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# The Fogs of War and Peace

A review essay for Peacehawks, by Jamie Arbuckle

*if you want peace, prepare for peace.*

Hans Blix

Being a review of the book *The Fog of Peace – How to Prevent War*, by Gabrielle Rifkind and Giandomenico Picco,[1] and of the Zoom conference, *Honouring Giandomenico Picco: A Conversation About Negotiation and Diplomacy*, narrated by Christine Amanpour and Sulome Anderson [2]

## Introduction

Gabrielle Rifkind is Director of the Middle East programme at Oxford Research Group, and a group analyst dealing principally with the politics of the Middle East. Giandomenico Picco was for 20 years a UN Secretariat officer and was prominent as a negotiator with focus on Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. In 1991 he was able to secure the release of a number of hostages from long-term captivity by the Hezbollah; best known among them were Terry Anderson and Terry Waite. Rifkind and Picco have co-authored this important and highly readable book, which is amplified by the Zoom conference, co-hosted by Amanpour and the daughter of Terry Anderson.

## The Fog of Peace

The chapters of the book more-or-less alternate between Rifkind, whose review of processes is invaluable, and Picco, who has been there and done that. This might have been awkward, but it is not: Rifkind seems to lay down themes; Picco suggests how they might be applied – or were. Or weren't.

Already in their introduction, the co-authors identify the problem of the non-rational actor: "... in conditions of heightened tension and fear group behaviour emerges which is not

based on rational calculations but instead is driven by rigid beliefs about identity and survival.” (p. 6). Later, it is said that “these irrational processes influence the politics and decision makers (p. 12). ... “The collective stories that groups and societies tell about themselves become part of their political narrative and therefore affect how they see themselves.” (p. 13).

And here already is the crux of the problem for conflict management, whether for individual negotiators or for international and/or regional organisations alike: where apocryphal history meets irrational actor an explosive is produced. If this be mixed in a failed state or states, the resulting witches’ brew will almost certainly be violent and protracted conflict. Whether it is the heroic defence of their homes by the Serbs under Prince Lazar on the Field of Blackbirds in Kosovo in 1389, or the heroic defence of the Alamo against the army of Santa Anna in 1836, or the mutual apprehensions of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (so much in evidence in their jointly but separately received wisdom) since early in the 17th Century: all these legends are locally considered factual and memories of them are as though recent; the dangers are ever fresh. For any intervention, these must be recognised and dealt with, whether in considering relations between Kosovo and Serbia, or in respect of U.S.-Mexico relations, or those of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland: historical apocrypha are very powerful in inciting, inflaming and prolonging conflict. It’s as Winston Churchill said (of the Balkans): “... they produce more history than they can consume locally.”

### **What is a negotiator to make of this?**

It is vital, say the authors, that empathy ” ... does not mean sympathy or agreeing with the other.” (p. 16). We must understand the situation thoroughly, and be able to see a conflict through the eyes of the conflicted parties; working through the apocrypha is our real problem. That process, for the negotiator or for the mediator, is one of moving beyond positions to interests: creating common ground. Positions are usually clear from the outset; the parties are shouting their positions from every available media. However *interests* are often not clear even to the parties themselves. Cultivating common ground can be stony work indeed. Especially in the Middle East, it seems that all parties want peace with victory; to again paraphrase Churchill, “Now they shall have neither.”

There is another problem with conflict management, which is related to and exacerbates all of the forgoing challenges: some people really like war. Especially young men, often with no prospects and little education, can be brought to believe that violence “represents not a problem but a solution.” (p. 20) As I wrote in my book, ... even peace has its

enemies. Not all those “hosts” in an intervention area of operations will welcome, support or even accept peace – which ... is more than just the absence of war. As Robert Kaplan has said, ‘ a large number of people on this planet, to whom the comfort and stability of middle-class life is utterly unknown, find war and a barracks existence a step up rather than a step down.’ In the spring of 2000, as armed militias from Kosovo (and probably Albania) were conducting a brutal guerilla campaign to de-stabilize Macedonia, one of the guerilla leaders was interviewed on Austrian TV, and was asked what he would do if the conflict were peacefully resolved. *Panther*, as he styled himself, pondered this novel idea at some length, then, speaking excellent German, he mused that perhaps he would just go back to the Ford assembly line in Cologne. It took but scant imagination to realize how little Panther wished to return to putting windshield wipers on Escorts – nor what it might take to send him back to Cologne.[3]

As they say, there’s no accounting for tastes, but this is another challenge for empathy.

### **Picco as Negotiator – the Record**

Over more than two decades from about 1985 to 2009, Giandomenico Picco conducted thirteen successful negotiations with Iran: three hostages released in Lebanon (1985-87), the seizure and hostage-taking in Iran (1979-1981), ending the Iran-Iraq war (1988), hostage release in Lebanon (1991-92), the freeing of 13 Iranian Jews held in Shiraz in Iran (1998-2001), the concurrent presence of the Presidents of the U.S. and Iran at a sitting of the General Assembly of the U.N. (1992), Iran-U.S. negotiations on the sale of oil (1992-94), the return of Israeli soldiers’ remains (2000-2001), 9/11 and the Bonn Conference (2001), Operation Desert Storm (2002), the U.S.-Iraq War (2003), freeing 15 Royal Navy officers held by Iran (2007) and freeing American hikers taken by Iran (2009). (Chapter 13)

Central to the climate of these negotiations were two factors:

- The level of autonomy of the negotiator: ” ... it was essential that the relevant bureaucracies did not restrict my creativity as a negotiator, but that was not easy – it isn’t the way bureaucracies behave.” (p. 83)
- Empathy is essential: “immersing myself not only in a national narrative but also in the personal narratives of those individuals with whom I was working.”

Picco infers from these two factors an enormous and almost entirely personal “responsibility in case of failure.” He says, of his attempts at negotiating the Cyprus conflict, ” ... I resigned my role ... It was my failure, not the failure of the institution.” Later he says, “The strength of institutions is that they may empower individuals to achieve more than they could achieve individually, but the individual has to accept personal responsibility for success and defeat.” (p. 210) And with that I take my first serious issue with this fine

book. An enormous sense of personal responsibility is clearly a vital tool to enable the negotiator to draw on deep reserves of patience and courage, as Picco has so clearly demonstrated. He allowed himself to be kidnapped by kidnappers in Beirut, so that he could establish contact with them, to negotiate with them for the release of the hostages they had been holding, as in the case of Terry Anderson, for six years.

But this interpretation of personal responsibility is I think exaggerated – this is hubris. I believe that the responsibility for protracted conflict, as with the success or failure of negotiations, lies clearly with the parties to the conflict, who too often are unable or unwilling to manage the conflict non-violently, nor are they able to resolve the conflict in any satisfactory and durable manner. The failure in Cyprus was not the failure of the negotiators, but of the Cypriots. One hears a great deal about the failure of the Oslo Accords to resolve the conflict in the Middle East – that failure was not I think the fault of the Norwegians, but of the Israelis and the Palestinians. We don't blame doctors for illness, nor should we blame negotiators for conflicts. As both these conflicts have now endured for so long (the Middle East since 1948, Cyprus [by my reckoning] since 1963), we may well ask if either party is interested at all in peace. If after all these years they seem not to be desirous of, or are unwilling to make any sacrifices or compromises (such as power-sharing) for peace, there is little that can be done to bring them peace – except that they might be brought to their own desire for it.

There is one other point at which I take issue: the so-called “Dialogue among Civilisations”.

The Dialogue among Civilisations was the brain-child of the Austrian philosopher Hans Koechler who, in 1972, addressed himself to UNESCO to propose a “dialogue between different civilizations”. The first conference to explore and to promulgate this concept was held in 1974. The idea was taken up in 1997 by the President of Iran, Mohammed Khatami, specifically to rebut the polemical theories of Samuel Huntington, as expressed in his book, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* [4]. The Dialogue “... had been conceived as a tool to re-write relations with the west, and the U.S. first and foremost.” (p. 85) I thought I had heard this one before – and I had.

I had as it happens heard Samuel Huntington present his *Clash of Civilisations* just about at the time of its publication, and I thought then that he was presenting an unnecessarily dark, ultra-Hobbesian view of the world and the inevitability of protracted conflict among – what?

I think there is only one civilisation common to our only planet. Our civilisation is generally organised around language, religion, nationality and geography: these form our several

cultures. Of these characteristics, nationality and geography are the least formative: the Anglo-Saxon heritage is shared as native among the peoples of eight nations on four of the world's seven continents. Religion does not necessarily define culture: there are more Muslims in India than there are in Pakistan; the Orthodox Christians of Greece, Russia, Serbia and Ukraine have otherwise little in common. It is misleading to try to draw lines between or around cultures. We belong to various cultures, however they are shaped and defined. There is only one civilisation for us to share, and there is nothing inevitable about cultural conflict.

In 2001 Picco became the Representative of the Secretary General of the U.N. for "The Year of Dialogue Among Civilisations." The programme continues, but has had a low profile for at least the past two years. In revisiting some of the recent entries on the website of the "Foundation for Dialogue Among Civilisations"[5], formed by Mr. Khatami, I have noticed how the terms "civilisation" and "culture" are too often interchanged. Words matter, and mis-titling the concept is not a good beginning.

Read this book, but perhaps it ought not to be your first sortie into this subject, and it should certainly not be your last.

### **The Man Who Saved My Father – the Zoom Conference**

The Zoomcast is much about Giandomenico Picco, told principally by Terry Anderson and Terry Waite.

Terry Anderson was an AP journalist who was taken hostage by the Hezbollah Shiite Muslims in Beirut in 1985.

Terry Waite was a representative of the Arch-Bishop of Canterbury. He had already had some notable successes in hostage negotiations, having in several instances secured the release of 13 hostages held in Iran and in Lebanon. Attempting to negotiate the release of Anderson in 1987, he was himself taken hostage and held for nearly four years.

Anderson and Waite were freed by the successful negotiations of Giandomenico Picco in 1991.

Notable in this presentation are the bravery and the patience of the hostages and of Picco. It is also told in their own words how Anderson and Waite have recovered from their ordeal, a journey requiring as much patience and courage as their captivity.

Perhaps the thing which will stick with me are the words of Chris Voss, a former hostage negotiator for the F.B.I. who knew Picco well and learned much from him. He said that,

when negotiations were at their most difficult, the only thing for the negotiator was “Hear what they have to say, and agree on the next meeting.”

## Conclusion

The book and the Zoomcast are vivid records of patience and courage, not to say heroism, and these clearly tending, often against heavy odds, to well-deserved successes. And, as you may infer from Chris Voss’ testimony, in this game, speaking is less important than hearing. Is this not a lesson generally for our times? If so, then this book and this video are full of them. Don’t miss out on these two sources of some – even if episodic and conditional – optimism.

## End Notes

[1] I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2017

[2] Zoom.us (If, having read this book and seen that Zoom conference film, you would like to make a donation, please go to: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/please-help-the-man-who-saved-my-father>)

[3] Arbuckle, James V., *Military Forces in 21st Century Peace Operations: No Job for a Soldier?* Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 81, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, “The Coming Anarchy”, by Robert Kaplan, February 1994, p. 72. By the way, the attempt to foment conflict in Macedonia failed. In late 1994 an appeal by the Macedonian government to the U.N. for assistance resulted in the first preventive deployment in the annals of peacekeeping: the United Nations Preventive Deployment in Macedonia (UNPREDEP) was operational from 1995 to 1998 (see Sokalski, Henryk J., *An Ounce of Prevention*, United Nations Institute of Peace Press, Washington, D.C., 2003). The whereabouts of Panther, since the unthinkable has occurred, is not known.

[4] Simon and Schuster, U.K., 1997.

[5] See <http://dialoguefoundation.org/en>