Ambassador John W. McDonald

The Track Not Taken
Personal Reflections on State Department Intransigence and Conflict Resolution

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THE INSTITUTE FOR MULTI-TRACK DIPLOMACY
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By
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Fifty years of experience dealing with a variety of bureaucracies have led me to conclude that no bureaucracy ever changes voluntarily. When a small shift does occasionally take place, it is usually because of pressure from an outside source or, less frequently, because of leadership from the top of an organization. The field of foreign affairs is no exception to this rule. For 15 years, I have sought to change the way the US Department of State’s bureaucracy thinks about and manages international ethnic conflicts. The State Department has failed to acknowledge, institutionally, the positive role that non-governmental organizations, skilled in the art of conflict resolution, can play in this critical and sensitive arena.
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Tracks That Meet

In 1983, toward the end of my 40-year diplomatic career, I was assigned to the newly formed Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs, one of the State Department’s most innovative structures. I began to explore the role of private citizens in the field of foreign affairs. Some months before, my friend and colleague, Joe Montville of the State Department’s Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs, had coined the phrase “Track Two” diplomacy, another name for citizen diplomacy.

Track One diplomacy, the object of most of my career, is formal, official, government-to-government interaction between designated representatives of sovereign states. Track Two, on the other hand, is non-governmental, informal, and unofficial. It entails interaction between private citizens or groups of people within a country or from different countries, all outside the formal government power structure. Track Two aims to reduce or resolve conflict by decreasing the anger, tension, and fear between peoples by improving communication and understanding of the other side’s point of view. In no way is Track Two a substitute for Track One: instead, it complements and parallels the goals of Track One.

I pursued my interest in citizen diplomacy at the Center for The Study of Foreign Affairs and organized the first symposium on Track Two diplomacy in February 1985, bringing together a number of eminent Track Two practitioners—all private citizens—to tell their stories. The book over-viewing the symposium, called Conflict Resolution: Track Two Diplomacy, was ready for publication a few months later but was not published by the State Department until May 1987. The State Department had a turf problem: certain officials did not want a government publication acknowledging that there is an alternative way to do diplomatic business. This basic stubborn attitude has not institutionally changed since 1985. There have only been a few exception to this inertia over the past 15 years.

The United States Information Agency (USIA) has, for example, managed to shift its thinking dramatically. In February 1994, I learned that the agency’s new director was interested in innovating in the field of conflict resolution. I briefed ten USIA employees about the field in March, and on May 16, 1994, the director approved the creation of a new, agency-wide Conflict Resolution Project Team and
asked its members to meet with experts in this field. Unfortunately, the team collapsed in a matter of months, the victim of transfers and budget cuts. However, one arm of USIA, the International Visitors Program, moved enthusiastically into the arena. Over the years, it has brought several hundred leaders from Africa, Asia, and Latin America to the United States to learn about conflict resolution and Track Two diplomacy.

But the agency’s efforts were not well appreciated. On September 20, 1996, USIA tried to impact the State Department’s thinking by hosting a seminar at the State Department on “Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Linking Track One and Track Two Diplomacy.” It was a failure—ten people showed up.

An alternative approach of reevaluating attitudes about diplomacy has been taken by the Agency for International Development (AID), through the personal leadership of its last Administrator, J. Brian Atwood, who created a new entity in AID called the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). One of the most innovative models in the AID’s long history, it has been able to help swiftly and effectively in crisis situations involving ethnic conflict, working in Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Indonesia, and other troubled areas.

On the other hand, AID’s efforts in East Africa never got off the ground because of middle management inertia, lack of understanding about how to cope with a regional problem, and the failure to create a structure, like OTI, which could cut across Bureau lines.

The State Department’s only bright spot has been the consistent role of the Foreign Service Institute in training young diplomats in negotiation and conflict resolution. They still use books and articles like Conflict Resolution: Track Two Diplomacy, Guidelines for Newcomers to Track Two Diplomacy, and “How to be a Delegate: International Conference Diplomacy.” The problem is that almost no senior diplomat or top manager has ever taken these courses. It will be years before young diplomats with Track Two education will rise in the ranks to top policy positions where they might make a substantial difference.

The State Department’s Open Forum has also done yeoman’s service over the years by sporadically sponsoring an Interagency Working Group on Conflict Resolution. The major problem with such group is that they have never attracted the attention of the top brass, so their work and ideas go unnoticed.

The last concerned effort to change the State Department’s thinking took place shortly after Madeleine Albright became secretary of state. The leaders of ten distinguished non-governmental organizations working in the field of conflict resolution signed a letter to Secretary Albright on January 30, 1997. They urged her to adopt “a new basic national policy of emphasizing the United States’ commitment to the prevention of violent conflict.” The letter suggested the establishment of a “government-private-sector task force that would recommend long-term, strategic approaches to prevent violent conflicts.” The signatories offered to
help carry out these recommendations and even attached a draft agenda, putting forward some suggestions for action.

The letter was answered by the director of the Policy Planning Staff some seven months later. He responded that the State Department already incorporates conflict prevention and resolution techniques into its daily activities, but suggested that the concerned parties please, keep in touch.

This flippant response reminded me of my first meeting with the senior staff of the International Labor Organization in Geneva, in 1974. As the new deputy director-general, I was shocked to see that there was only one woman among the 80 people who attended the meeting. Knowing that the ILO constitution said that the mission of the organization was to represent the rights of the workers of the world and that 53 percent of those workers were women, I questioned how their rights could be protected by the staff when women were so underrepresented. I was told by dozens of men over the course of the next several weeks that they were always concerned about women’s rights.

The real irony about the institutional malaise at the State Department is that each signatory of the letter to the secretary of state has many stories to tell about how US ambassadors in the field, in country after country, admire, respect, and honor the work done by US conflict-resolution NGOs. In fact, many of the ambassadors want more help but do not have sufficient funds.

The sad truth is that the State Department is being left behind intellectually and institutionally. Canada, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and other foreign offices now have special units, offices, ambassadors, and even special funds committed to examining problems of ethnic conflict, conflict resolution, and preventative diplomacy in an organized and thoughtful fashion. Even the World Bank, though often maligned by the United States, established under James Wolfensohn’s able leadership a highly effective Post-Conflict Unit, with sufficient funds and staff to begin reforming the way the Bank views conflict situations.

Three Deadly Sins

Why is foreign policy so difficult? The crux of the answer lies in our negotiating style and attitude. In particular, three areas need considerable improvement.

First, most diplomats from other nations believe that the United States is the most arrogant nation in the world. The fact that the United States is the only true superpower remaining obviously feeds this image. This power-based arrogance is projected by US negotiators across the conference table at international gatherings, and is often seen by others as second nature. We seem to project the idea that we are superior to other peoples because we have led the world for 50 years and know that we are the best in everything we do. Many Americans are
actually surprised when they are accused by non-Americans of arrogance and frequently take exception to this criticism, only exacerbating this attitude.

The recent World Trade Organization Conference in Seattle is an excellent demonstration of this arrogance. I have never heard of a world conference where the head of the United States delegation and the president of the conference was the same person, as was the case in Seattle. The reason for keeping the two posts separate is because the two roles have entirely different agendas. The US delegate aims to pursue the US agenda, whereas the president must try to reach global consensus with regard to the agenda so that the conference can succeed. The merging of the two roles in Seattle only fed the image of US dominance of the trade agenda, and contributed to the conference’s failure.

As another small indicator of US arrogance, each time I taught a weeklong course on negotiation at the Foreign Service Institute, I was astonished to learn that usually only about two of the twenty-two students were actually foreign-service officers from the State Department. Year in and year out, the other twenty were from other government agencies who knew their offices did not negotiate well and wanted help. I discussed my concerns on several occasions with senior officials of the Department, who actually denied that training could be of any assistance to a real diplomat. “You are either born with these skills or you learn them by the seat of your pants,” I was told on more than one occasion. I have even attended several meetings in recent years where leading US diplomats have rejected the importance of culture and cross-cultural understanding as an important part of modern diplomacy. Some have gone on to deny that an understanding of the world’s religions could be helpful to our negotiators.

Second, Americans are the most impatient people in the world. This inhibits our negotiating style so much that the rest of the world recognizes and takes advantage of this shortcoming at every opportunity.

One of our distinguished US ambassadors to the United Nations once told the story of a visit she made to East Asia some years ago to get Asian leaders’ opinions about when Vietnamese forces might withdraw from Cambodia. Leader after leader said they expected action “soon.” When Americans think of the meaning of “soon”, they usually mean tomorrow night, or perhaps next weekend. She finally asked what the Asian leaders’ time frame was. The consistent reply: “Oh, in the next five to ten years!” Some years ago, when Henry Kissinger was negotiating with the Vietnamese in Paris, the State Department thought it was doing a very wise thing by renting a house for Mr. Kissinger for a year.

The Vietnamese, with a substantially different time horizon, bought a house in Paris.

Finally, American diplomats are bad listeners. This closely relates to their impatience and arrogance. “Why should we listen carefully?” they ask. “We already know what is good for you, and we will be pleased to tell you what your
needs are and how we can fix those needs.” Because we have not developed good
listening skills, which require patience, American diplomats are perceived as
superficial, uninterested in other points of views, and therefore arrogant.

Listening skills can be learned. A few years ago, I was invited to moderate
a day-long meeting between three Sinhalese leaders and three Tamil leaders, on
the Sri Lankan civil war. I knew the two factions had been making political state-
ments aimed at each other because they never listened. In order to have a produc-
tive dialogue, I proposed that the Tamil leader speak first, allowed to talk for only
ten minutes. The Sinhalese leader would then have to summarize that statement,
in two minutes, to the satisfaction of the Tamil leaders. The roles would then be
reversed.

The process worked. The Tamil leader used his time wisely. He made not a
single political statement in his allotted ten minutes focusing instead on what he
considered to be the root causes of the conflict. Then the Sinhalese official, with
some difficulty, summarized his counterpart’s remarks in two minutes to the
Tamil leader’s satisfaction. The roles were then reversed and the Sinhalese official
used his time in the same fashion. Instead of making political statements, he
directly addressed the root causes of the conflict from his prospective. The Tamil
leader, also with difficulty, summarized in two minutes what he had heard to the
satisfaction of the other groups. For the first time in their lives, each knew that the
other had heard him. It set the tone for the day. No inflammatory statements were
made during the entire meeting, and all participants focused on the basic issues
each side had raised. That day had a positive influence on the conflict for at least
the next six months.

In my experience, Track Two practitioners are not arrogant. They put their
egos aside, are extremely patient, and listen well. Instead of telling those across
the negotiating table what their needs are, they inquire about those need and
listen attentively to the response. Only by carefully exploring conflict areas in
specific situations can policymakers determine if an outsider can be helpful. If
there is a mutual decision among all parties to move forward together, then Track
Two can compel leaders to initiate a long-term commitment to peace.

Track Two diplomats also know there is no such thing as a quick fix. There
are no magic wands in diplomacy; it takes time, skill, and patience to build trust
and impact lives. Diplomats must change the way a group of people thinks about
“the enemy” to help them realize that the enemy is also human with equivalent
hopes and fears. Track Two diplomats deal with people, not institutions. They do
not aim to solve the political issues of a conflict: that is Track One’s job. The two
tracks are different, but they can work together constructively.
Policy for the New Conflict

Over the past decade, the nature of conflict has shifted away from inter-state conflict to intra-state conflict. The problem is that the State Department has not shifted to meet these new challenges. There are 35 ethnic conflicts in the world today, in which thousands of people will be killed this year. However, only three of these conflicts are in the press at any one time. We currently read about Kosovo, Chechyna and East Timor is fading fast. What about the other 32 intra-state conflicts? Track One diplomats do not want to acknowledge that these problems exist because they do not know what to do about them.

A ray of hope emerged recently. When the G-8 foreign ministers met in Berlin in December 1999, they issued a statement to the effect that conflict prevention would now be a priority on their political agenda “for years to come.” “Recent regional conflicts and their history,” they recognized, “have demonstrated time and again that we do not lack ‘early warning’ but ‘early decision,’ and long-term concrete and sustainable strategies of prevention.” The delegates even agreed to assess the role of non-governmental organizations in the years ahead.

What will be the State Department’s response to this commitment?
Ambassador John W. McDonald

Ambassador John W. McDonald is a lawyer, diplomat, former international civil servant, development expert and peacebuilder, concerned about world social, economic and ethnic problems. He spent twenty years of his career in Western Europe and the Middle East and worked for sixteen years on United Nations economic and social affairs. He is currently Chairman and co-founder of the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, in Washington D.C., which focuses on national and international ethnic conflicts. In February, 1992, he was named Distinguished Visiting Professor at George Mason University’s Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, in Fairfax, Virginia.

McDonald retired from the Foreign Service in 1987, after 40 years as a diplomat. In 1987-88, he became a Professor of Law at The George Washington University Law School in Washington, D.C. He was Senior Advisor to George Mason University’s Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution and taught and lectured at the Foreign Service Institute and the Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs. From December, 1988, to January, 1992, McDonald was President of the Iowa Peace Institute in Grinnell, Iowa and was a Professor of Political Science at Grinnell College.

In 1983, Ambassador McDonald joined the State Department’s newly formed Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs as its Coordinator for Multilateral Affairs, and lectured and organized symposia on the art of negotiation, multilateral diplomacy and international organizations. He has written or edited eight books on negotiation and conflict resolution.

From 1978-83, he carried out a wide variety of assignments for the State Department in the area of multilateral diplomacy. He was President of the INTELSAT World Conference called to draft a treaty on privileges and immunities; leader of the U.S. Delegation to the UN World Conference on Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries, in Buenos Aires in 1978; Secretary General of the 27th Colombo Plan Ministerial Meeting; head of the U.S. Delegation which negotiated a UN Treaty Against the Taking of Hostages; U.S. Coordinator for the UN Decade on Drinking Water and Sanitation; head of the U.S. Delegation to UNIDO III in New Delhi in 1980; Chairman of the Federal Inter-Agency Committee for the UN’s International Year of Disabled Persons, 1981; U.S. Coordinator and head of the U.S. Delegation for the UN’s World Assembly on Aging, in Vienna, in 1982.

From 1974-78, he was Deputy Director General of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Geneva, Switzerland, a UN Agency, with responsibility for managing that agency’s 3,200 person Secretariat, coming from 102 countries, with programs in 120 member nations, and an annual budget of $135 million. From 1947-1974, Ambassador McDonald held various State Department assignments in Berlin, Frankfurt, Bonn, Paris, Washington D.C., Ankara, Tehran, Karachi, and Cairo. Ambassador McDonald holds both a B.A. and a J.D. degree from the University of Illinois, and graduated from the National War College in 1967. He was appointed Ambassador twice by President Carter and twice by President Reagan to represent the United States at various UN World Conference