for handling spoilers: the threat of withdrawal, inducements, and the 'departing train' strategy. All of them, unfortunately, have major drawbacks: withdrawal of peacekeepers and mediators may clear the way for further predation by the strong; inducements may encourage spoilers to increase their demands; and spoilers can sometimes not only get on the 'departing train' of a peace agreement, but also hijack it later. Sometimes force is the only alternative for handling spoilers.

The role that reconciliation initiatives can theoretically play is to undermine spoilers' power after a ceasefire or a settlement is reached. By changing the attitudes of ordinary people to favor peace over violence, reconciliation initiatives would erode the support base on which spoiler groups depend. Furthermore, such initiatives can sometimes change the attitudes of the spoilers themselves. For example, in Northern Ireland, ex-paramilitary fighters played a key role in peacebuilding efforts and

¹¹ On the importance of religious organizations, see Sampson (1997) and Lederach (1997).

¹² I am indebted to Jim Richter for pointing out this obstacle.

in negotiations, while cross-community communications efforts – often led by women – have been important in quashing rumors that spoilers might exploit to justify violence (Fitzduff, 2001). Reconciliation initiatives are not a silver bullet, but they do represent a useful addition to the toolbox for handling spoiler problems.

Another dilemma concerns the role of procedures of justice such as war-crimes tribunals. Since reconciliation requires acceptance of only partial justice by both sides, it is likely that overemphasis on war crimes tribunals will be counterproductive in most cases.¹³ Most leaders involved in ethnic violence will likely have innocent blood on their hands, so trying to build complete justice into any settlement is likely to block its implementation, as the guilty powerful work to protect themselves by opposing the peace. Punishment, therefore, should typically be focused on the highest-level or most egregious offenders, with lesser miscreants being judged by their willingness to change their behavior. Emphasis should instead be on acknowledgement, for example through truth and reconciliation commissions, which can contribute to the healing of psychological wounds. Such commissions have been widely used, most prominently in South Africa, but also in Nicaragua and other African conflicts as well. While the most effective form and scope for such commissions remains controversial, what is clear is the cathartic effect for some victims – though one account cautions that this was ‘the *beginning* of a healing process rather than the end’ (van der Merwe, 2001: 196).

The greatest barrier to reconciliation initiatives, however, is the reluctance of practitioners to promote them. Mediators focused on the here-and-now of delicate negotiations are reluctant to endanger their relations with the parties by protesting out-

bursts of violent rhetoric. This policy is shortsighted at best: as long as leaders find it necessary to stay in power through appeals to chauvinist public opinion, they will be unable to persuade their constituents to transcend chauvinist thinking and accept a compromise – they will still be stuck in the symbolic politics trap. To help create an escape from the symbolic politics trap, mediators must instead keep the parties accountable for their own rhetoric, while supporting reconciliation initiatives by NGOs and religious groups, integrating these initiatives into a larger peacebuilding strategy.

Conclusion

Contrary to stereotypes, the symbolist understanding of ethnic violence is not more optimistic about conflict resolution than is the rationalist understanding. It is less optimistic than the liberal rationalist approach suggested by theorists like Walter (1997, 2002), which is too sanguine about the motives of most conflicting parties. At the same time, it offers more hope than the realist–rationalist argument that a partition resulting in reduced but not ended conflict is the best that can be achieved (Kaufmann, 1996, 1998). And that is the case for adopting the symbolist approach: it redresses the oversights of liberal theory while avoiding realist despair.

Ethnic civil wars are, indeed, fought over tangible stakes such as land, resources, power, and security. But these stakes are either divisible or positive-sum in nature and, therefore, not a fundamental barrier to conflict resolution. What make ethnic wars intractable are the intangibles – myths and fears that lead the parties to demand political and military dominance or superior status. These factors lead to security dilemmas between groups and to chauvinistic symbolic politics within groups that makes compromise seem like betrayal.

¹³ Good discussions of the trade-off dilemma between peace and justice include Baker (1996) and Rigby (2001).

Together, the chauvinistic internal politics and the security dilemma create the symbolic politics trap, which can destroy leaders who try to escape it and achieve peace.

A new departure in conflict resolution is therefore required. Given the obstacles posed by extremist symbolic politics, pursuing negotiations to settle an ethnic war in the absence of a strategy for reconciliation means trying to construct peace in the shiftest of sands. Collapse is the likely result. Constructing a solid foundation for peace requires that negotiators, including mediators, be much more demanding of their interlocutors with regard to the intangibles of ethnic symbolism and group emotions. Both sides in ethnic wars should expect not merely abandonment of provocative rhetoric by their opposite numbers, but explicit mutual acknowledgement of each side's own responsibility and of the other side's wounds. Mediators should fund and coordinate diverse programs of mutually reinforcing reconciliation initiatives led by NGOs and religious groups. Ultimately, leaders on both sides need to reconstruct their nationalist discourses to emphasize the strands that justify peace and reconciliation, sidelining the hostile discourses that lead back into the symbolic politics trap. At the same time, the societies themselves must rebuild their relationship into one that is cooperative enough to allow the solution of mutual problems and compatible with positive images and attitudes toward the other group.

Many of these tasks are, to be sure, long-term ones that take decades to fully bear fruit. That is as it must be: reconciliation is extremely difficult to achieve. However, conflict resolution is not merely about reaching agreements – it is about achieving enduring settlements. The job of conflict resolution is to create an atmosphere in which a settlement can be reached and be stable when implemented. In ethnic conflicts, characterized as they are by deep fear,

hatred, and resentment, the job realistically takes decades to be completed. Though their effectiveness is not yet fully known, reconciliation initiatives are the only tools that can even undertake that job.

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