Preventing Mass Violence

Our species has a long history of distrusting strangers, despising outgroups, and fighting each other in many ways and many places, using the most damaging technology available at the time. This special issue of *Science* on Human Conflict illustrates the role of the scientific community in achieving deep insights into the evolutionary history of human conflict and, most importantly, demonstrates how science can help to clarify the major factors that affect the risk of mass violence (see p. 818). Such understandings are critical to develop education that decreases the probability of conflicts, to provide early and active help to countries having trouble with intergroup relations, to help foster equitable democratic development, to protect and promote human rights, and to place constraints on weaponry.

Today, the capacity to incite hatred and violence is greater than ever before. Yet there are promising lines of inquiry and innovation that promote humane, democratic, and prosocial development in childhood and adolescence, as well as responsible adult leadership. It is vital that schools and other child-rearing institutions, including religious organizations, provide a setting in which young people from different backgrounds can overcome ingroup bias and reach valued common goals in an atmosphere of collaboration. Decades of experimental research with youth and adults show that initial animosity can be converted to cooperation if favorable conditions are provided that benefit the groups involved, supported by relevant authorities. There is a strong positive effect of friendly contact when members of two groups work together, with equal status, toward a superordinate goal that can be obtained only through cooperative activity.

A peaceful world will depend on the international community, and especially the established democracies, being on the alert for sister countries in trouble, while being both prepared and willing to extend help to those nations. Many (but not all) countries are open to accepting help in easing intergroup tensions if approached with sympathetic interest and a vision of better opportunities. Integrative solutions can be developed by reformulating basic questions and putting problems into a different context. A high priority can be given to programs of disease prevention that can be accomplished only through the mutual cooperation of groups in conflict. For example, improving the health of children through intergroup cooperation across adversarial boundaries can be used as a point of entry for providing wider help.

Early prevention of mass violence emphasizes giving help to countries in trouble before violence occurs, if possible. Danger signals are typically evident years before there are casualties, providing ample warning time. But specific response options with contingency plans must be in place to respond to such warnings. To prepare, a critical mass of knowledge and skill is required, embodied by a core of professional scientists, scholars, diplomats, lawyers, and political and military leaders, as well as specialists in the fields of conflict resolution and violence prevention. Within a nation, government-university relations are critical for research, training, and practice. But strong support should come from a network of cooperating regional organizations, in addition to international centers.

The immense danger of mass violence is a powerful stimulus for using our extraordinary learning, problem-solving, and survival capacities to diminish great risks, as was successfully done in the aftermath of the Cold War. Regular meetings over several years between distinguished U.S. and Soviet scientists on arms control, crisis prevention, and conflict resolution helped to reduce the nuclear danger and reconcile grievances. The problems of prejudice, ethnocentrism, hatred, and violence are still too low on the world’s priority list. Science can continue to clarify the factors that affect these issues. And it is incumbent on the scientific community to use its deep and broad knowledge to help move conflict prevention to a much higher place on the global agenda.

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