

# 2012 INTERNATIONAL ADVOCATE FOR PEACE AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

*John Marks\**

Worldwide, tens of millions of people are caught up in violent conflict, and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, die every year as a direct result. Violence has a profoundly negative impact on the whole planet, even when it occurs in remote places. Where there is violence, lives and livelihoods are shattered; economic development is blocked; human rights are abused; and the environment is devastated. Consequently, preventing violence is a necessary precursor for humanity to move forward in positive ways. Current problems—whether economic, ethnic, or environmental—are too complex and inter-connected to be settled on a violent, adversarial basis. The earth is clearly running out of space, resources, and recuperative capacity to deal with wasteful conflict. This is not a fringe issue. It is in everyone's best interest to build peace.

Conflict is, in fact, a completely normal part of human interaction, and it often serves as a catalyst for constructive change and growth. When individuals—or countries—respond non-violently to conflict, good things usually happen. The challenge is not to try the impossible—to eliminate conflict—but to defuse it peacefully and, eventually, to transform it.

In 1982, at the height of the Cold War, like so many people, I was concerned the United States and the Soviet Union might literally blow up the world. In those confrontational days, I founded Search for Common Ground. We started with only two staff members, including me. We had a tiny office, and our main work was to improve U.S.-Soviet relations. Today, we have a staff of 600, working out of 50 offices in 30 countries. Yet, despite our growth, we have remained true to our founding mission: To transform the way

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the world deals with conflict—away from adversarial, win-lose approaches and towards win-win, collaborative problem-solving.

We are committed to long-term engagement to help resolve and transform even the most intractable conflicts. We work with local partners to strengthen the capacity of whole societies to prevent violence. We have a truly remarkable staff, which is driven by a shared passion to create a better world.

All our programs are firmly rooted in the societies they serve. We do not believe in parachuting in expertise from outside. We think that people resident in a particular country can best carry out conflict prevention. Unlike many organizations, we seek to build a lasting presence in each country where we work. For example, two of our oldest country programs—Ukraine and Macedonia—have been operating for over fifteen years, and they still are implementing projects that are similar in concept to those from our early days. Now, however, no expatriates are present, and our offices have turned into local NGOs. Similarly, the center for conflict prevention that we started in Gaza has evolved into an independent, self-supporting Palestinian NGO, which continues to promote non-violent peace building under very difficult circumstances.

Our methodology is rooted in a simple idea: *Understand the differences and act on the commonalities*. Within this framework, we have developed a diverse toolbox that includes such traditional conflict resolution techniques as mediation, training, facilitation, and back-channel negotiation—along with unconventional ones involving radio and TV production, music, sports, outdoor activities and community organizing. We believe that violent conflict grows out of stereotyping, demonizing, and dehumanizing, and we regard popular culture to be among the most useful tools to reverse the process. Thus, we produce TV and radio soap operas that communicate messages of mutual respect, tolerance, nonviolence, and collaborative problem-solving. We also make music videos that have become theme songs for entire peace processes, and our toolbox even includes street theater, art, dance, and film festivals.

In sum, we employ a multi-pronged, multi-project strategy, and our staff members are immersed in local culture. In any given country, we combine what has been learned elsewhere with the unique qualities present there. We seek to support and expand indigenous wisdom, and we have no single operating model. We work from the premise that every conflict and culture is different, and that a standardized, off-the-shelf approach simply does not work. Still, from country to country, there are similarities. For ex-

ample, all our projects aim to be inclusive and to operate across entire societies. Everywhere, we find a storytelling tradition, which we try to utilize. We observe that almost all people in conflict tend to see themselves as victims. And we view the keys to success to be commitment, creativity, and nimbleness. We are like a weaver who knits together multiple strands to help mend societies torn and broken by violent conflict. Our strategy for combating extremism is to encourage moderation. We work both *top-down* and *bottom up*, and we promote societal healing.

Consider the following sampling of our projects:

### **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

Since 1998, the DRC has suffered appalling atrocities and trauma. War and other violence-related causes have resulted in more than five million deaths. Over 200,000 women and girls have been raped. Deplorably, the Congolese Army and armed militias have been prime perpetrators. Faced with repeated denunciations by humanitarian and human rights groups, the Army has often reacted with denial and defensiveness, and it has tried to insulate itself from the criticism. In such an atmosphere, we recognized the opportunity to create a different kind of relationship and made a decision to work *with* the Congolese Army to help transform it into a force whose main task is to protect—not harm—civilians. Here is what we have been doing in the DRC:

1. We have established 36 Civilian Protection Committees at Army Headquarters and inside brigades and battalions in five of the DRC's most troubled provinces. Altogether, we reach about 25% of the military with training programs that use interactive tools to change the abusive behavior of soldiers.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, evaluators measured the results achieved with the DRC's 8th Brigade, which had been part of our process for two years and which had been redeployed to South Kivu province—an area with a very high incidence of military misbehavior. They found that 92% of the local population sampled said that this unit was considerably better in protecting civilians than the previous brigade.
2. We have reached more than 600,000 Congolese with mobile cinema screenings at which we show films that communicate the need to prevent sexual violence. The films are followed

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<sup>1</sup> Video on file with author.

by discussions led by trained military and civilian facilitators.

3. We have produced *The Team*, a 13-part soccer-based dramatic TV series that communicates anti-rape messages, as well as a 26-episode, reality TV series, which stresses that individuals can make a difference in curbing abuses.
4. We have made eight public service announcements (PSAs), starring a well-known Congolese rapper, showing that “real men” do not commit violence against women.<sup>2</sup>
5. We have established a network of eighty-five community and national radio stations that air military-oriented soap opera and news magazine programming that we produce.
6. We sponsor solidarity activities involving joint military-civilian good works, such as sporting events, clean-ups, repairs, and joint harvesting projects.
7. We have published and distributed 200,000 comic books that portray model behavior of soldiers and the consequences of criminal acts.
8. In 2011, we facilitated a peace agreement between two warring tribes in Equateur Province that had resulted in scores of people being killed and about 100,000 people becoming refugees.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Team: Soap Opera for Social Change*

In the DRC and sixteen other African, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries, SFCG has taken the world’s most popular sport, soccer, and combined it with one of the world’s most popular entertainment forms, the soap opera. The result is *The Team*, a multi-episode, dramatic TV and radio series that promotes tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict. In each country, the plot centers on a fictional soccer team—except in Pakistan where cricket reigns supreme and is the focus of the series. In each place, *The Team* is made up of characters who reflect the diversity of the country and of its conflicts—whether ethnic, tribal, religious, or socio-economic. So, in Côte d’Ivoire, the series explores the divi-

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<sup>2</sup> See SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND, “Vrai Djo” (“Real Man”) PSA Campaign, <http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/drcongo/vrai-djo.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See Jonny Hogg, *Mimes of death, forgiveness ease Congo conflict*, May 27, 2011 4:44 PM, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/05/27/uk-congo-democratic-equateur-idUKTRE74Q4I20110527>.

sions between the Muslim north and the Christian south. In Morocco, it looks at the gulf between rich and poor. And in Kenya, where SFCG has produced thirty-nine episodes and the series ranks in the *top-ten* TV programs, players come from different tribes. As Kofi Annan said, “This timely, topical project is a very positive step forward in helping Kenyans to overcome obstacles such as ethnicity, which stand in the way of progress for the country.”

## Track 2 Activities

We have a long history of working unofficially to support and enhance official negotiations. In 1993–94, before peace talks had started between Israel and Jordan, we sponsored *back-channel* meetings between former Jordanian and Israeli generals who worked out a series of unofficial agreements that became the basis for the eventual Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty. Since 1996, we have sponsored continuing, U.S.-Iranian contacts that combine discreet, high-level meetings with *people-to-people* projects. From 1996 to 1998, we held confidential U.S.-Iranian gatherings in Sweden that led directly to *wrestling diplomacy* when US wrestlers went to Iran for the first open visit of Americans since the Iranian Revolution. In 2005, we formed a U.S.-Iran Nuclear Group to search for agreement on nuclear issues. In 2005, a senior Iranian Ambassador said, “I believe you saved our negotiation. . . . Without the work of the group, I believe discussions would have ended.”

In 2011, our persistence again paid off, and we played a key role in bringing home the American hikers imprisoned in Iran. The hikers’ mothers had earlier asked us for help in getting their children freed. Unofficially, we kept pushing, probing, and talking. Finally, we arranged for Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the Catholic Archbishop Emeritus of Washington, and John Chane, the Episcopal Bishop, to travel to Iran where they met President Ahmadinejad who credited their presence as providing the context in which the Iranian government was willing to release the hikers.

## Côte d’Ivoire

In 2010–11, Côte d’Ivoire suffered awful violence after a disputed election. Although, we had been working in that country

for seven years to prevent bloodshed, our efforts obviously were not sufficient. Still, Danané, a fragile region with more than 200,000 inhabitants where we had been intensely involved, stayed largely peaceful during the crisis – while neighboring areas went up in flames. Now that the violence has ended, we are using the infrastructure and experience built up over the years to promote social cohesion and reconciliation. Thus, we re-equipped our Abidjan office that was looted during the violence, launched a program to place articles favoring reconciliation into the print media, increased production of radio programs aired on a network of forty stations, expanded our peace building activities in rural areas, and are producing an additional thirteen episodes of *The Team*.

### **Palestinian Territories**

Since 2002, we have worked in partnership with the Ma'an TV and News Network to strengthen independent media in the Palestinian Territories. Together, our organizations have co-produced five TV series, including *The Team*. Also, we provided programmatic and technical support to Ma'an, which has become the first Palestinian independent satellite broadcaster, the leading news agency, and the most visited website.

### **Pakistan**

In addition to producing cricket-based, TV and radio versions of *The Team*, we are also carrying out a project called “Radio for Peacebuilding in Pakistan.” This initiative brings peace building approaches to one-half of Pakistan’s FM radio stations. We provide training in constructive and culturally-sensitive dialogue on critical issues facing the country.

### **U.S.-Muslim Engagement**

In 2008, we sponsored a project to help reverse deteriorated relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. To this end, we convened a group of thirty-four prominent people, including former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, ex-Republican U.S. Congressmen Vin Weber and Steve Bartlett, Ingrid Mattson, Presi-

dent of the Islamic Society of North America, and Tom Dine, who headed the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). The group, whose members were one-third Muslim, issued a report, *Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World*, which became a guide for the Obama administration for improving ties. “Few challenges matter more than reducing distrust and misunderstanding between the United States and people living in Muslim majority states,” said Madeleine Albright. “This timely report is a groundbreaking, stereotype-shattering, and thought-provoking contribution to that essential cause.”

### **Common Ground News Service**

Since 1993, we have published weekly editions of this news service that disseminates articles promoting dialogue and constructive perspectives with the Muslim world. Published in six languages, more than 36,000 CGNews articles have been reprinted by the world’s leading newspapers and websites.

### **Conclusion**

As enlightened as all of the above may seem, it would have little meaning if it were not backed up by substantial achievement. And the fact is that we believe that we have an impressive track record of successful peace building in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe. In such places as Burundi, Sierra Leone, and Macedonia, we have played a significant role in moving whole countries back from the brink of violence and war.

