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# Social Conflict: Some Basic Principles

Dean G. Pruitt\*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term “conflict” has two generally accepted meanings.<sup>1</sup> The first refers to overt conflict—an argument, fight, or struggle. The second refers to subjective conflict—Party’s perception that Party and Other have opposing beliefs or interests, or that Other has deprived or annoyed Party in some way. The latter concept is richer for theory building than the former, in that there are several strategies Party can employ in reaction to subjective conflict. Party can take a contentious approach and retaliate, or Party can try to impose its will on Other by means of an argument, demand, or threat. This strategy is very likely to lead to overt conflict. Instead of contending, Party can remain inactive or yield to Other, or Party can engage in problem solving, with the aim of finding a solution to the conflict that both of them can accept. One sometimes finds combinations of these strategies.

Contentious behavior, and hence overt conflict, is often unfairly maligned. When enacted in moderation, it has several positive virtues. It can discourage premature group decision making, as when Party defends its views until there has been full discussion of the issues. Conflict can facilitate a reconciliation of people’s legitimate interests, as when Party insists on what it finds important until Other is convinced or they have found a reasonable compromise. Indeed, without moderate overt conflict—and the resulting persuasion or compromise—there can be little progress in groups, organizations, and nations, and these entities may well fall apart. Avoidance of moderate conflict can lead, in the long run, to dissolution of a marriage or to civil war.

Conflict gets its bad reputation because overt conflict sometimes becomes too severe; heavy threats or violence are employed. People or property get hurt, relationships deteriorate, and some participants lose their health because their immune systems have been undermined. The problem in such cases is not conflict *per se*, but the escalation of conflict.

## II. ESCALATION

Escalation occurs when a party to a conflict uses heavier contentious tactics than before—demands in place of requests, angry statements in place of demands, threats in place of angry statements. Escalation sequences are often found where a

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1. See DEAN G. PRUITT & SUNG-HEE KIM, SOCIAL CONFLICT: ESCALATION, STALEMATE, AND SETTLEMENT (3d ed. 2004).

party becomes increasingly contentious over time.<sup>2</sup> Escalation sequences are sometimes unilateral, with Party doing all the escalating in response to persistent annoyance from Other. For example, the chair of a meeting that has gone astray might first suggest, "Let's get back to the topic," then demand, "Come on guys, let's talk about the topic," and finally get angry and pound on the table. Most escalation sequences are bilateral, though, with both sides escalating in tandem.

Bilateral escalation involves a conflict spiral, in which each side's escalation is a response to the other's most recent escalation—in other words, a vicious circle of blow and counterblow. An example of a conflict spiral follows.

Between 1978 and 1980 management and labor in a Kentucky coal mine operation were having a dispute.<sup>3</sup> During this two-year period the miners had engaged in twenty-seven wildcat strikes. Management had responded by firing miners and taking the union to court for breach of contract. In the end, 115 miners had gone to jail for a night. This not only failed to stop the strikes, but led to a wave of bomb threats, sabotage, and theft. Miners started bringing guns in their cars when they came to work.

Each hostile action in a conflict spiral adds a new grievance to the other side's list and makes the other side more hostile and punitive. This, in turn, provides a renewed basis for the first side's hostile action, and so on.

Most escalation sequences subside fairly quickly. Teachers go on strike and there are many ill-willed feelings, but finally they negotiate and patch up the problem. Husband and wife yell at each other over expenditures, but they finally talk it over and apologize. India and Pakistan posture at the border, but then the nations send peace delegations. However, if conflict spirals go too far or too long, escalation can become a semi-permanent affair, that is, an intractable conflict. Examples include the Kentucky coal mine conflict previously described, the conflict between 1968 and 1998 in Northern Ireland, and the long-standing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

What are the characteristics of conflicts that spiral out of control and become intractable? Often they involve one-sided vision: Each side blames the other for starting the conflict or for heating it up unduly. Each side sees itself in a unilateral escalation situation in which Other is the perpetual "aggressor" and Party is simply defending itself. In other words, there is no understanding of the conflict spiral, which means that there is no sense of responsibility to remedy it. An example of one-sided vision is former President Reagan's reply to the question of whether an arms race existed between the US and Russia: "There is no arms race; they are racing and we are simply trying to keep up."

Another common occurrence on the road to intractable conflict is that structural changes take place on one or both sides or in the community surrounding them. Structural changes are produced by escalation, and they keep escalation going. Some structural changes are in the psychological realm. Hostile attitudes and perceptions set in, trust breaks down, and new, more competitive goals de-

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2. See Dean G. Pruitt, *Conflict Escalation in Organizations*, in *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS* (Carsten K. W. De Dreu & Michele J. Gelfand eds., 2007).

3. WILLIAM URY, JEANNE M. BRETT, & STEPHEN B. GOLDBERG, *GETTING DISPUTES RESOLVED: DESIGNING SYSTEMS TO CUT THE COSTS OF CONFLICT* 101 (1988).

velop. One is no longer simply motivated to succeed in the conflict; one wants “to look better than, punish, discredit, defeat, or even destroy” the other party.<sup>4</sup>

If groups are involved in escalation, changes may also occur in normative and social structures within the groups. Hostile attitudes, perceptions, and goals often become group norms, which are perpetuated by the processes of norm enforcement. Furthermore, groups may become more mobilized as a reaction to continued conflict; it is often hard to put the genie back into the bottle once strong group identities are formed, group grievances are crystallized, group leaders emerge, and/or activist subgroups form. These structural changes frequently have functions for the people involved—there are vested interests in maintaining them. As a result, they tend to persist, keeping the conflict in a perpetually escalated state.

Structural changes may also occur in the community surrounding the parties. When conflict heats up, formerly neutral community members are often pulled to one or the other side of the controversy, a phenomenon known as “community polarization.”<sup>5</sup> The resulting social support reinforces both sides’ sense of grievance and hostility toward the other side, and can strengthen their capacity for aggressive action, encouraging further escalation. It also erodes the ranks of neutrals who might otherwise try to dampen the two sides’ tactics and mediate the conflict. The Cold War division of the world into supporters of the Soviet Union and of the West is a good example of community polarization.

Under what conditions do such one-sided vision and structural changes take place, leading to intractable conflict? Prejudice and bad initial relations between the parties are sometimes to blame. Research shows that people in distressed marriages are prone to retaliate when annoyed and, hence, are more likely to become involved in conflict spirals than those in happy marriages.<sup>6</sup> Groups are also more prone to escalation than are individuals.<sup>7</sup> When conflict is at the intergroup level, preexisting community structure also makes a difference. Varshney’s study of conflict in Indian cities found that escalation was much diminished in communities with integrated civic organizations—political parties, unions, and business associations—that had members from both sides of the tense Hindu-Muslim divide.<sup>8</sup> When Hindu-Muslim conflict arose, members of these crosscutting associations became active in fighting escalation and holding the community together.<sup>9</sup>

### III. CONFLICT RESOLUTION

One cannot possibly do justice to the immense topic of conflict resolution in this brief article, but an important aspect that is not well understood bears brief discussion: backchannel communication as a way of breaking logjams.

4. PRUITT & KIM, *supra* note 1, at 109.

5. JAMES S. COLEMAN, *COMMUNITY CONFLICT* 13 (1957).

6. Thomas N. Bradbury & Frank D. Fincham, *Attributions and Behavior in Marital Interaction*, 63 *J. OF PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 613-28 (1992).

7. Joseph M. Mikolic, John C. Parker, & Dean G. Pruitt, *Escalation in Response to Persistent Annoyance: Groups Versus Individuals and Gender Effects*, 72 *J. OF PERSONALITY AND SOC. PSYCHOL.* 151-63 (1997).

8. ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY, *ETHNIC CONFLICT AND CIVIC LIFE: HINDUS AND MUSLIMS IN INDIA* 283-86 (2002).

9. *Id.* at 212.

The author first encountered backchannel communication in some literature he read about labor-management contract negotiation<sup>10</sup> and some interviews he did about NASA procurement negotiation.<sup>11</sup> In the formal part of these negotiations, one typically finds a team of people on each side of the table. Each team has a laundry list of demands that are defended while the other team's laundry list is refuted. It is common for deadlocks to occur in such negotiations. Both sides want an agreement, but there is relatively little progress.

At this point, covert problem-solving often begins—informal, backchannel talks, with the aim of locating a mutually acceptable compromise. The head negotiators, or their deputies, have dinner together in an obscure restaurant or telephone each other and work out a deal they can sell to their respective teams. The key to success in such talks is that a small number of people are communicating privately while the main negotiation is still going on.

Backchannel communication has two benevolent consequences: (1) *Flexibility*. The parties can talk about what is most important to each of them and brainstorm about possible solutions to the problem without kibitzing from more hostile teammates and without fear of undermining their official negotiation positions. If the secret talks do not work, they can return to their official positions at the table without serious loss. (2) *Creativity*. Quiet, informal settings like restaurants or bars allow people to relax, which encourages the creative juices to flow. This may be the key to developing new ideas for workable compromises.

Backchannel communication is especially important when the conflicting parties are very hostile toward each other, as in intractable international conflicts and conflicts between governments and rebel groups. In such cases, it is difficult to start formal negotiation until there has been a lot of backchannel talk. This is partly because backchannel communication allows the parties to talk while continuing to fight; usually neither side is willing to stop fighting until they are fairly sure that an agreement can be reached. It is also partly because of the need for political cover. When relations between conflicting parties are seriously eroded, communication is often equated with disloyalty on both sides. Officials who are caught communicating with the other side are likely to lose their jobs, or worse. Hence, if they want to explore the feasibility of a negotiated settlement, they turn to backchannel talks and keep them as secret as possible.

If backchannel talks are successful, it becomes much easier to enter formal negotiation because there is reason to believe that the other side will make substantial concessions. This means that a ceasefire is feasible and political opponents are faced with a *fait accompli*. Without the political cover provided by backchannel talks, most severe conflicts would never be solved.

An example can be seen in the run-up to the 1998 negotiations that ended the thirty-year Northern Ireland conflict.<sup>12</sup> By the late 1980s it had become obvious to the two main players, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British gov-

10. See, e.g., EDWARD PETERS, STRATEGY AND TACTICS IN LABOR NEGOTIATIONS 159-60 (1955); RICHARD E. WALTON & ROBERT B. MCKERSIE, A BEHAVIORAL THEORY OF LABOR NEGOTIATIONS 174 (1965).

11. Dean G. Pruitt, *Indirect Communication and the Search for Agreement in Negotiation*, 1 J. OF APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 223, 225 (1971).

12. Dean G. Pruitt, *Readiness Theory and the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST (2007).

ernment, that victory could not be achieved on the battlefield. This led to back-channel talks, over a ten-year period, which culminated in the official negotiations. The problem of political cover was so great that the IRA and the British government communicated through chains of intermediaries rather than directly. Take, for example, this chain of communication: Sinn Fein (the political wing of the IRA) talked with the SDLP (a moderate, Catholic political party), which then talked with the government of the Irish Republic, which then talked with the British government. Such chains enhance secrecy by making it difficult for reporters to trace the communications and also improve communication by ensuring that each party in the chain is talking with people who understand, and to some extent sympathize, with what they are saying.<sup>13</sup>

Communication through these chains was so successful that each side became convinced that the other side wanted to end the conflict, that the form of the final negotiation was worked out, and that some preliminary agreements on substantive issues were developed. Finally, the two sides felt confident enough to declare a ceasefire and begin direct negotiations, into which the British brought representatives of the Protestant Northern Ireland community.

The Northern Ireland talks provide a possible model for moving toward negotiation with other ethno-nationalist terrorist groups, such as Hamas.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS: RELEVANCE TO THE MEDIA

Most people have a rather narrow model of escalated conflict, looking for the aggressor and the defender—the villain and the angel.<sup>15</sup> The media often are effective at challenging this perspective by presenting both sides of a conflict story. However, further sophistication could be built into reader perspectives by noting that conflict spirals are often at work in overt conflict and that one-sided vision and structural changes often keep these spirals going.

Popular understanding of conflict resolution also appears to be rather primitive. Take, for example, mediation—third-party assistance to people and groups who are trying to solve a conflict. Sophistication about this topic is certainly growing, as more contracts entail a mediation clause and more courts are offering mediation in civil cases. But many people still confuse mediation and arbitration, and few people voluntarily seek mediation when they are having a conflict.<sup>16</sup> Feature articles on community mediation centers and more attention to the role of mediators in solving particular conflicts would help the public better understand this important third-party service.

Reports on backchannel talks are seldom seen in the media, though these talks often play a big role in conflict resolution and should also be an element of popu-

13. Dean G. Pruitt, *Negotiation Between Organizations: A Branching Chain Model*, 10 NEGOTIATION J. 217, 222 (1994); Dean G. Pruitt, *Escalation, Readiness for Negotiation, and Third-Party Functions*, in ESCALATION AND NEGOTIATION IN INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS 256-57 (I. William Zartman & Guy Olivier Faure eds., 2005).

14. Dean G. Pruitt, *Negotiation with Terrorists*, 11 INT'L NEGOTIATION 370-94 (2006).

15. PRUITT & KIM, *supra* note 1, at 93.

16. In a survey we did 15 years ago, only 2% of undergraduates reported seeking anything like mediation when they were having a conflict. Mark E. Keating, Dean G. Pruitt, Rachel A. Eberle, & Joseph M. Mikolic, *Strategic Choice in Everyday Disputes*, 5 INT'L J. OF CONFLICT MGMT. 143-57 (1994).

lar understanding. However, there is an ethical issue present. Reporters who learn about ongoing secret talks (including secret mediation sessions) should not write stories about them, even if there is danger of being scooped. The reason for this is that publicity is likely to halt such talks and to discredit the leaders involved in them, thus prolonging the conflict and making it more likely to escalate or to stay escalated.

A case in point is a 1993 newspaper story written by an Irish journalist after considerable research, which revealed the existence of a secret channel of communication between Sinn Fein and British Intelligence through a mysterious intermediary called the “contact.”<sup>17</sup> The story was highly embarrassing to the British government, which issued a phony explanation for the contact that enraged Sinn Fein. As a result, the channel of communication was closed down. Had there not been an additional channel through the SDLP and the Irish government, this might well have set back the peace process. The journalist was surely behaving as reporters are supposed to—investigating and then publishing an important story—but the incident still poses an ethical issue. Secret talks that are moving toward settlement of a severe conflict should only be reported after they have occurred.

In short, conflict theory has much to offer to the mass media.

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17. EAMONN MALLIE & DAVID MCKITTRICK, *THE FIGHT FOR PEACE: THE SECRET STORY BEHIND THE IRISH PEACE PROCESS* 232-55 (1996).