Cutting Losses:
Reflections On Appropriate Timing

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Introduction

The field of conflict resolution has reached a point in its evolution where hunches and intuitive guesses are being transformed into testable theoretical propositions. Nowhere is this more important than in the debate about when conflicts are "ripe for resolution."

The conventional wisdom is that early intervention is preferable to late intervention since conflicts are more tractable when there is cognitive flexibility, when the structural conditions are conducive to settlement and the issues are clear and unclouded, and when the protagonists have not lapsed into a malignant spiral of violent hostility. If this wisdom is correct, and there is much evidence that it is so, then conflict resolutionaries should direct most attention to the prevention of violent conflicts.

If conflict resolvers fail to prevent the occurrence of violence, however, the question of when it is timely and appropriate for third parties (or the antagonists themselves) to initiate peace processes remains. This is a vital issue, since premature or tardy interventions may impede rather than advance positive peace processes.

Most recent work on this issue has focused on the question of "conflict ripeness" or the perception of "ripe moments" for intervention. This concept refers both to moments in time and to a convergence of a variety of personal, structural, substantive, and circumstantial factors. The challenge facing conflict analysis is to determine what structural and personal factors are most likely to motivate antagonists (in particular, the leadership of hostile groups) to halt adversarial relationships and begin exploring negotiated solutions to their problems.

Most of the literature in this area suggests that antagonists in "normal" circumstances have an intuitive sense of which conflicts may yield positive results and which conflicts will generate high levels of risk, insecurity, and vulnerability. Once parties have made a decision to use violence and coercion, however, these intuitive regulators disappear and they lose their ability to cost conflicts within common and agreed frameworks.

This paper is an important contribution to the debate about the circumstances likely to result in a restoration of realistic costing and a movement from antagonistic to conciliatory behavior. Mitchell provides a detailed analysis of Zartman's and others' pioneering work in this area and evaluates the Hurting Stalemate, Imminent Mutual Catastrophe, and Entrapment models as inducements to negotiated problem solving. He counterposes an Enticing Opportunity model to these "exhaustion" models and suggests that positive inducements to change may be as effective or more effective than anticipated costs as a motivator in changing violent behavior.

Mitchell is too astute to suggest that the Enticing Opportunity model is an alternative to the others, so he suggests that each be used in combination with the others. He raises some fundamental questions about conflict dynamics and suggests that, having ascertained a ripe

moment or moments for intervention, we are still left with the issue of determining what sort of intervention is the most likely to result in the restoration of just, collaborative relationships. This is a critical issue facing conflict intervenors: Is our task to ameliorate, manage, resolve, or transform conflicts, or is it a combination of all four? The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution is pleased to publish this paper as an important step towards understanding the nature of impasse in violent conflicts and what might constitute an appropriate and useful response.

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This working paper is an effort to contribute to the debate about when conflicts are "ripe for resolution." It explores some current efforts to explain when a peace process is likely to begin, starting from the frequent observation that parties in conflict are often reluctant to cut their losses and quit — or at least seek a negotiated settlement — even when the costs of the conflict are mounting and the parties' goals seem more and more unattainable. How do such observations fit in with existing theories of "ripeness" and with questions about appropriate circumstances for bilateral or third-party peace efforts?

At the present moment, it seems that the literature of international conflict resolution offers four basic approaches to the determination of appropriate conditions for de-escalation and commencing (or restarting) a peace process. All of these share a number of basic features, despite their ostensible diversity. Unfortunately, some of the suggested alternative views about a conflict's ripeness present awkward conceptual problems. Hence, this paper sketches some ideas that deal with some of the gaps and disjunctions in the four models of ripeness currently advanced as the framework for understanding when parties in conflict will begin to consider seriously the possibility of a negotiated settlement — when, in William Zartman's terms, their leaders move from a "winning mentality to a conciliating mentality."[1]

Four Models of "Ripeness"

Over the last decade, the linked issues of when a peace process is likely to begin and when conflict resolution or amelioration processes are most likely to have a significant impact on the course of a protracted, deep-rooted conflict seem to have produced a consensus around the utility of the concept of ripeness. Conflicts are held to be ripe for resolution only when the appropriate moment — or, more accurately, the appropriate set of circumstances — arrives.[2] A popularized version of this thesis is that, particularly in violent and protracted conflicts, this ripe moment occurs only when the adversaries jointly confront a costly impasse.

In actual fact, current literature seems to have produced four different versions (or models) of the "ripe moment" thesis, two of which arise from Zartman's pioneering work and two from elsewhere. The four models might be characterized as:

1. The Hurting Stalemate (HS) or "plateau" model, initially suggested by Zartman[3] and later developed by Stedman[4] and by Haass[5].

2. The Imminent Mutual Catastrophe (IMC) or "precipice" model, again originating with Zartman.

3. The Entrapment (ENT) model, pioneered by Edmead[6], Teger[7], and others.

4. The Enticing Opportunity (ENO) or "planets in conjunction" model, versions of which are to be found originally in Mitchell[8] and in Crocker[9].

Full analyses of these four models can be found in the works referred to above, but a brief description of each is necessary in order to illuminate their differences and similarities.

The Hurting Stalemate Model

It could justifiably be argued that separating the concept of a hurting stalemate (deadlock) from its associated idea of an imminent catastrophe (deadline) unfairly distorts Zartman's original theory, in which the two ideas are intimately linked in producing circumstances that make a conflict ripe for resolution. Clearly the two factors can work together to reinforce one another during any protracted conflict, and Zartman's initial argument was that adversaries will be most likely to consider a negotiated solution to their conflict when they anticipate a long period of continually costly action, together with a low perceived probability of achieving their goals and a high perceived probability of a looming disaster that would increase still further the costs of continuing coercive strategies.

However, for the sake of clear understanding, it seems reasonable to treat the two models separately. This raises the question of whether each set of circumstances can *separately* produce a ripe moment. Clearly, both circumstances will reinforce each other's effects, but is the presence of *both* a long stalemate *and* an imminent disaster a necessary condition before adversaries consider negotiation? Whatever the answer to that question, the models are presented separately, at least for analytical purposes.

The core argument of the HS model is that adversaries will most likely seek a negotiated solution or a resolution of their conflict when no party can envision a successful outcome through continuing current strategies nor an end to increasingly painful costs. In Zartman's words, the mutual plateau must be "...perceived by both [parties] not as a momentary resting ground but...as a flat, unpleasant terrain stretching into the future, providing no later possibilities for decisive escalation or for graceful escape...."[10]

Two preliminary comments can be made about the original HS model and some of the later modifications offered by other writers. The first is that the model strongly suggests that extended pain is the only thing (or, at least, the most effective thing) that will make people consider future costs, alternatives, face-saving options, et cetera. It implies that leaders and their supporters learn and change their minds only through experiencing the pain of loss (fruitlessly expended resources) and damage. Perhaps the leaders of parties in conflict can go through no other learning experience that will make them change their minds and their policies, but if so, this surely makes them unique. Most of what is known about how people in general learn indicates that there are other, more effective means of teaching apart from inflicting pain; that is why schoolchildren are no longer beaten. It may be the case that leaders learn through being in a stalemate that hurts, but this probably does not mean this is the only way, or even the best way, that they can learn about alternative ways of achieving their goals.

The second question raised by the HS model, given that it does accurately characterize some ripe moments, is whether it is the continuing cost or the absence of likely success that is the most persuasive element affecting leaders' decisions about continuing or quitting. In *The Structure of International Conflict* [11], it was suggested that it might on occasion be the absence of the potential benefits of victory that had most effect, while at other times it might simply be the continuing costs (particularly opportunity costs). Put slightly differently, it seems more than possible for very different types of stalemates to exist and to hurt differently. Contrast the following: (1) a stalemate of desperation, where both sides are exhausted and no victory is in sight; (2) a stalemate of attrition, where neither side is being significantly hurt but neither can destroy or neutralize the other, so no successful end is in sight; and (3) a stalemate of frustration, where adversaries have come to recognize that they cannot achieve a clear-cut victory that achieves all their goals, whatever their expenditure of effort and resources. Will all or none of these situations produce ripe moments?

The Imminent Mutual Catastrophe Model

If the HS model represents the "plateau" aspect of Zartman's original scheme, the IMC model offers the reinforcement or the alternative of the "precipice" — a disaster that threatens to overwhelm adversaries, whether or not there is a stalemate. The implications of the IMC model tend to have been somewhat neglected in favor of the HS model, which fits in rather better with the dominant coercive paradigm of international conflict studies, but the IMC model does have some very interesting implications of its own.

Briefly, the argument underlying the IMC model is that parties in conflict will consider conditions ripe for de-escalation and conflict resolution only when they face an imminent major catastrophe of some sort. Note that successful de-escalation in this model depends on *both parties* facing undeniable disaster, a huge increase in costs, and/or a major drop in the perceived probability of success and victory through continuing the struggle. If only one side faces such a catastrophe, the other will have no incentive to look for a settlement but can simply sit back, wait for its adversary to plunge over the precipice, and then move in to pick up the pieces.

One interesting question raised by the IMC model is: What sorts of circumstances are likely to present imminent mutual catastrophes to parties in conflict? Presumably, one example would be the situation facing the Allied and Japanese leaders in 1945, prior to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. For the Allies, the prospect of invading Japan, with its attendant losses, must have appeared likely to produce a major catastrophe, even if the invasion resulted in final victory. For at least some of the Japanese leaders, the same Allied invasion must also have represented a catastrophe and may thus have prompted Japan to make overtures for peace even before August 1945.

In many other cases, a more likely set of circumstances will involve parties approaching different but roughly simultaneous disasters after which particular costs for both sides will increase geometrically. In the case of the Rhodesian peace process, for example, the advent of a Thatcher-led government in the U.K. that was willing to recognize a Muzerewa regime

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in Salisbury presented a new and potentially costly set of circumstances to the Zimbabwean leaders. At the same time, the general African rejection of Muzerewa and the successful escalation of the guerrilla war presented a similar precipice to the white-dominated regime in Salisbury. Facing different but interlocked potential catastrophes, both sides began to consider a negotiated settlement.

This IMC model raises at least one implication also raised by its HS partner. Clearly, a key aspect of both models is that for circumstances to be ripe for a shift to a "conciliatory mentality," decision makers on each side need to perceive independently that their own side is approaching some unavoidable catastrophe or that they are stuck in a costly situation with a low probability of success, even in the long term. Do the models, however, also imply that the circumstances will be even more propitious if both sets of decision makers also perceive the *mutuality* of their predicament? In other words, if both sets of decision makers perceive that not only they but their adversaries are facing an approaching disaster (or are stuck in a costly stalemate), the probability of a shift away from a "winning mentality" could be increased. Are the decision makers involved likely to anticipate that their rivals will now be in a more "reasonable" frame of mind through the latter's consciousness of an approaching deadline or existing deadlock? Do approaching mutual disasters cancel out each other's effects? Whatever the precise effects of such a perception of the mutuality of their problems, this point does emphasize the importance of perceptual variables in both HS and IMC models, a factor that becomes even more salient in the third, "entrapment" model.

The Entrapment Model

In many of its aspects, the Entrapment model (ENT) can be seen as a direct rival to the HS model; initially, the approaches seem to be mutually contradictory. The HS approach is very much in the "rational actor" tradition of formal decision-making analysis, which assumes that increasing costs and decreasing potential benefits from victory are factors that will help shift decision makers from continuing one set of strategies to considering another. By contrast, the ENT model argues that leaders become trapped into a continued pursuit of victory, even after costs seem (to an outsider) to have become unbearable. Underlying this model is an apparently irrational process by which "costs" become transformed into "investments" in a victory that must be complete. Hence, the more costs that are incurred, the more reasons exist for carrying on. In the ENT model, the hurt itself, paradoxically, becomes a reason for continuing; the greater the hurt, the more the need to continue towards victory in order to justify both the psychological and political sacrifices already made.[12]

In many ways, an entrapment approach is less irrational than it might seem. At one level, leaders often make, and themselves fall victim to, the argument that the extent of past sacrifices makes any alternative to complete victory unthinkable, as the sacrifices will then have been for nothing or for some worthless or unworthy compromise. At another level, parties in conflict often face the problem that the benefits of success are only garnered at the very end of the process, once final victory has been achieved. In one sense, engaging in a conflict is rather like building a bridge: the major costs are incurred well before any benefits accrue, and the benefits only begin to be realized once the whole edifice is constructed

and complete. Finally, there often exists a complex relationship between anticipated costs (the "hurt" in the HS model) and the costs already borne. In very costly conflicts, comparison between "what we have already suffered" (past hurt) and "what we might have to suffer in future" (marginal hurt) can make the latter appear relatively trivial and certainly bearable. In other words, the anticipated *marginal* costs of continuing might not be enough to turn leaders' minds towards conciliation as long as their vision remains fixed on achieving the benefits that alone will justify the expended costs. As Kenneth Boulding once remarked, "Rats and men come to love the things for which they have suffered!"

If an ENT model suggests that hurts and costs can become reasons for *continuing* rather than *abandoning* a coercive strategy, when in such a model does a ripe moment occur? I have argued elsewhere[13] that an entrapment approach suggests that leaders involved in a protracted conflict do, indeed, go through a number of decision-making stages: the first is characterized by concentration on the achievement of potential rewards, the second by justification of expended resources via further commitments, the third by the increasing desire to damage the adversary and minimize overall losses, and the last by exhaustion of resources and search for a way out. In this particular framework, a key turning point is between the third and fourth stages when some salient event or another factor triggers decision makers to reassess their situation so that their major objective changes from justifying past sacrifices or damaging the recalcitrant adversary to salvaging remaining resources by a significant reversal of policy. Psychologically, the turning point occurs when past losses are no longer regarded as investments in success, but become "bygones" in the classical economist's sense, to be reluctantly abandoned; and when leaders' thinking becomes dominated by the need to cut losses and minimize further costs, even if this means abandoning the promised, compensatory, but increasingly unlikely benefits of victory. Parties need to become "resource salvagers" rather than "reward seekers," saving as much as they can from a clearly failed policy that offers little hope of achieving the benefits for which it was originally launched.

In contrast to the HS and IMC models, an Entrapment model leaves open the questions of:

1. How leaders learn (by pain, by rational thought and anticipation, or by applying theories);

2. What factors are likely to circumscribe leaders' capacity to explore alternatives to continued coercion; and

3. What is the possibility that conflict resolution processes are appropriate even at the height of a crisis or in the midst of the violent stage of a conflict cycle?

At present, those using the model will only say that *some* triggering event or occurrence will bring about a major re-evaluation of policy, that this *may* occur in circumstances other than those involving impasse or impending disaster, and that the latter conditions *may* serve to reinforce commitment to an existing policy.

It is clearly the case that in the Entrapment model, outsiders can play a much more active role in bringing about ripe circumstances rather than simply waiting for them to occur. This is a point made very strongly by Jeff Rubin in his discussion of appropriate timing for de-escalation strategies in which he argues that both third parties *and* adversaries can and should create appropriate conditions and, hence, ripe moments. Rubin insists that the challenge "...is to *create* these favorable conditions, rather than wait for them to appear."[14] Similarly, Chester Crocker has written, "The absence of 'ripeness' does not tell us to walk away and do nothing." [15]

At the very least, third parties can begin to assist by asking themselves such questions as:

- How might we (or others) best help the adversaries to anticipate likely future costs? [16]

- How might we best help leaders to develop viable options?

- How might we best help to free leaders from constraints on their ability to search for alternative solutions?[17]

- How might we best design a nonthreatening and noncoercive process that will assist leaders in developing a conciliatory mentality and in moving towards a solution?

Whether or not third parties assist, ripeness in an ENT model seems to involve moving parties from a mentality in which hurts and sacrifices become reasons for continuing rather than quitting to one in which anticipated costs and diminishing resources dominate decision making and viable, less costly alternatives present themselves.

The Enticing Opportunity Model

In contrast to the three models discussed so far, the "enticing opportunity" model takes a more optimistic view of leaders in conflict, suggesting that a ripe moment can occur when leaders see a much better way of achieving their goals than "slogging on" with the costly struggle. New options open up or are created which cost less and offer more likely gains than continued violence and mutual coercion. The emphasis is on new benefits rather than existing or anticipated costs, on rewards for adopting alternatives rather than on sacrifices that have to be compensated. [18]

In many ways, the ENO model is probably the most diverse of the four, as it brings into consideration a wide variety of possible factors than can contribute to the creation of a ripe opportunity. Chester Crocker has referred to this kind of propitious situation as being one that has "the planets in conjunction." The idea of a number of key variables attaining the right condition or level is echoed in the frequent metaphor of a railway track with all the points switched to an appropriate setting to enable a train to roar through to its destination.

Among factors mentioned by Crocker are the availability and increasing acceptability of some new sets of basic ideas, principles, and concepts; the gradual blocking or disappearance of parties' unilateral options; the existence of useful (perhaps even indispensable) channels through which adversaries can communicate; the existence of some arenas in

which "informality can thrive" and, ultimately, new principles can be converted into precise agreements. Crocker emphasizes that third-party peacemakers can play major roles in the creation of such propitious circumstances and ripe moments.[19] Others have echoed Crocker, suggesting that the right set of circumstances may result from the advent of new leadership not as committed to the goals or methods of their predecessors, a change of goals or level of commitment on the part of the adversaries' patrons, the availability of new resources from which to construct an innovative solution (resources ranging from material goods to creative ideas), and/or a change of priorities within the elite of one or both adversaries.

As discussed in "Conflict Resolution and Civil War," a number of factors seem to have contributed to an appropriate set of circumstances that encouraged a settlement in the first Sudanese Civil War. These fell into three major categories — interparty, intraparty, and extrasystem — and included such factors as the relevant terms offered by the adversaries, the level of cohesion within each party, and the vulnerability of external patrons to pressure either from one of the adversaries or from third parties.[20]

To persuade adversaries to think of moving towards a negotiated settlement, however, the prime determining condition appears to be that leaders and followers on both sides perceive that major rewards may be attained through the pursuit of some negotiated solution. For leaders, one of these rewards must usually be an anticipation that they will play some future leadership role. What seems to have enticed a number of adversaries into a negotiated peace process in a variety of conflicts is a shared (if mutually contradictory) belief that, through a process involving negotiations followed by elections, they would *win* more cheaply the political power they were unable to obtain by coercive means. In the case of Zimbabwe, for example, the Lancaster House settlement was clearly facilitated by the belief of all three African leaders — Muzerewa, Mugabe, and Nkomo — that they would win the proposed elections that were part of the settlement. In that case, the two potential losers were prepared to accept the election results rather than return to a "winning" and coercive mentality. In the case of Angola, however, the dashing of Jonas Savimbi's expectations of a victory over the Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola (MPLA) through elections led to Savimbi's abandonment of a negotiation process and a damaging return to the battlefield.

In other cases, enticement has taken the form of an expectation of a *share* in the political power that was the source of the original coercion and conflict. In South Africa, for example, a pre-election understanding between African National Congress (ANC), Inkatha, and the Nationalist Party for sharing national political office and influence was enticing enough to ensure that the peace process in that country continued through to (tempered) majority rule. In the case of the Basque country in Spain, the sharing of political power has been the result of negotiations establishing a devolved or decentralized political system, in which a variety of "winners" achieve some rewards for abandoning means of coercion and goals of "winning." At the very start of both types of process, a key factor seems to be that *all* parties can perceive new possibilities of gain for themselves, a factor of particular importance for those who might lose, and lose all, through any settlement process.