

**Conflict Resolution and Power Politics
Global Conflict After the Cold War
Two Lectures**

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Forward

The two public lectures contained in this working paper were presented by Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution faculty member Richard E. Rubenstein at the University of Malta. "Conflict Resolution and Political Power" was presented in Valletta, Malta, on January 12, 1995, under the sponsorship of the International Foundation. "Global Conflict After the Cold War" was given on November 30, 1994, at Sir Teri Zammit Hall, Msida, under the auspices of the University of Malta's Department of Sociology.

Malta's continuing interests in international peacemaking and conflict resolution are well known throughout the world. Almost from the time it became independent, this former British colony saw itself as a force for peace in the Mediterranean region: a natural bridge between Europe and North Africa, the First World and the Third. Pursuing these interests, Maltese public officials and academics have played a leading role in negotiating international agreements on the Law of the Sea and on environmental security. They have reached out to the Islamic nations and to Israel and have convened important conferences on Mediterranean regional problems. In fall 1994, I was pleased to attend the annual meeting of the International Peace Research Association hosted in Valletta by the University of Malta's Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies.

Richard Rubenstein spent a sabbatical semester in Malta at the invitation of a number of key figures interested in conflict resolution, including the University's Rector, Fr. Peter Serracino Inglott, Chair of the Department of Sociology; Fr. Joe Inguanez, and Director of the International Office, former Ambassador Leslie Agius. Professor Rubenstein lectured to university students in sociology, psychology, public policy, and law and to diplomats studying at the Mediterranean Institute for Diplomatic Studies. In addition, he presented the public lectures that are published here, which were attended by high-ranking government officials as well as by members of the university community and the general public. A lively discussion followed each presentation.

Richard E. Rubenstein received his B.A. degree from Harvard College, his M.A. from Oxford, and his J.D. from Harvard Law School. Professor of Conflict Resolution and Public Affairs at George Mason University since 1987, he is a former director of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. His books include *Rebels in Eden: Mass Political Violence in the United States* (1970); *Alchemists of Revolution: Terrorism in the Modern World* (1987); and *Comrade Valentine* (1994). He is an author of the recent ICAR monograph, "Frameworks for Interpreting Conflict: A Handbook for Journalists" (1994). His current research focuses on the causes of global religious conflict.

The Institute is pleased to publish these important lectures, which advance inquiry in our field in two difficult and relatively unexplored areas: the relationship of conflict resolution theory and practice to power politics and the sources of socioeconomic conflict in the post-Cold War environment. As usual, Professor Rubenstein has taken well-reasoned, con-

troversial positions that should stimulate much-needed debate. We will be happy to hear from readers about their reactions to these ideas.

Those wishing to quote from these lectures or to reprint them in whole or in part should feel free to do so, provided that proper attribution is made to the author and to the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution.

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Conflict Resolution and Power Politics

Conflict resolution is a new field of study and practice that seeks to resolve serious social conflicts by assisting the conflicting parties to identify and solve the problems that generate violent or destructive behavior. At George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, we are working to develop more penetrating, comprehensive, and useful theories of intergroup conflict and to test and improve them by acting as mediators or facilitators in a wide variety of conflict situations. Many other institutions, I am happy to report, are similarly engaged. There are now some 20 university-based centers specializing in conflict resolution in the United States, and perhaps 50 more worldwide. The University of Malta's new Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies is a welcome addition to this growing number.

At ICAR, we focus primarily on internal or transnational conflicts of the sort that are sometimes called "intractable" or "deep-rooted," signifying that they resist resolution by ordinary military or political methods. During the past few years, my faculty colleagues and I, together with a number of our graduate students, have involved ourselves as consultants to the parties or facilitators in connection with violent racial, ethnic, religious, and class-based struggles both in the United States and abroad. What I have to say here grows out of these theory-building efforts and practical experiences. The relationship of conflict resolution to power politics is a subject that concerns us greatly both as scholars and as practitioners.

Conflict Resolution, Management, and Settlement

Let me begin with a distinction that may seem "academic" but has proved vital to our work. We are accustomed to distinguishing between the resolution, management, and settlement of conflicts. Conflict *resolution* attempts to get at the root causes of destructive conflict and to eliminate them — if necessary, by altering the system that embodies or produces them. Conflict *management* aims at moderating or "civilizing" the effects of conflict without necessarily uprooting its causes. And conflict *settlement* interrupts hostilities for the time being without either identifying their underlying sources or creating a system of conflict management.¹

Using these definitions, it is easy to see that much of what is often called "conflict resolution" is really conflict settlement. Not long ago, for example, former U.S. president Jimmy Carter procured an agreement by which the generals then ruling Haiti agreed to leave the country in exchange for certain guarantees of personal and economic security. President Aristide, whom they had deposed, was then returned to office. That agreement represented a temporary settlement of the long-standing conflict between the Haitian military establishment and the social forces supporting it, and President Aristide and the social forces supporting him. Obviously, it did not resolve the underlying class struggle that for centuries has made Haiti a social and political battleground. Conflict resolution requires, above all,

that all parties' basic human needs be satisfied. Only when ways are found to satisfy the needs of all Haitians for identity, security, solidarity, justice, and development will we be able to speak of that conflict being resolved.

The Haitian agreement is instructive for another reason — it teaches us something about the relationship between conflict settlement and political power. It seems clear that the generals would not have stepped down without the exercise of power by the United States, which took the form of political efforts to isolate Haiti, economic sanctions against the military regime, a naval blockade to interdict the shipment of military goods, and, finally, a threat by President Clinton to invade the country, if necessary, to restore President Aristide to office. The relationship between conflict settlement and coercion, as this example suggests, is intimate and direct. Conflicts can be *settled* temporarily by victory on the battlefield, credible threats to use force, or power-based negotiations. But they can be *resolved* only when their causes have been identified and eliminated. For this reason, the relationship between conflict resolution and power politics is problematic and complex.

Common sense sometimes tells us that any settlement is better than continued bloodletting or that, as the saying goes, "It is better to jaw, jaw, jaw than to war, war, war." A conflict settlement may be a step on the road to resolution, as we hope that the Haitian settlement will be...but, then again, it may not. Settlements sometimes make things worse. To the extent that it ignores or exacerbates the underlying problems generating the conflict, a temporary peace can lay the groundwork for greatly escalated violence. For example, the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, led by a fairly direct route to the rise of Hitler and the outbreak of World War II.

In this respect, one may also compare the Haitian settlement just mentioned with the far more complex agreement negotiated in 1993 by representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the government of Israel. Both agreements, obviously preliminary and partial, raised popular expectations for full conflict resolution. Both generated considerable pressure on negotiators to travel further along that road. But both were arrived at, in part, by pushing aside the most difficult problems: *systemic* obstacles to peaceful cooperation like Haiti's endemic poverty and quasi-colonial status, the collapse of the Gazan economy, and the continued presence of large numbers of Israeli settlers on the West Bank and in Gaza.

The tendency to base a settlement on existing common ground between the parties, leaving more difficult problems for later determination, is certainly understandable. One wants to start somewhere, especially in cases of long-lasting, seemingly unresolvable conflict. But it is important to recognize that the faith that motivates this diplomatic strategy is often blind. Following a long-sought settlement, otherwise realistic and worldly statesmen can frequently be heard discussing "the momentum of the peace process," as if some sort of Newtonian law of dynamics were operating to convert a partial, often superficial agreement into a comprehensive, lasting peace. Unfortunately, no such law exists. Events in Israel/Palestine have already demonstrated that other issues previously pushed aside will have to be faced sooner rather than later if escalated violence is to be avoided. Similarly, unless economic reconstruction lays the basis for sustained autonomous development in Haiti, that

