

The case for engagement

an interview with President Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter was President of the United States from 1977 to 1981 and is founder and Chair of The Carter Center, a non-partisan and not-for-profit organization that advances peace and health worldwide. The Carter Center has engaged in conflict mediation in many parts of the world, and President Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

Accord: How would you make the case for why it is important to engage with armed groups?

President Carter: Well, the basic answer to that basic question is: with whom are you going to discuss a conflict if you don't discuss it with the people who are involved in the conflict, who have caused the conflict from the beginning, and who are still engaged in trying to kill each other?

Often it would be quite impossible to get third parties, or fourth parties, to represent the people who are actually in combat. So in every case that I've ever addressed, I've attempted to go directly to the people who instigated and are continuing the conflict to see if and when they might be able to attempt to bring an end to the war and have a peace agreement that would be either temporary in nature (a ceasefire) or perhaps lead to a permanent resolution.

So, when there's a terrible human rights abuse quite often the abuser may be a dominant dictator or an international pariah with whom very few people want to relate. But they're the only ones who – if approached properly and forcefully – will change their policies and reduce the human rights abuses. The same thing applies, in my opinion, to an ongoing civil war.

It's sometimes surprising how many of the issues parties to the conflict do agree on. It's usually just a few items on which they cannot agree – they are obviously



significant, very significant. But that permits me to concentrate on the issues that have brought about the conflict.

Another very important factor that can only be ascertained if you know the country well is the pressure being exerted by the subordinates on the leaders of the two sides. Sometimes revolutionaries whom I have gotten to know well don't really want to see an end to the conflict. But their subordinates are tired of the war.

What are some of the criteria for whom you would engage with, and when and how?

The first premise that I've imposed on myself ever since leaving the White House is that before we go into a sensitive area of the world we get approval from the White House.

Sometimes it has been somewhat reluctant, and sometimes it's just tacit approval – they just agree to look the other way. But I don't inject myself into a politically sensitive arena if it might conflict with the policies of the United States. That's the first thing.

The second thing is, there needs to be some identifiable leaders in the 'battle zone,' usually within a country, that can speak effectively for the groups at war. And this is sometimes not possible.

A third criterion is that both sides in a conflict need to be willing to attempt a peaceful resolution. And quite often this occurs after a matter of long waiting for that propitious moment to arrive.

Would you hold off from engaging if one side was interested in a settlement but, say, the government entity was not interested?

Yes, if we are approached by one side. Of course in every case we have to make a political judgment, since every case is different from others – but we try to monitor all the conflicts in the world every day. If we do get an inquiry that's substantive from either side in a civil war, then we would immediately make plans to consult the other side: "Would you be willing to have an intermediary explore a resolution?"

I have done it in two stages. Quite often to talk to somebody about negotiation or mediation raises a red flag. So we do what I call “pre-mediation work.” Without self-anointing ourselves as mediator, we just explore with both sides what the chances are that they would take the next step in approving some kind of mediation effort.

We say, “We’re just exploring the ideas to see what we could do to help you end this conflict successfully.”

In a sense, you’re engaging to decide whether you want to engage.

It’s not so much a matter of whether we want to or not, but whether we have an adequate opening that would at least give us a chance of success. And I’ve never been afraid of failing in the effort, you know, if I think we have a reasonable opportunity at the beginning. I think you can be too timid about going into a controversial arena.

So if we see a glimmer of hope, we explore, and if both sides – even if one side is somewhat reluctant – approve us as the mediators then we proceed more aggressively. One thing to remember is that almost invariably in a civil war, the last thing the ruling party in particular wants is for the United States or the United Nations or some highly identifiable mediation group to come in, because that in effect gives the imprimatur of legitimacy to the revolutionary people in their country.

But since The Carter Center has no authority, and since we are completely non-governmental in nature and we are already involved in about 65 nations around the world in other kinds of programmes – disease prevention, election observation, agriculture, projects of that kind – quite often we are known by both sides. So it opens up doors to us as a third party much more readily than would be the case for a national government or an international agency.

What about the argument against engagement that says that by engaging with an armed group – who might be guilty of human rights violations – you are in a sense legitimizing that group and their violence?

Well, I’ve been accused of that – or maybe sometimes criticized or condemned for that – during the life of The Carter Center. In each case, the decision I had to make was: should I reject this person who is contacting me and let the war or the human rights abuse or whatever continue? Or should I get approval from the White House and meet with those people to see if they are amenable to ending the war or ending the human rights abuse?

And I made the decision to go ahead and negotiate with these international outcasts, or reprobates, in order to try to end the conflict.

You met with the Bosnian Serbs at a time when no one else would. I imagine that was a pretty tough decision.

It was very tough. But as a result of that engagement, I worked on an agreement both sides accepted. It was a complete ceasefire for four months. And it was out of that ceasefire that the Dayton Accords eventually grew. But I met with some people that were later branded as international criminals, and they’re still being hunted.

What about other arguments that as a governmental entity you look weak if you engage with an armed group?

In most cases the ruling party is reluctant to deal with revolutionaries on an equal basis. The first time I was able to break that impasse was in Sudan when I went there in 1989. I finally got President Bashir’s approval to negotiate between him and John Garang of the Southern People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), but it was very difficult for the officials in Khartoum to treat the revolutionaries in the south on an equal basis – to sit down across the same table – as they did with me.

In fact, we orchestrated a place with the help of Professor Moi in Nairobi, Kenya that we called The Peace House. We actually had 14 representatives from the Sudanese government and 14 representatives from the SPLM, and they sat across the table from each other with me mediating.

But that kind of thing is very difficult for an incumbent ruling party to accept because it does tend to legitimize the others who have been branded not only as revolutionaries, but now as terrorists.

But you’ve been successful, in many of these cases, of ultimately getting them to do just that.

That’s true. The first time I had an actual breakthrough in Sudan was through dealing with Guinea Worm disease. The two sides were hard at war at that time and wouldn’t have a day of ceasefire, because for one side it would be advantageous in the dry season and for the other side in the wet season. I explained that we wanted to get into the southern part of the country to help eradicate Guinea Worm disease, and since both leaders were thoroughly familiar with the devastating effect of this disease on their people, they reluctantly agreed – after a lot of negotiating – to have a temporary ceasefire. At first it was only six weeks, but eventually I got them to extend it to six months.

What about the difficult case of engaging with terrorist organizations? Some would say terrorists have no interest in peace so they shouldn't be engaged with. How do you think about whether to engage with a terrorist group?

Well, I'll have to be frank about this. These days I would be reluctant to get involved in negotiating with terrorists who are internationally branded as such, and about whom there's no doubt that they are terrorists.

But, let me step back for a minute slightly and say that in many cases, over the last quarter-century there's an increasing inclination on the part of any ruling party to brand as "terrorists" anyone who disagrees with them.

When I was negotiating, for instance, with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin at Camp David in 1978, he never referred to any Palestinian as anything other than a terrorist. Obviously, we see that his successors are negotiating directly with Palestinians. Back then there was a prohibition against any American having direct dealings with the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Right now President Putin makes it clear that all Chechens who oppose him are terrorists. In Liberia 15 years ago, the warlords and their troops were all known as terrorists. As a matter of fact, last year Zimbabwean President Mugabe identified my staff – who were there to help put together a proper election – as terrorists. So the epithet "terrorist" is now used excessively, though some obviously deserve that condemnation. But I think that in a number of cases I have had to make my own judgment about whether or not a group is worthy of our involvement with them.

And does that follow a lot of the same criteria we talked about before?

It would involve the same criteria, yes. Obviously, if someone like Osama bin Laden sent word to us that he wanted to negotiate – which would be impossible to conceive – I wouldn't do it.

One of the most interesting times that I did negotiate, though, was when we were involved indirectly in Somalia. The United States was trying to hunt down and kill a general, and he contacted us, and we worked out something between him and the US government indirectly. That's one of the rare occasions that we've negotiated between the US government and somebody else.

But The Carter Center is available, and I would say that if we make an error, it would be in taking on things for which there isn't much chance of success, instead of

being more cautious. On the other hand, we err on the side of at least talking to people who are pariahs in the international community when no one else will talk to them. The advantage of talking is that when I think our intercession might end a conflict or eliminate threats or actual human rights abuses, we engage more fully.

Does introducing the "terrorist" label unnecessarily complicate things because we can't agree on what it means?

Well, it does. It depends on the degree to which it deters outside mediation. For example, President Putin has convinced the rest of the world that all Chechens who disagree with him are terrorists.

Since the United States has adopted the frequent use of "terrorism," and since we've passed some very stringent laws and restraints on human freedom under the aegis of combating terrorism, this has opened a Pandora's Box for actual persecutors and human rights violators to claim, "We're just dealing with terrorism." And that's happened in a number of countries.

Finally President Carter, can I ask about the decision to disengage. Is there anything that would weigh on you to say, "It's time to pull out or end our involvement?"

If I'm personally involved in a mediation, and it becomes obvious to me that despite my best efforts either side is not acting in good faith, and that they don't genuinely seek a resolution of their differences, then I very quickly withdraw.

And I reserve the right to have a press conference at that point with both leaders present (if they will come), and say, "This is the situation. I've done the best I could. These are the proposals I've made. One side has accepted them, the other side has refused," and then I withdraw. I've done that a few times.