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The Power of Symbolism: Disarmament in Northern Ireland

Editor

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Abstract. This article explores recent events in Northern Ireland to highlight the import of symbolism in the resolution of political conflict.

Recent public announcements by political leaders of the British and Irish governments suggest that there is once again progress in approaching a resolution of political conflict concerning Northern Ireland.

For too long, the issue variously labeled disarmament, weapons decommissioning, or putting arms beyond use has impeded and even reversed such progress. But now we are told that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) has pledged to open its arsenals to international inspection and even re-inspection. We also are told that the IRA has pledged to reappoint representatives to an international disarmament commission. These pledges--if carried out--are said to ensure verification that the IRA's weapons are not being used.

Critical analysis of the above should quickly yield the conclusion that what is at issue is symbolism not some notion of an objective reality. First of all--as is usual in the international political discourse on the fate of weapons in Northern Ireland--much is made about the threat and the resistance of the IRA on weapons, while little is made about the threat and resistance of Protestant paramilitary groups. Yet an objective reading of the situation would surely note that there is threat and resistance from varied parties. These sources of threat and resistance remain regardless of IRA pledges and requisite actions. In fact, the IRA pledges and actions should remove any semblance of balance of threat among competing political groupings--leading to a higher probability of deterrence of paramilitary and terrorist action failing.

Second--as illustrated by the machinations of Saddam Hussein regarding nuclear weapons development in Iraq and (before him) of Mikhail Gorbachev regarding biological weapons development in the Soviet Union--inspection regimes may have little to do the likelihood of threat. In fact, such regimes can lull observers into a false sense of security and place those whom these observers represent or are pledged to protect in dire straits indeed. The usual venues of treachery and tragedy comprise secret sites that are not identified and inspected, identical versions of assets (some of which are unknown to the inspectors), and the moving of some assets in an insidious shell game. And, of course, the verified destruction of all weapons does not preclude the probability that more may be on the way.

So why the trumpeting of progress? Is this merely an example of some hoped for deception of others and even self-deception? Hardly. At issue is what words and actions will take the place of what is hoped for but what can never be--i.e., what will serve as a concrete representation of something abstract like a trusting relationship, cooperation, and peace. Progress is made when the representation--through its associations, its resemblances, its appeals to conventions--satisfies the requirements of social perceivers who may be only dimly aware of what these requirements are. This satisfaction may relate to constructs as diverse as the collective unconscious, neurolinguistic programming, resonance, therapeutic interpretation, transference, and empathy. On such a fragile construction is conflict resolved in a world that is ever-changing. (See Florian, V., & Mikulincer, M. (1998). Symbolic immortality and the

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management of the terror of death: The moderating role of attachment. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 74, 725-734; Liu, C. H., & Kennedy, J. M. (1997). Form symbolism, analogy, and metaphor. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 4, 546-551; Northern Ireland peace progress. (May 8, 2000). *The New York Times*, p. A26; Robb, J.E. (1998). The archaeology of symbols. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27, 329-346; Zizek, S. (1997). Psychoanalysis and society: "The big other doesn't exist." *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, 5, 3-17.) (Keywords: Conflict, Northern Ireland, Symbolism.)