

Acknowledging the Role of the US Department of State
English Language Fellows Program
In Incremental Conflict Resolution & Peacebuilding

Pamela M Creed, Ph.D.
University of Belgrade under the auspices of
the US Department of State
& Georgetown University

Introduction

Chris Hedges (2002), in his powerful book *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, writes a provocative argument for the appeal of war as a means to provide meaning in people's lives. He argues that young men often view going to war as a means of proving their manhood and worth as people – discovering and portraying their dignity. He argues that a relationship between war and lust exists. Battle is seductive because it empowers and feeds a cathartic unleashing of the senses and can restore a sense of dignity and meaning (Hedges).

Yet, while Hedges (2002) reminds us of the psychological and emotive forces that compel us to war, he also gives us reason to hope. War can provide meaning and purpose, he argues, but alternatives to violence exist. Human beings are also capable of finding meaning and purpose through love, connection and empathy. The 'aggressive structures of society' (Hedges) can transform and create positive channels of energy in place of violent ones. One means of creating those positive channels of energy is to dramatically increase the frequency of positive personal encounter between peoples of different nations. Encounter breeds empathy. And empathy might be the most powerful force for peace.

This paper argues for increased citizen diplomacy. While both hard and soft approaches provide tools for public diplomacy, we appear to be experiencing under the Obama Administration an attempt to shift the balance toward soft diplomacy, not only through broader, more inclusive and complex narratives, but through the strengthening of programs that support encounter and build empathy through citizen and cultural

diplomacy. In particular, this paper will highlight one academic exchange program that lies under the public radar. The United States English Language Fellow Program receives little attention beyond those people directly impacted by it, but it has, nonetheless, demonstrated promising success in improving relations between the US and other nations at the grass-roots level – building peace one person at a time.

Cultural Diplomacy and Peacebuilding from Below

While peace agreements are the work of political and government elites, these agreements often fail to transform conflicts from negative peace (absence of violence) to conditions of positive peace. In other words, effective, sustainable and transformative peacebuilding processes must include the empowerment of communities to build peace from the bottom up (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2005). Complex, multi-dimensional approaches are necessary to sustain peace through the development of long-term structures and relationships that become embedded in the culture. One important component of any effort for peacebuilding is the strengthening of local knowledge and wisdom through local actors and the nongovernmental sector. Citizen-based peacebuilding initiatives contribute to the opening of public space so that civil society can grow and relationships between peoples can improve (Ramsbotham, et al., 2005).

John Paul Lederach, (1997) Director of Eastern Mennonite University's Conflict Transformation Program, designed an integrated framework that captures the interdependence of this complex relationship between elites acting at the system level, individual actors at the relationship level, and middle actors negotiating between them at the subsystem level. He argues that peacebuilding initiatives must consider the needs and resources of all three levels and recognize that while each is unique, they are

interdependent; therefore, coordination and cooperation across all levels and activities is critical. Individuals working at the relationship level provide key information drawn from valuable human resources about immediate issues, attitudes and activities, and they can maximize benefits from institutional, cultural and informal networks that connect people with each other (Lederach, 1997, p. 60).

Building on the argument that cultural and informal networks form a significant part of an integrated peacebuilding process, Marc Gopin, the Director of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University's Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, argues for a new approach to peacebuilding that focuses heavily on citizen and cultural diplomacy – “incrementalism” or “incremental conflict resolution (ICR)” through social networks (Gopin, 2009). This approach differs significantly from approaches typically taken by NGO's or government agencies in that it establishes first-order goals and higher-order goals and practices. First-order goals address immediate challenges while higher-order goals address long-term transformation and ideals such as justice and the satisfaction of basic human needs. An important distinction from previous approaches, however, is that first-order goals would be evaluated independently and ‘without regard as to how events unfold in the long-term’ (Gopin, 2009, p. 65).

Gopin (2009) states that more than one first-order goal should be introduced and supported before moving toward higher-order goals. An example of a first-order goal might be people working together to build a house, or a teacher working with students on a common project. These types of ICR's should each be evaluated for their success individually and separately from the higher-order goals. New events or situations might

arise that interrupt or postpone higher-order goals, but that should not diminish the significance of any success experienced with first-order goals (Gopin).

This creative new approach to peacebuilding is liberating for the peacemaker because it frees the individual actor from the responsibility of uncontrollable circumstances that threaten to suspend higher-order goals without necessarily diminishing the impact of the positive incremental change (PIC) that may have resulted from one small intervention. Gopin (2009) argues that arithmetic plays a role here: “positive change transforms human social life with the steady accumulation of positive incremental change, given the right circumstances” (Gopin, 2009, p. 66).

One approach to ICR is through social networking. Gopin (2009) argues that people from adversarial groups who form surprising friendships and alliances can work together to teach, speak and intervene in conflicts and places of violence. Not only is their work influential at the grass-roots level, but their ‘pairing’ - the presence and witness of their friendship - “...becomes a living symbol of the vision they are proposing for the future” (Gopin, 2009, p. 73). This symbol is a force itself that repels violence and war while offering instead an alternative vision for meaning and purpose through friendship and common goals (Hedges, 2002; Gopin, 2009).

The US State Department Academic Fellowships and Incremental Peacebuilding

According to Lederach (1997) educators can play significant roles at the individual level of peacebuilding. Indeed, two educators from adversarial groups paired together to work on common goals, to learn from each other and to exchange cultural information is an excellent opportunity to promote the type of incremental conflict resolution or peacebuilding that Gopin (2009) argues is so critical to support higher-order

goals. The US State Department sponsors several academic exchange programs as part of its efforts to improve relations and foster peace between America and other nations. According to its website, <http://exchanges.state.gov/>, programs such as the Fulbright Program, the English Language Fellow Program, Specialist Program, Professional Exchanges, Cultural programs and summer work/travel programs all contribute to the goals of enhancing cultural understanding and awareness and building and improving relationships. These initiatives support individuals at the community level as they engage in creating common projects and relationship building with local actors, i.e., incremental conflict resolution practices.

The English Language Fellow Program is administered through local American Embassies or Consulates and is supported in part by Regional English Language Officers (RELOS). American educators are sent to specific countries and work in a variety of settings, such as Ministries of Education, universities, state schools and state educational institutions. The American educators are paired with host counterparts and together they work to implement a 10-month to two-year educational program (<http://exchanges.state.gov/englishteaching/index.html>). There are many opportunities for the Fellow to interact with the local population, build social networks and engage in various projects at the grass-roots level to enhance cultural understanding and foster relationship building. Mutually beneficial and positive personal encounters engender feelings of empathy, which slowly chip away at past images, attitudes and wounds.

The positive incremental change that occurs through academic and other exchange programs is evident to the people directly involved as their personal attitudes begin to shift and space opens for broader perspectives and understanding toward the

other. In 2003, the US Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), and the Office of Policy and Evaluation contracted with ORC Macro to conduct an independent evaluation of the English Language Fellows Program (Final Report, 2003). The report states that the program has “successfully promoted greater knowledge and understanding among American Fellows’ foreign students [and colleagues] of the English language and of the United States and its history, people and culture. In addition, the Program has effectively contributed to increased understanding between the people of the United States and people of participating countries” (Final Report, 2003, p. iii).

In particular, the study found that 90% of Fellows gain a new perspective on their host country and approximately 40% gain a completely new understanding of the country’s culture, language, society, government and politics. The study further finds that at least half of the fellows believe their contribution to strengthening US relations with the host country and to developing friendly, empathetic relations is significant (Final Report, 2003).

The Fellows Program is legislated through the Fulbright-Hays Act. The goals of this act are:

- To enable the US Government to increase mutual understanding between people of the United States and people of other countries.
- To strengthen the ties that unite people of the United States with other nations.
- To promote international cooperation for educational and cultural advancement.
- To assist in the development of ‘friendly, sympathetic and peaceful relations between the United States and the other countries of the world’ (Final Report, 2003).

The legislative intent of the Fellows Program, according to this report, has been successfully met. There were three recommendations for the program: first, that it be continued and expanded because the program was found to be very important to meeting State Department foreign policy needs; secondly, the program should increase its presence in countries where large segments of the population are anti-American because the study found the program to be "...essential to foster democracy and break down the barriers that divide Americans and people of other countries; and finally, Fellows should be given opportunities for multiple fellowships to help prepare Fellows to better meet the Program's legislative goals of increasing mutual understanding, friendly relations, and strengthening ties that unite (Final Report, 2003, p. 55). This year, 2010 -2011, the Program is funding 176 Fellows in 83 countries.

The Fellow Program consists of first-order goals and higher-order goals. A long-term higher-order goal of the US State Department is, as seen above, to "advance the larger goal of reaching mutual understanding among nations" (elf.georgetown.edu/program_background.html). While first-order goals such as enhancing English teaching capacity and sharing information about American values, culture and government are more easily quantifiable and measurable, the impact of incremental steps toward positive change through activities that promote the higher-order goals may be more difficult to assess within the overall context of each situation.

My experience as a Fellow corroborates the findings in the 2003 Final Report. When I arrived in Belgrade, Serbia I knew nothing of the language and little of the culture. I was familiar with some history – mostly concerning WWI, WWII and the recent regional wars in which Serbia played a significant role. During the 1990s, Serbia,

Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo endured violent ethnic conflict in what was, to many, a civil war that spawned brutal ethnic cleansing and in isolated cases, genocide. The Dayton Peace Accords ended the fighting in Bosnia-Herzegovina but established structurally, a negative peace. While the last decade has brought much stability to the region, ethnic separation remains institutionally sanctioned in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska as well as in Kosovo. Ethnic tensions and bitter memories still remain throughout the region. In addition, the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 as a response to Serbian aggression in Kosovo led to collective anger toward and resentment of President Clinton and the US. These feelings were exacerbated in 2008 when Kosovo declared its independence and received immediate recognition and support from the US.

By the time I arrived, in 2009, much of the anti-American sentiment in urban areas had dissipated as people were trying to get on with their lives in a new Serbia. But outside the cities and beneath the surface within the cities, anti-Americanism and indeed, resentment toward Western European countries as well, quietly festers. As I have lived and worked in Belgrade during the last year and a half, I have had the opportunity to interact with many Serbians in my community and around Serbia itself. Many of them have shared their stories, their hopes and their fears with me. In exchange, I have brought news of America and stories of American life and society. But perhaps most importantly, my presence becomes symbolic of America. In each of my encounters with locals space opens between us for new perspectives of both past and present while a more complex understanding of the other develops. Shared histories are created, common goals for the future are discovered and awareness of the other is broadened. Through

encounter and talk the seeds of a new emotion are planted – empathy. As the conversations and interactions ensue, empathy is nurtured and ties strengthened.

As part of my Fellowship I enjoy some financial and logistical support from the US Embassy in Belgrade and the RELO in Hungary. As I have come to know Serbians, Bosnians and Kosovars, my interest in their common, shared future has shifted from the abstract to the personal. Working with local actors, both colleagues and friends, and with the support of the US Embassy Belgrade, I travel to different parts of Serbia teaching American values, history and government. This year I have partnered with an Albanian Serb in Southern Serbia on a project to bring Serbian, Albanian and Roma youth together for six workshops in Conflict Resolution training. In addition, I will partner with another Fellow in Kosovo on a project to create a social networking site that will bring together Serbians and Kosovars at the university level in a yearlong on-line dialogue. Students will have the opportunity to get to know each other on a personal level and explore topics that have traditionally divided them.

There is evidence that these types of first-order activities yield positive results that support the higher-order goals of sustained, positive peace throughout this region. The Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Serbia recently organized a dialogue for better relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Five students from Pristina spent three days in Belgrade and were hosted by the Faculty of Political Science. Students from Serbia also spent time in Pristina. A journalist with the local news station B92, Misa Stojilkovic, moderated the debriefing. The outcome was overwhelming positive with students reporting such experiences as feeling surprised to learn how much they had in common and that they could be friends. Some of the young people commented that such activities

‘build bridges between people’ and help raise awareness for ‘people who are not aware of current problems’. One student commented that ‘politicians are using people for their own interests’ [but] ‘the best ways to break stereotypes is to start talking about cooperation’ (B92, 2010).

More collaborative projects such as the YiHR initiative and the smaller models that I have initiated through the support of the Fellowship and local actors should be promoted. One of my first-order goals as a Fellow in my second year is to harness the opportunities in human resources I have cultivated over the last year to bring people together in dialogue. These dialogues will take place in English, which has become a potential tool as a common (and in some cases neutral) language. The aim of the on-going dialogues is to foster mutual understanding and explore shared values and goals. It is my hope that support for projects such as these will increase so that more young people have the opportunity to encounter each other each year. Positive peace cannot be sustained by political and economic agreements at the top level alone, but through thoughtful integrated approaches, which include efforts toward positive incremental change that only encounter and the cultivation of empathy can generate.

Conclusion

In 2005 I interviewed American veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, many of whom had served more than one combat tour. Some of the veterans I interviewed had transformed during the course of their service from self-identified ‘warriors’ to peace activists. How did such a transformation come about?

Listening to their stories was compelling. Chris Hedges (2002) articulated what many of these soldiers unwittingly described to me through their stories: war can indeed

provide meaning, dignity and purpose. One veteran described his reaction to 9/11 and his desire to go to Afghanistan to fight:

...I couldn't wait for us to respond. So I was excited about getting over there and seeing (inaudible) and making some kind of a difference. I didn't want it to be a small response. I wanted it to be big, make my presence known and let them know that okay, don't do that again..." (Participant 11 in Creed, 2009, p. 183).

Another soldier captures the myth of the glory of war: "I had this optimistic picture of how it would look without Saddam Hussein, with like Alexander the Great rolling over these hordes of evil-doers in chariots and rebuilding the entire land in some brand new American way" (Participant 5 in Creed, 2009, p. 191).

Eventually these veterans and many with similar stories of how they felt before the war returned home opposed to it. As they shared their emotional stories replete with fear, roadside bombings, torture, and killing, they also shared stories of far less violent encounter. Their stories shared an important element of otherwise violent and tragic episodes: the everyday encounter with Iraqi and Afghani fathers, mothers and children. Mothers who risked coming into the street to offer them bread; men who shared their water, gave them directions or told them the stories of their lives. Through even the smallest moments of encounter the enemy slowly morphed into human beings. Images of evil-doers and aliens faded as these soldiers began to see instead people just trying to live their lives in terrifying circumstances. Slowly, a new emotion emerged – empathy. Some soldiers squelched the budding feeling and fought to retain their resolute hardness,

often as a means of self-preservation, but many let it come until it engulfed and transformed them (Creed, 2009).

The global image of the US was seriously damaged as a result of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and anti-Americanism continues to grow and harden in many parts of the world. Regional, religious and ethnic conflicts have increased dramatically during the last twenty years. We need creative, integrated approaches to peacebuilding all over the world. As Hedges (2002) reminds us and as my own research and experiences as an American Fellow in Serbia demonstrate, war does provide meaning – but so too, do love, connection and empathy. In successfully creating positive increments of change, we begin slowly restoring a sense of dignity, meaning and purpose amongst divided, marginalized or wounded people (Gopin, 2009; Hedges; Creed, 2009). Through encounter we do what rarely can be done at the elite levels of power: cultivate empathy and so strengthen the roots of an ever-fragile peace – one person at a time.

Resources

- B92 TV News Channel. (2010, October 28). Debriefing of Youth Initiative for Human Rights. Aired October 28, 2010, 9:00 pm.
- Creed, P. (2009). *Myth, memory and militarism: The evolution of an American war narrative*. (Doctoral dissertation, George Mason University, 2009).
- English Language Fellows Program. (2010). Retrieved October 29, 2010 from http://elf.georgetown.edu/program_background.html
- Final Report. (2003, October). Evaluation of the English language fellows program. Calverton, MD: ORC Macro.
- Gopin. M. (2009). *To make the earth whole*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishes, Inc.
- Hedges, C. (2002). *War is a force that gives us meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Public Affairs.
- Lederach, J.P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., & Miall, H. (2008). *Contemporary conflict resolution*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- US Department of State. (2010). Academic Programs. Retrieved October 29, 2010 from <http://exchanges.state.gov/englishteaching/index.html>

