
8-21-1998

Trends. The Omagh Bombing: Ireland and the Psychology of Walls

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1998) "Trends. The Omagh Bombing: Ireland and the Psychology of Walls," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 8 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol5/iss8/4>

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Title: Trends. The Omagh Bombing: Ireland and the Psychology of Walls

Author: Editor

Volume: 5

Issue: 8

Date: 1998-08-21

Keywords: Bombing, Northern Ireland, Omagh, Psychological Safety, Psychological Walls

In William R. Polk's foreign policy textbook, *Neighbors and Strangers*, much is made of the origins and roles of walls--literal and figurative--throughout the history of human interaction. Walls can be erected to protect one's assets, to keep out the contaminant influences of others, to facilitate enjoyment and nurturance from immersion in one's own, and even to more safely interact with others from a stable and secure foundation.

Polk's analysis is more nuanced and seemingly more congruent with human behavior than the common notion that all walls must to be torn down if violent conflict between, among, and within people is to be minimized and political more efficaciously resolved. With this in mind, what are the implications for the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland?

The salient point is that walls will not be broken down. Instead, who and what are on each side of them may change. With the Northern Ireland peace agreement, walls between Catholics and Protestants are reconstituted as walls between supporters and opponents of that agreement. The tragedy of the Omagh bombing may further reinforce this reconstitution and increase the ratio of agreement supporters to opponents on either side. In fact, as previously described in IBPP, without the presence of opponents separated from supporters by a wall, that wall must necessarily come between supporters.

Does this mean that more effective management of political conflict and a minimization of violent conflict are doomed without opponents of the peace agreement? No. An index of the demise of "the troubles" will be the reconstitution of the wall between the people of Northern Ireland and those of other political entities--e.g., nation-states. With this reconstitution, conflict will comprise political, social, cultural, and economic dimensions--the normative discourses of the global community. (See Clarity, J.F. (August 20, 1998). A sign of hope? Adams and Trimble attend bombing funeral. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly: The Psychological Aftermath. (July 3, 1998). IBPP, 5(1); Gould, W.B. (1995). Boundaries and meaning. *International Forum for Logotherapy*, 18, 49-52; Milbrath, L.W. (1995). Psychological, cultural, and informational barriers to sustainability. *Journal of Social Issues*, 51, 101-120; Phillips, T.L. (1996). Symbolic boundaries and national identity in Australia. *British Journal of Sociology*, 47, 113-134; Polk, W.R. (1997). *Neighbors and strangers: The fundamentals of foreign affairs*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; Puddifoot, J.E. (1997). Psychological reaction to perceived erasure of community boundaries. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 137, 343-355; Segalla, R.A. (1996). "The unbearable embeddedness of being": Self psychology, intersubjectivity, and large group experiences. *Group*, 20, 257-271.) (Keywords: Bombing, Northern Ireland, Omagh, Psychological Safety, Psychological Walls.)