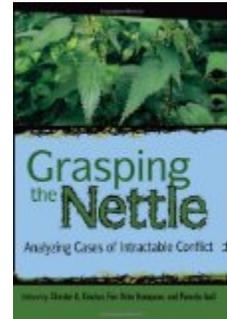


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, Pamela Aall, eds. *Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005. xxv + 410 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-929223-61-9; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-929223-60-2.

Reviewed by Geoffrey Skoll (Criminal Justice Department, Buffalo State College, New York)  
Published on H-Genocide (March, 2007)



## Violence in the Abstract

The editors of this wide-ranging anthology make two claims for the book. The first is that it offers different conceptual approaches to hard-to-resolve conflicts—i.e., intractable conflicts, as the subtitle informs. The second claim is that it has insights into the tradecraft of third-party interventions. The book fails to deliver on the first and only partially on the second. The failures come from the overly abstract viewpoint of all but three chapters in the book. One of the three is a case study of Colombia by Cynthia J. Arnson and Teresa Whitfield, which I consider in more detail below. The chapters by Jacob Bercovitch on mediation techniques and by Diana Chigas on grassroots intermediation provide useful information on the craft of conflict resolution. All the other articles suffer from a viewpoint on conflict that neglects the violence. It is as if armed conflicts occur without slaughter and carnage, atrocities, and crimes against humanity. Another consequence of the abstract perspective is that it avoids discussing powerful global forces acting on those mainly domestic and regional conflicts included in the book, places such as the Sudan, the Balkans, Eurasia, Kashmir, and Palestine. Most contributors to the volume offer clamant silence on imperialism and transnational corporatism. A third result of the abstraction is that discussions on the nature of intractability and ways of achieving tractability appear as speculative reasoning rather than empirically grounded findings.

This volume has sixteen chapters including an introduction and conclusion by the editors. The contributors are academics, mainly in disciplines such as political sci-

ence and international relations along with mid-level negotiators associated with NGOs. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) solicited their participation after the September 11 attacks. There was an implied view that local and regional so-called intractable conflicts potentially bred threats for future attacks. USIP is an independent research organization funded by Congress, established under law (22 USC 4106 et. seq.) during the Reagan administration with a board appointed by the president and confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

The first six chapters try to define intractable conflicts and suggest ways to resolve them through diplomacy and negotiation. Roy Licklider, a political scientist at Rutgers University, draws three conclusions about what he calls intractable wars. First, they are not like wars that end. Second, we have to find patterns to understand why this is the case. Finally, causes of long wars are probably not what keep them going, although he offers no proof for this last assertion. The second analysis is by I. William Zartman, an organizational and management professor at the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins. His approach is to find units of analysis in a variety of conflicts that seem to have similarities, then use these analytic units to generalize. An example of the fruits of his analysis is the conclusion that “the best time to interrupt protraction is a moment when the objective conditions of ripeness appear.... Ripeness is a matter of perception and thus of persuasion” (p. 59). Another generalization he draws is that “zero-sum identity is perhaps the most difficult to deal with because it is a

broad popular perception rather than an elite matter, and thus more difficult to manipulate” (p. 60). In other words, seasoned experts from the first world know when a long war is ready to end by the seat of their pants, but when the masses know they may bear the brunt of settlements, it is harder to pull off because local elites in the second, third, and fourth worlds are easier to manipulate than the ordinary people they rule.

Louis Krisberg’s chapter shows how inappropriate abstraction produces confusion. First, he asserts that “a conflict’s intractability depends upon who the adversaries are deemed to be” (p. 67), but he does not discuss who would do “the deeming.” For example, he refers to labor-management conflicts as intractable. One imagines General Motors versus the United Auto Workers rather than death squad militias. Next, Krisberg says that intractable conflicts have phases; he views six as particularly significant. Although these six have a certain logical appeal—eruption of conflict, escalation, failed peacemaking, institutionalization of destruction, de-escalation, and termination—they have no empirical ground. The reader can only assume Krisberg made them up. Of course, phases or stages also have an emotional appeal. They confer a sense of order, even when it is absent in actuality.

The chapters by Jacob Bercovitch and Diana Chigas respectively are empirically grounded. Bercovitch analyzes armed conflicts throughout the world between 1945 and 1995. He uses descriptive statistics to compare the results of several kinds of intervention: mediation, negotiation, arbitration, and referral to international organizations. His conclusion is that such interventions are difficult but can save lives and reduce destruction. Chigas discusses the role of intermediation conducted by unofficial third parties acting as go-betweens, facilitators, or mediators. She constructs a 3-track model of diplomacy. Track 1 diplomacy involves official state personnel, track 2 is staffed by unofficial elites, and track 3 is staffed by grassroots interveners working within local communities. Devoting most of her discussion to track 3, she says such interventions are mainly directed at rebuilding social capital in communities fractured by conflict. The logic of this approach is that “in many instances, the local level is a microcosm of the larger conflict” (p. 137). Bercovitch and Chigas contribute to an improvement of what the editors call the “tradedraft” of ending conflict through talk rather than violence.

The chapters by Bercovitch and Chigas are an exception to the overly abstract discussion of the concept of in-

tractability, just as the chapter on Colombia by Cynthia Arnson and Teresa Whitfield is exceptional among the case studies. First, they give a brief but cogent historical explanation for the extreme violence in Colombia and explain that the sources of violence and the intractability of the conflicts are internal and social. Second, the authors note that the obstacles to resolution are largely due to fragmentation of the Colombian state, the guerillas, and the paramilitaries. This fragmentation is a consequence of the conflict’s duration, going back to the 1960s. Unlike the other chapters, Arnson and Whitfield stress the human cost of violence. Finally, this chapter does not gloss over the negative effects of U.S. intervention and the overall failure of international bodies, including the Organization of American States and the United Nations.

The other case studies are less informative. They all have important distinctive defects. J. Stephen Morrison and Alex de Waal, in their chapter on Sudan, give an adequate history with a nod toward its attendant human atrocities. Nonetheless, they obscure the significance of external forces. For instance, they note that the oil industry there is controlled by oil companies from outside the United States, mainly Chinese, Malaysian, and Indian. Although they note that oil revenues enable the Sudan government to continue fighting, they draw no further inferences. Several pages later they say that “U.S. leadership has been key: the United States alone has the leverage to ensure a settlement. But the diplomatic personnel it has been able to deploy have been relatively few” (p. 177). Considering the connection between oil and imperialism in the rest of the world, especially U.S. imperialism, it is extraordinary that they fail to discuss its impact on Sudan.

Chapters by Stephen Burg on the Balkans, Paul Hare on Angola, and Charles King on Eurasia lack even the historical insights of the Sudan chapter. For instance, Burg attributes the breakup of Yugoslavia to “ethno-nationalism” without mentioning the role of Germany and other Western European powers. Hare locates the Angola conflict in Cold War competition but is vague in accounting for its continuation after 1991. U.S. covert aid to the UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola or National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) and its leader Jonas Savimbi is not mentioned. Neither does Hare consider the human rights atrocities during the civil war. Charles King’s article on Eurasia adequately addresses Russian imperialism as fomenting fighting in the region, but fails to put it in a larger context. Again, there is no mention of oil and gas pipelines, no mention of Western influence, the

human cost, and an overly detailed focus on differences among the four conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

Three chapters share similar characteristics: Howard Schaffer and Teresita Schaffer on Kashmir, and two on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, one by Stephen Cohen and the other by Shibley Telhami. What they share are the tortuous evasions necessary to absolve the responsibility of the Western powers. Both conflict-areas create political controversy in the domestic American arena, Palestine-Israel more than India-Pakistan. Nonetheless, the reader would not know it from reading these chapters. In the Kashmir chapter, it is not because the authors do not identify the issues. They lay the source of the conflict at the feet of British imperialism: “the Kashmir conflict is a by-product of the partition of India” (p. 295). Next, they point to Pakistan’s decision to ally with the United States. They also note the tacit U.S. approval of the nuclearization of south Asia, in contrast, for instance, to the U.S. reaction to possible nuclear development by Korea and Iran. But then they conclude that “it is hard for a third party [the United States] to intervene effectively when the disparity in power between the disputants is great” (p. 315). They go on to blame Kashmir for a large part of the intractability, saying Kashmiri leaders interfered with potential India-Pakistan agreements, and that Kashmiri leadership is weak. Finally, they ask whether managing a conflict, which is the current U.S. diplomatic strategy, is possibly a sufficient resolution.

A similar pattern is found in Stephen Cohen’s chapter on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He correctly notes one characteristic of it is that “intervention from the outside is coterminous with the existence of the conflict” (p. 343). He locates its roots in the neocolonial partitioning of the region by Britain and France after Turkey lost control of the area during World War I. He says the pattern has held. Imperial interests have kept the conflict going. Left out are the ethnic cleansing policies of Israel and the desper-

ately suicidal terrorist attacks by Palestinians. Also left out is U.S. military and diplomatic support of Israel in the face of almost universal disapproval by the rest of the world. Shibley Telhami’s chapter echoes much of what Stephen Cohen says, although along the way his analysis reveals a stronger pro-Israeli bias. Perhaps the most peculiar chapter is Scott Snyder’s on Korea—a conflict without fighting for over half a century. In addition to its odd inclusion, is the fact that Snyder reviews the history of the conflict going back to the Korean War of the early 1950s without a single reference to major scholarship. His point seems to be related to North Korea’s inclusion in the infamous “axis of evil” by George W. Bush, but it is not at all clear what the conflict is, let alone why it is intractable. As with many of the other chapters, the mystery is at least clarified if not solved when U.S. strategic interests are included. Despite repeated attempts at rapprochement between the two Koreas, the United States remains intractable. One supposes this chapter is included to broaden the concept of intractable conflict to include conflicts without violence.

What may best explain the peculiarities of Snyder’s article, may also explain the shortcomings of this volume. It was sponsored and published by the USIP. Ostensibly nonpartisan and non-ideological, USIP was set up to support U.S. strategic interests. In its scholarship support activities, it has shown a conservative bias both supporting scholars at and soliciting participants from such organizations as the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, McDonnell Douglas Corporation, and the RAND Corporation. By law, ex-officio board members include the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, President of the National Defense University, and the Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Consequently, subscribers to the H-Genocide list and those generally interested in the defense of human rights will find little of use in the book, outside of the three exceptional chapters I noted above.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-genocide>

**Citation:** Geoffrey Skoll. Review of Crocker, Charles A.; Hampson, Fen Osler; Aall, Pamela, eds., *Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12906>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).