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

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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.