

Center for Conflict Analysis  
and Resolution

Working Paper 4

## **A Willingness To Talk**

by

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## About the Author

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Mitchell was educated at University College, London, with his Ph.D. dissertation focussing on Kenyan political conflicts. He was previously professor of International Relations at the City University, London, Visiting Fellow at the University of Maryland, College Park, Visiting Lecturer at the University of Southern California and at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Mitchell also served as a consultant to the BBC crisis simulation program, "A Game of War," and was honorary treasurer of the South Atlantic Council. He is a member of the Centre for the Analysis of Conflict, University of Kent, Canterbury, England.

## About The Center

The Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University has as its principal mission to advance the understanding and resolution of significant and persistent human conflicts among individuals, groups, communities, identity groups, and nations. To fulfill this mission, the center works in four areas: academic programs, consisting of a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Conflict Analysis and Resolution and a Master of Science (M.S.) in Conflict Management; research and publication; a clinical service program offered through the Conflict Clinic, Inc., center faculty, and senior associates; and public education.

Associated with the center are three major organizations that promote and apply conflict resolution principles. These are the Conflict Clinic, Inc., mentioned above; the Consortium on Peace Research, Education and Development (COPRED), a network organization; and the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution (NCPCR), offering conferences and workshops.

Major research interests include the study of deep-rooted conflicts and their resolution; the exploration of conditions attracting parties to the negotiation table; the role of third parties in dispute resolution; and the testing of a variety of conflict intervention methods in a range of community, national, and international settings.

Outreach to the community is accomplished through the publication of books and articles, public lectures, conferences, and special briefings on the theory and practice of conflict resolution. As part of this effort, the center's working and occasional papers offer both the public at large and professionals in the field access to critical thinking flowing from faculty, staff, and students at the center. The papers are presented to stimulate critical consideration and discussion of important questions in the study of human conflict.

## Forward

The Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution is pleased to publish Christopher R. Mitchell's monograph, "*A Willingness to Talk*," which throws new light on the interesting and important subject of conflict termination.

The processes that can lead to a temporary or permanent cessation of hostilities between conflicting parties are by no means well understood. Of particular significance are the communications Professor Mitchell calls "gestures of conciliation"—words or actions by which a party may indicate its desire to deescalate, halt, or settle an ongoing conflict. Unfortunately, because of their ambiguity, these signals have frequently been ignored or misinterpreted. Sincere conciliatory gestures are often received as deceptive ploys or as signs of weakness, while those which appear to be genuine may lack serious intent.

Professor Mitchell's paper asks the important questions: what role do such gestures play in moving conflicting parties toward negotiation or settlement? In what ways are they most frequently misinterpreted? How can one tell the difference between a genuine conciliatory signal and a "ploy"? What are the criteria for *unambiguous* gestures of conciliation? The answers provided by this study will be of interest to conflict analysts, policymakers, conflict resolution practitioners, and the concerned public. It should be required reading for foreign service officials and diplomats.

Professor Mitchell's Working Paper also serves as an example of meaningful methodological inquiry in conflict analysis. The essay itself embodies answers to important questions of method posed directly by its author: for example, how does one "model" behavior in conflict analysis? How can hypotheses about conflict behavior be derived from historical case studies? How can these hypotheses be verified or disproved? Christopher Mitchell brings scholarly insight and common sense to bear in demonstrating the extent to which conflict research can usefully employ the methods of the social sciences and the extent to which it demands adaptations or new methods of its own. Both in its discussion/exemplification of method and in its analysis of conciliatory gestures, "*A Willingness to Talk*" performs a most important service.

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Fairfax, Virginia  
October 29, 1990

# A Willingness to Talk: Conciliatory Gestures and De-Escalation

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## Abstract

Moves intended to initiate de-escalation and begin a peace process are often difficult to make and even more difficult to identify unambiguously. Two examples from recent Anglo-Argentine relations provide a basis for investigating whether successful gestures of conciliation demonstrate any common qualities or occur only in highly propitious circumstances. A number of hypotheses are advanced concerning characteristics which enhance a gesture's credibility and chances of success. Although it is noted that even gestures attempting to signal a clear "willingness to talk" with an adversary, which demonstrate these characteristics, can be missed entirely, misinterpreted, or ignored by a Target firmly committed to continuing the conflict by coercive means; the initiation of a successful process of conflict termination remains a highly uncertain procedure.

The general problem of "conflict termination" and the more specific one of ending wars have been much neglected aspects of both international relations and conflict research until comparatively recently. In the case of conflict researchers, as Paul Pillar argues,<sup>1</sup> this relative neglect can be explained to some degree by a reluctance to become involved in the study of how, once started, conflicts and wars are prosecuted, a concomitant of the field's concentration on preventing war and maintaining peace. In the case of international relations scholars, one has to reckon with the powerful influence of strategic studies, with its assumptions about "winning and losing", victory and defeat. Whatever the reasons for this scholarly neglect, however, there are signs that there is a growing interest in conflict termination,<sup>2</sup> defined as: "A process by which coercive conflict behavior is brought to an end and some agreement reached which deals with the issues in dispute and which enables the parties to coexist without overt, physical coercion—at least for the time being." It may be that the relationship established between the parties after the conflict has been "terminated" merely arises from the shelving of the dispute (the ending of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871); or that it is based on some precarious but temporarily stable compromise; or that it represents some final and complete resolution of the conflict. The point is that termination is more than a temporary truce, a ceasefire in place, or an agreement to stop fighting, striking or boycotting, although such temporary truces may form part of the process itself. One important, initial question for observers of this complex process of bringing a conflict to an end is simply: *How does it begin?*

At one level, answering this question can best be treated as a decision-making problem in which one investigates the process by which adversaries come to the conclusion, often in

isolation from each other, that at least one of a logically possible range of solutions that might be worked out with the other side is now preferable to the continuation of the war—or strike, feud, gang war or other form of overt, coercive interaction.<sup>3</sup> At another level, however, the problem can be approached as one which concerns demonstrating to a suspicious adversary, or at least, an adversary's leadership, a "willingness to talk"—although not to surrender. This approach suggests that a starting point of what has commonly been termed "the de-escalation process"<sup>4</sup> involves one party in a conflict, the "Initiator", making some move or sending some signal to its adversary, the "Target", the underlying purposes of which are; [1] to alert the adversary's leaders to the possibility of a negotiated or mediated solution; and [2] to indicate some change in the Initiator's stance regarding the issues in conflict and, hence, the range of possible outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Our next research question then becomes: *What might be the nature of such an initial move?*

## **1. Concessions, Arenas and Conciliatory Gestures.**

An obvious answer to this second question is that one way to start a de-escalatory process is to make an obvious "concession" to which the adversary is likely to respond. Leaders, it is frequently argued, usually react positively to a "genuine" concession, at least by making a positive, if cautious move of their own. Conceptual questions that arise at this point are; (i) What, exactly, is meant by a concession? (ii) How do we define and thus recognize it? (iii) How can the Initiators making such a move ensure that it is perceived by the Target as "genuine"—whatever *that* might mean?

One obvious place to begin looking for clues to characterize clearly the essential nature of a concession is the literature on face-to-face negotiation, which has typically dealt with such concepts as "concession rates," "opening bids," and "trading concessions between negotiators." Pruitt, for example exemplifies the process of concession making as one in which "...each side is endorsing an option which can be called its demand or position...In a negotiation over wage raises, labor's current demand may be 35¢, while management's may be 10¢. When a demand is relaxed, we speak of a concession, for example, a move from labor from 35¢ to 30¢..."<sup>6</sup>

Note that, in such situations, a move defined as a concession involves some form of *retreat* from one previously stated position or bargaining point to another, less satisfactory, less "extreme" position, as viewed by the adversary. It involves a giving up" of something, even if that something is, occasionally, not then in the conceder's possession. Note also that, as Kriesberg has suggested,<sup>7</sup> there is a clear implication that such a retreat is grudging and enforced or, at least, made under pressure and unwillingly. Finally, the move is made in circumstances of low ambiguity; it is clear to both parties that one has, in fact, made some retreat. Moves that involve a backing away from some previous sticking point are usually easy to identify as "concessions" in such circumstances, that is, in a negotiating arena, precisely because both sides' overt negotiating positions are unambiguously laid out and known in some detail by each adversary. Clear demands have been articulated and

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bargaining positions established. Given, then, that positions, lines and limits on the issue dimensions under negotiation are clear, any retreat is also clear. Hence, during direct negotiations, there is usually little doubt about what moves might constitute “concessions,” although there can still be considerable ambiguity about the value of the offer, the underlying intentions of the conceder, or the reasons the move was made.

In contrast to the circumstances of direct negotiation, the situation at the start of any de-escalation process is usually characterized by high ambiguity, as well as high mistrust. In such a *pre-negotiation arena* adversaries’ public bargaining positions are rarely outlined with any clarity. Neither side knows its adversary’s position in such detail as is usually the case when prior soundings and prolonged face-to-face interaction have revealed the stand taken on each salient issue. In the absence of clear lines, limits, and positions, it is much more difficult to identify a *retreat*, signalling a willingness to talk and starting a process of de-escalation. A retreat from some line not even noticed by the leaders of an adversary will hardly be perceived as a concession by that adversary.<sup>8</sup> Under these circumstances, the nature of a concession becomes much more problematical, as does the effectiveness of acts or gestures to convey a desired message.

This is not to argue that signalling via a concession at the start of a de-escalation stage is wholly random or uncertain. In any conflict, some lines have usually been clearly drawn around overt bargaining positions; and it is rare that one party does not possess some impressions of what the “resistance points”, or “maximum concession levels” of its adversary are publicly proclaimed to be.<sup>9</sup> Recent instances of such lines and limits, for example, are the British Government’s unambiguous refusal to discuss the issue of “sovereignty” over the disputed Falklands/Malvinas Islands with the Argentine Government following the 1982 war and the Iranian Government’s refusal, repeated from 1981 to 1987, to discuss a ceasefire and settlement of its conflict with Iraq as long as the government of President Saddam Hussein remained in power in Baghdad. Such clear limits on the bargaining map often make the offering of clearly recognizable retreats theoretically easier, in the sense that any concession on an issue will undoubtedly be recognized as such by a Target. However, making any retreat may prove practically more difficult because of the unambiguous commitment to that very position. (Even so, the Iranian Government did, eventually, have to abandon its prior demand in order to obtain a truce and negotiations with President Hussein.) This is but one of the major paradoxes of using concessions as a form of conciliatory gesture during the de-escalation stage of conflict termination. Any ambiguity in a party’s bargaining map makes it easier for conciliatory gestures to be made but more difficult for them to be accurately perceived while any certainty about where a party stands (where its limits are) makes it easier for the gesture to be accurately perceived, but much more difficult to be made in the first place.

It is clear, then, that concessions, which we define as retreats from previously clear bargaining positions, can be made within widely different contexts or *arenas* and at quite different stages of any termination process. Furthermore, circumstances will undoubtedly



affect the clarity with which parties perceive their own and their adversary's bargaining positions and, hence, the recognizability of any retreat when one is made.<sup>10</sup>

We suggest four alternative sets of circumstances in which concessions are likely to be offered by leaders of a party contemplating a negotiated settlement to their dispute:

(1) *In a negotiating arena*, during continuing face to face negotiation as part of some mutual exchange of concessions converging on a compromise settlement.

(2) *In a deadlocked negotiating arena*, during a face to face negotiation which has become deadlocked, thus some serious concession is required to get the negotiations moving again and prevent a permanent breakdown.

(3) *In a pre-negotiation arena*, at the start of a process of de-escalation, when it is desired to signal a willingness to contemplate a negotiated compromise; but when the bargaining position of the Initiator is sufficiently ambiguous to complicate the making a clearly recognizable conciliatory gesture.

(4) *In a deadlocked, pre-negotiation arena*, during an on-going de-escalation process, when both sides' bargaining positions are partially clear, but both have "painted themselves into a corner" by reiterating what issues are not negotiable<sup>11</sup> making public retreat difficult.

The remainder of this paper concentrates upon the issue of concession making in the third of these arenas, where one key factor influencing the recognizability of any retreat is the high level of uncertainty regarding the exact bargaining map of an adversary. It takes as one of its basic assumptions that, in situations characterized by high levels of uncertainty, it is often difficult to use a classical concession to initiate a de-escalatory process successfully. Retreats from unclear positions are likely to go unnoticed and unappreciated.

Furthermore, it is also clear that many historical processes of de-escalation have not been started by one party's making a classical concession to another. Rather, they have commenced with de-escalatory moves or gestures that are plainly not *retreats* from clearly delineated, tenaciously defended demands or bargaining positions. Many de-escalatory processes have begun with tentative soundings of an adversary's bargaining stance, with efforts to reduce high levels of tension, with informal peace feelers, with wholly symbolic moves, or with "trial balloons" via third parties. Some successful de-escalatory initiatives have involved no obvious retreat from a previously stated position at all. Rather, they have involved moves or gestures over issues on which no previous position has even been taken, as when prisoners are unilaterally released or (when help is volunteered) in dealing with natural disasters. Frequently initiatives have been taken as offers made spontaneously, as when a sports team or a ballet company is invited to tour. These have been purely symbolic moves, as when previously jammed broadcasts are suddenly unjammed or some relatively costless mark of respect is paid to an adversary, such as the use of an official title or the holding of a memorial service for the dead of both sides.<sup>12</sup>

An analysis of the beginnings of a process of conflict termination needs, therefore, to take into account not only de-escalatory moves that are classical concessions, or retreats from clearly articulated positions, but a wide variety of other types of moves which can

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signify a party's interest in de-escalation and its willingness to talk. We suggest, therefore, the broader category of conciliatory gestures which includes all such types of moves or statements, practical and symbolic, used by parties in conflict to initiate a process of de-escalation and dialogue. Included in this broad category of actions are all those commonly designated as peace feelers, trial balloons, bridge building exercises, tension reducing measures, symbolic gestures, confidence building measures, and abstentions from cost imposing acts or opportunities for harm. An interesting sub-category of conciliatory gestures consists of those moves involving a retreat from previous positions that we have identified as concessions. Both conciliatory gestures and concessions are efforts to signal a willingness to begin de-escalation, but the latter is a small, specialized subset of the former.

Unfortunately, while it is often the case that *concessions* made in any pre-negotiation arena suffer from problems of recognizability, the same is equally true of other sub-categories of conciliatory gestures. Any move made in an attempt to de-escalate a conflict will almost certainly be made in circumstances of high ambiguity, high mistrust, and, hence, low recognizability or credibility of moves intended to be viewed positively by an adversary. Whatever form a conciliatory gesture might take—concession, symbolic gesture, tension reducing move—problems of recognizability and, therefore effectiveness, will exist. Our fundamental analytical problem regarding the start of conflict termination involves the question: *Given the customarily high level of ambiguity about the bargaining maps of parties in conflict, what types of action constitute the minimum that a Target party would recognize as a GENUINE and CREDIBLE conciliatory gesture, calling for some reciprocal move on its part?*

## 2. The Characteristics of Conciliatory Gestures.

By this point, it should be clear that a major, underlying assumption of this paper is that conciliatory gestures are neither randomly selected nor completely situation specific. We hypothesize that there are classes of action that share some attributes or characteristics which help to ensure that, in a majority of cases, they will be recognized as conciliatory rather than coercive moves, indications of a lack of resolve, or mere efforts to play to some gallery. Put another way, we seek some action type, the characteristics of which clearly enable it to be classified as conciliatory rather than anything else; or, in a weaker version, characteristics that have been taken as conciliatory in many historical cases. It may be that our initial assumption about there being some “conciliatory action type” is incorrect, although anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise. All that will be attempted here is to suggest some likely defining characteristics for close examination.

We can begin by noting that many actions and statements intended by the Initiator to be conciliatory are not identified as such by the Target. Reactions by a Target to many moves are simply to deny that they constitute a genuine “conciliatory gesture,” to argue that they offer no “meaningful” concession, or to assume that the signals are made mainly for some other, non-conciliatory purpose—playing for time, playing to an audience, buying off domestic “doves,” or demonstrating flexibility. The list of reasons or excuses for *not*

perceiving that the other side has made a conciliatory gesture is endless. Moreover, even if it is the case that many such non-recognitions of conciliatory signals represent public, tactical “ploys,” it is also frequently the case that they don’t. Actions that one side genuinely intends to be conciliatory are equally genuinely perceived by the Target to be anything but that. At a conference on the Middle East held in London in the late 1960’s, for example, a Palestinian representative drew conferees attention to a recent major “concession” of the P.N.C. in announcing that all Jewish settlers who had arrived in Palestine before 1948 would be allowed to make their permanent home there in a future non-Zionist state. The idea that this announcement was a concession was greeted with amusement and some derision by Israeli supporters present, but there could be no doubt that the speaker perceived the action as a real and major concession by the Palestinian movement and was genuinely puzzled and angered by its reception.

This anecdote serves to illustrate the essentially subjective nature of *perceiving* or *defining* any action as a “conciliatory gesture”. In a very real sense, a conciliatory gesture, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder or, in this case, the Target. This observation suggests the possibility that one simple answer to the question posed above is that a conciliatory gesture is what is perceived to be such by the Target. What we might term “Target recognition” then becomes the only essential characteristic in categorizing acts as conciliatory gestures, although this leads us straight into the quagmire of *ex post facto* definitions.

This is not a new problem. Kriesberg has confronted something very similar in his discussion of the nature of “rewards” as one form of inducement, arguing that such acts may be distinguished according to four criteria: (i) the intentions or “underlying motivations” of the sender; (ii) the interpretation of the receiver; (iii) the judgement of the observer; and (iv) the purported meaning that the sender wishes the action to have for the receiver.<sup>13</sup> Kriesberg selects the *last* criterion for determining whether or not some behaviour can be classified as a “rewarding” action. This seems a sensible basis for approaching the essential nature of a “conciliatory” gesture, whether one is attempting simply to distinguish this type of move from those which are intended to be coercive or persuasive, or to establish a clear definition for that particular class of conciliatory action. From this point on, therefore, our definition of a conciliatory gesture is any act or statement in which the Initiator intends that the Target shall perceive the signal as conciliatory—a definition which leaves aside issues of hidden motivations of the Initiator or the external evaluations of an Observer. The definition involves a simple distinction illustrated in Figure 3.1.

Whatever might be the purported meaning of such an action for the Initiator, the success of an initiative is another matter entirely, whether we define “success” as clearly starting a de-escalatory process or merely as being correctly evaluated by the Target. As we have argued above, making a successful conciliatory gesture depends primarily on an interaction between Initiator and Target, such that *a successful conciliatory gesture is one*

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which is recognized as conciliatory by its Target. This argument clearly implies that many acts which are purportedly conciliatory are not so recognized by Targets, an observation which leads to modifying our simple figure in order to emphasize that only some conciliatory gestures are successful, while others are not. Figure 3.2 reflects this modification.

We come now to the general hypothesis that particular types of action are likely to be more frequently perceived as conciliatory than a range of alternatives which are unlikely to be so perceived. The issue can be stated probabilistically. To take an extreme case, it seems so unlikely that an escalation of physical violence will be recognized by the Target of that violence as a conciliatory move that this could safely be assigned a probability of 0. In contrast, the likelihood of a Target recognizing a unilateral ceasefire or a bombing pause as conciliatory might still be low, but generally greater than in the case of increased physical violence. (It would, at the very least, be  $>0$ .) The key analytical question about the case of the ceasefire or bombing pause (where the probability of the being recognized as a conciliatory move seem intuitively greater than the first case) is; **qualities that make this so, and what qualities in other potential actions might increase the probability still further?** In slightly different terms, and bearing in mind the underlying ambiguity of pre-negotiation arenas for both Initiators and Targets: *What are the characteristics of a purportedly conciliatory action that will markedly increase the likelihood that a Target will perceive it as a genuinely conciliatory gesture which calls for some reciprocal move, even if it is then decided by a Target not to make such a move?*<sup>14</sup>

### 3. The Content of Successful Conciliatory Gestures.

In the absence of any substantial body of empirical findings on this issue, we are, at this stage, thrown back upon anecdotal evidence, historical experience, and plausible deduction to derive testable hypotheses. One strategy for hypothesis generation would be to take cases where purported conciliatory gestures clearly succeeded in being recognized as such, and examine these for common elements. An alternative and, paradoxically, more fruitful method might be to examine cases where what was clearly *intended* as a conciliatory gesture failed to be perceived as such by the Target and to construct some hypotheses about the basis for such failure. Two recent and instructive cases where purported conciliatory gestures failed to be recognized as such by their intended Targets involve British and Argentine efforts to de-escalate the level of antagonism and distrust in their broken relationship following the brief South Atlantic War of 1982.

The first of these unsuccessful gestures of conciliation was made by the British Government in July 1985, when the Foreign Minister, Sir Geoffrey Howe, announced that the British would unilaterally lift the ban on imports from Argentina which had been imposed at the start of the 1982 War. It was clearly the case that the British Government, in taking this initiative, intended the action to be conciliatory and a step towards developing better diplomatic and economic relations with Argentina. It is equally clear that the Argentine Government, in rejecting the British move, evaluated the gesture negatively.

Argentina saw no hint of a genuine desire to de-escalate the dispute and begin serious talks and, in reply, called for a substantive discussion of the central issue of the dispute, sovereignty over the Falklands/Malvinas Islands, within 60 days.

The second unsuccessful conciliatory gesture occurred over a year later. In November 1986, Argentina offered to establish a formal ending of hostilities, which the British had been demanding, in return for an ending of the 150 mile British Protection Zone round the disputed Islands. The Argentine Declaration also called for “global” negotiations on the issues in dispute, without mentioning the formal term “sovereignty”, and offered an informal and “open dialogue” with the UK as a preliminary step towards formal negotiations. Again, the Initiator’s declaration purported to be a conciliatory move but, again, the Target failed to evaluate the initiative in anything but the most negative fashion. The British evaluation was that this was another Argentine effort to lure them indirectly into talks about sovereignty. No formal British reaction to the Declaration was ever sent to Buenos Aires.

These two examples of unsuccessful conciliatory gestures clarify the preliminary questions that must be raised at the start of a search for generalizable ideas about the nature of successful conciliatory gestures. First, what might be deduced from the failure of the British 1985 and the Argentine 1986 initiatives about *missing* features of those gestures which, if present, might have enhanced their probability of success? Second, what additional general lessons might be deduced from available theories about the qualities of actions that are essential if the actions are to be regarded as conciliatory by their Target?

It seems clear that one important feature of the British action (which the Argentines publicly recognized as a positive step and one conspicuously lacking in the later Argentine move) was that the former “broke new ground.” It did this in the sense both of giving up a position and withdrawing from a situation of continuing coercion through negative sanctions.<sup>15</sup> This recalls a common theme from the literature, noted earlier, on *concessions* during face-to-face negotiation, which emphasizes that any “genuine” concession involves giving something up, retreating from some position or withdrawing from some previously unambiguous line or limit. But the principle may be stated more generally. It seems likely that a *necessary*, but probably not *sufficient*, condition for an action to be recognized as a conciliatory gesture is that it represents some noticeable change from a previous position or a previous pattern of behavior. Moreover, the greater the degree of change, the greater the likelihood that the action will be recognized by the Target as a conciliatory gesture—and perhaps reciprocated.

This precedent-breaking characteristic, described elsewhere by Kriebert as *novelty*, can, in practical terms, be conveyed in a variety of ways. The most common, following our earlier discussion on “concessions,” is some act or statement that represents a clear and significant *retreat* from a previously enunciated position or condition—the prior withdrawal of a patron’s troops as a condition for opening talks, for example, or a prior recognition of the validity of some claim. Equally, however, it is possible to break precedent in a temporal

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sense; for example, by suddenly responding to a signal after a long period of studiously ignoring similar requests. A good example of this latter type of novel or precedent-breaking act would be the Iranian Government's unilateral agreement, on June 10, 1984, to limit indiscriminate shelling of civilian targets in the Gulf War, an action which followed a long period of Iran's ignoring or rejecting U.N. initiatives on this question. Alternatively, the quality of novelty can take the form of some entirely new initiative, wholly unrelated to previously enunciated limits or conditions, as when a leader offers to go directly to talk with the adversary's leader in order to break a deadlock. Examples of this type of conciliatory gesture include President Sadat's dramatic visit to Israel in 1977, and President Alfonsin's offer, in September 1985, to talk directly with the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher.

Another aspect of the necessary quality of *novelty* in successfully conveyed conciliatory gestures might involve the differing rates at which major changes in a party's position take place. Purely from the viewpoint of what we have earlier termed *recognizability*, it seems more effective to announce or undertake a major change rather than a series of minor, sequential changes that eventually add up to the same thing. Writing about a slightly different arena, namely the bargaining that *preceded* the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Boer War in 1899, Jan Hofmeyr, the Prime Minister of the (British) Cape Colony wrote that for Transvaal's President Kruger "...to have offered concessions in 'bits and pieces' and to have given the impression that they were 'extorted', ruined their effect on British public opinion..."<sup>16</sup> In contrast, particularly once a conflict is well under way, it seems much more likely that a major move or change in position, made all at once, will be evaluated as a genuine conciliatory gesture than a series of small changes or retreats. Kriesberg and others have referred to such initiatives as being "the strategy of the Grand Gesture" and argue that it can be a particularly powerful means of removing an impasse.<sup>17</sup>

We summarize this first guideline involving the need for an initiative to involve noticeable change or novelty if it is to be recognized as a conciliatory gesture in the following hypothesis:

H.1. *The greater the degree of positive change from an established pattern of behavior, position or set of conditions represented by an action, the more likely is it that the action will be perceived as genuinely conciliatory by the Target.*

To the feature of novelty or precedent breaking, some observers of bargaining behavior have added the quality of *irrevocability*, arguing that there is a major difference between those changes that are (i) promised, (ii) undertaken for the time being and (iii) irrevocably undertaken and executed at the time of announcement. In this sense, the British initiative in *actually* lifting the trade embargo should have made it more likely that the action would be perceived as a conciliatory gesture by the Argentine Government and probably helped to account for that Target's response that this was, at least, an undeniably, "positive act". Conciliatory statements that merely promise to undertake some action in the unspecified future are usually seen by Targets as cheap propaganda, while those contingent upon some action by the Target before being put into effect are regarded with equal suspicion as an

attempt to obtain something by offering a problematical reward. Connected with this argument is one which emphasizes evidence to the effect that actions which are unilaterally initiated rather than reactive (that is, acts *not* eventually undertaken in response to repeated requests, suggestions, or pressures) have a greater likelihood of being recognized and evaluated as genuine.

On closer examination, this set of arguments from the literature on tacit bargaining and negotiation implies three related qualities inherent of actions that are likely to increase the probability of the latter being recognized by a Target as clearly conciliatory. One is *irrevocability*—the degree to which an action, once taken, cannot be rescinded or reversed so that some status quo is easily regained. The others are *non-contingency* and *voluntariness*. All three suggest arguments and hypotheses about increasing the likely success of conciliatory gestures.

Obviously, some actions are, by their very nature, more *revocable* than others, although all acts seem inherently less revocable than mere verbal promises or commitments. Strikes are virtually impossible to re-start after there has been a return to work, so that the latter is a particularly irrevocable gesture in industrial conflicts. Cease-fires are somewhat less difficult to revoke (particularly if merely being used to obtain a breathing space). It is difficult to withdraw recognition of a status or right to exist once conferred. The British lifting of their trade embargo on Argentine goods made any re-imposition (should the initiative fail) difficult, although not wholly impossible. On the other hand, bombing pauses can be ended, a work to rule can be re-imposed and agreements to refrain from other forms of harmful action can be abrogated. In contrast to irrevocable actions, conciliatory gestures of the “I-will-if-you-will” type, as in the case of Argentina’s November 1986 Declaration, merely make the carrying out of the promised actions more remote and give the Initiator an almost limitless opportunity to argue that conditions have not been met or circumstances have changed. Contingent promises are highly revocable. Hence, it is reasonable to suggest a second, general hypothesis about the necessary attributes of successful conciliatory acts:

H.2. *The more irrevocable the effects of an action, the more likely that it will be perceived as a genuine conciliatory gesture by its Target.*

The second important quality that the literature on tacit and direct bargaining suggests as important in influencing the reception of an intended conciliatory gesture might be termed the degree of *voluntariness* inherent in the action used as a conciliatory gesture. To a large degree, this feature arises from the observable fact that parties make what they intend to be conciliatory gestures from very different circumstances, most importantly from circumstances in which the overall *balance of advantage* in the coercive struggle is, to some degree, either favorable or unfavorable. Conciliatory gestures can be made from a position of marked disadvantage in the dispute (following a defeat, the defection of an ally, the loss of a source of financial or material support), from a position of marked advantage, or from a position of stalemate. Each set of circumstances affects the perception and evaluation of any move made by one of the parties to the dispute, but particularly of efforts to make

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“genuine” conciliatory gestures. Most obviously, the question arises: can “coerced” conciliatory moves ever be regarded as “genuine,” in the sense that they are seen to arise from an Initiator’s calculations that an acceptable compromise settlement is now possible, rather than from a sense of weakness or anticipation of impending disaster? Few people might go as far as Eric Nordlinger who says flatly that “...Concessions offered from a weaker group are not concessions at all...”<sup>18</sup> However, the problem of the influence of the balance of advantage in the conflict on the evaluation of conciliatory moves remains a serious one.

Our present inclination is to argue that a conciliatory gesture *can* be recognized and evaluated as such, whether it is offered from a position of marked or slight disadvantage, from stalemate or from slight or marked advantage. It appears reasonable to hypothesize, however, that the likelihood of a conciliatory move being recognized as genuine by its Target will be seriously affected by whether the Target interprets the action as indicating incapacity and weakness rather than altered goals and evaluations of the range of possible solutions; and that this interpretation will be heavily influenced by the fortunes of the adversaries as they attempt to coerce each other towards surrender. Hence, we would propose:

H.3 (1). *The less an action appears to result from the Target’s successful coercion, as a sign of weakness, the more likely it will be perceived as conciliatory by that Target.*

H.3 (2). *Any conciliatory gesture made by a stronger or more advantaged party towards one weaker or disadvantaged is more likely to be perceived by the Target as genuine than the gesture offered by a weaker to a stronger party.*

Finally, the theoretical literature suggests that a third feature which will increase the likelihood that a gesture intended to be conciliatory will be so recognized by the Target is its quality of *non-contingency*: that is, whether the gesture is made contingent upon some response from the Target or whether it is made quite irrespective of whether the Target reacts in the short term or not.<sup>19</sup> There are a number of different types of contingencies involved in actions intended to be conciliatory, all likely to affect whether a Target will view the action as genuine or as some kind of tactical ploy or trap. These range from wholly non-contingent actions to those which are contingent upon some prior or preparatory action from the Target;

(1) “We are now doing X as a sign of good faith, irrespective of what you do.”

[Non-contingent Action]

(2) “We will do X as a sign of good faith, irrespective of what you then do.”

[Non-contingent Promise]

(3) “We will do X, Y and Z in sequence, but our completing the sequence beyond X will depend on some/ the following response from you.” [Non-contingent initiative, contingent sequence.]

(4) “We will do X but only if you commit yourself to doing Y” [Contingent, IFU Promise]

(5) “We will do X if and as you do A.” [Contingent, Tit-for-Tat]



(6) “We will do X but only after you have done A.” (Contingent IFU demand).<sup>20</sup>

Even unsystematic evidence clearly indicates that contingent gestures, such as the last three mentioned above, are unlikely to be perceived as anything other than invitations to the Target to make conciliatory gestures or concessions themselves. That is, the Target bears the costs of unilaterally taking the first step and runs all the attendant risks of being cheated. The third category of offer (Non-contingent initiative, contingent sequence) seems likely to have a better chance of being perceived as conciliatory, although it has the built-in feature of minimizing risks for the Initiator. The first two categories of action, on the other hand, present the greatest dilemma to Targets unsure of any genuine interest in de-escalation on the part of the adversary or, perhaps, wishing to ignore or deny the reality of a conciliatory gesture made towards them. However, the failure of the British removal of the trade embargo in 1985 indicates that, while the quality of non-contingency may make recognition of a conciliatory gesture more probable, it is not sufficient, in itself to ensure either this or acknowledgement and reciprocation. By contrast, the 1986 Argentine offer to end hostilities clearly fell into the category of a Contingent, IFU promise and was perceived by the British as a not very sophisticated trap. From this discussion, we can suggest a hypothesis along the following lines:

*H.4. The less the fulfillment of a conciliatory gesture is contingent upon some Target reciprocation [prior, simultaneous or subsequent], the more likely will it be perceived as genuine.*

If the likelihood of a conciliatory act being recognized as genuine is much affected by the *novelty, irrevocability, voluntariness* and *non-contingency* of that act, it seems equally likely that positive recognition will also be significantly influenced by what might be termed the “positive” or “negative” quality of the gesture being made. These terms are being used to distinguish cases where an Initiator making a conciliatory move actually carries out, or offers to carry out, some initiative involving action on its own part from those in which the initiating party merely refrains or offers to refrain from some activity which is feasible and which would damage the interests of the Target.

Paradoxical as it may seem, there are innumerable examples of parties in conflict attempting to signal to the adversary by omission rather than commission—that is, by deliberately *not* doing something they believe they have the capacity to do—and then expecting this “negative” conciliatory gesture to be perceived, acknowledged, and reciprocated by the adversary.<sup>21</sup> “Surely,” runs the customary argument, “they must realize we could have done X had we chosen, yet we quite deliberately abstained from doing so...” In the large majority of cases, the evidence seems to indicate that “they” either; (i) *didn't* realize it; (ii) did realize it, but felt that the omission involved no sacrifice and may even have brought tactical advantages; or (iii) did realize it, but perceived that an absence of action was due either to incapacity or the costs of acting!

Self restraint is a hard quality to recognize in the best of circumstances, but in intense conflicts, self restraint in an adversary is one of the most difficult qualities to perceive accurately. Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate clearly that one of the least successful

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ways of conveying to an adversary that one is “being reasonable” or conciliatory is to hold back from a feasible action. It might be helpful to hypothesize a continuum of gestures having a decreasing likelihood of being perceived by a Target as genuine. These would run from (1) actually carrying out something beneficial; (2) recognizing or accepting someone or some position; (3) ceasing something unpleasant intended to coerce; and, finally<sup>4</sup> deliberately refraining from some feasible and credibly harmful action not currently being employed against the adversary. At this stage, we merely advance the tentative hypothesis:

H.5. *“Actions” which take the form of refraining from an available activity are less likely to be perceived as genuine conciliatory gestures than are positive acts undertaken by the Initiator.*

Running through much of our previous discussion of the abortive British lifting of the trade embargo in 1985 and the Argentine offer to end hostilities in 1986 was the implication that, to be perceived by a Target as genuine, a gesture must not only be seen to provide benefits to the Target, but must also impose some level of costs on and/or provide no substantial level of benefits for the Initiator. We have noted that at least some of the Argentine targets of the British initiative of July 1985 were able to avoid evaluating the action as genuine by pointing out that it was of considerable benefit to Britain (it allowed necessary imports of Argentine goods), and that it cost the British nothing, since their embargo, like almost all such sanctions, was a two-edged weapon. Similarly, the British were able to argue that the Argentine move in November 1986 offered more potential benefits to the Initiator in Buenos Aires than to the ostensible Target.

These examples suggest that the action most likely to be unambiguously perceived as a conciliatory gesture is one which clearly imposes costs to the Initiator himself, whether these are costs of abandoning a key negotiating position, a tactical advantage, or some physical or material resource; or of loss of political support, vulnerability to domestic criticism, or loss of face or status or bargaining reputation among salient others.<sup>20</sup> Plausibly, we might hypothesize that the higher, more obvious and more immediate the costs, the greater will be the probability that the conciliatory signal will be read aright by the Target. Furthermore, the less the Target perceives, or has convinced himself, that the act in question, even though imposing costs on the Initiator, might also provide benefits in related areas, the more likely the action will be seen as a true gesture of conciliation rather than a bluff, a costless empty move, or playing to some gallery.

With this in mind, we can now advance another set of working hypotheses:

H.6. *The more costly the action to the Initiator, the greater the likelihood that it will be perceived as genuine by the Target.*

H.7 (i) *The fewer the benefits conferred either directly or indirectly on the Initiator by his own conciliatory gesture, the more likely will it be perceived as genuine by the Target.*

H.7 (ii) *If a conciliatory gesture confers benefits on both Target and Initiator, the greater the balance of benefits in favor of the latter, the less the likelihood that the Target will recognize the gesture as genuinely conciliatory.*

Apart from the issue of the distribution of the costs and benefits from a conciliatory move, our two cases also provide some interesting suggestions about a Target’s perceptions

about alternative, underlying motives for an Initiator's actions that may diminish the likelihood of the gestures being perceived as genuine:

H.8 (i) *The less the conciliatory action is perceived as an effort to buy time, the greater the likelihood that the Target will recognize it as genuine.*

H.8 (ii) *The less a conciliatory action is perceived as an attempt to "buy off" domestic critics, either "hawks" or "doves", the more likely will the Target recognize it as genuine.*

H.8 (iii) *The less a conciliatory action is perceived as playing to some external "gallery" (the UN, patrons and supporters, "world public opinion") the more likely will the Target recognize it as genuine.*

A final lesson that might be drawn from this relative failure of the British gesture in July 1985 arises from the Argentine reaction to the signal sent with the news of the embargo's termination—namely, that the British were still not going to discuss sovereignty. What the British gesture had clearly *not* done, therefore, was to put at risk their position on the central issue in dispute with Argentina—indeed, it was argued by several Argentine observers that the British had very carefully avoided any increased vulnerability by the manner in which the communication was made and the very order in which issues were raised in the text. This reaction suggests one further quality that might, in general, increase the likelihood of a gesture's being seen by a Target as genuinely conciliatory. This quality, which might reinforce the effects on credibility of both increased cost and decreased benefit might be characterized as increased risk to, or *vulnerability* of the Initiator.

There is an inherent plausibility in the idea that any action that renders an Initiator vulnerable to some reaction (either by third parties able to take advantage, but particularly by the direct Target of that action) will be recognized by the Target as *genuine*, even if this does not mean that the Target will take up either opportunity offered by the gesture.<sup>21</sup> Much of the literature on building *trust* in an inter-personal relationship where none had previously existed emphasizes that one way to develop a minimal level necessary to conclude some "keep-able" agreement is to place oneself in a position where one can be taken advantage of (to make oneself deliberately vulnerable or to "...expose oneself...")<sup>22</sup> The argument is put most succinctly by Bennis, who states that "...when a person trusts enough to make himself vulnerable by exposing himself, trust is generated in the other person..."<sup>23</sup> The final result is that parties begin to "...move themselves from a state of expectations in which they make non-trusting choices to the state in which they expect and make trusting choices..."<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, however desirable the process, the classic dilemma of "Who moves first?" remains a prime obstacle to beginning the process. Leaving aside temporarily the immense practical problems, the theoretical argument re-emphasizes our contention that unilateral actions which generally increase the recognizability of acts as conciliatory gestures equally generally expose the Initiator to risk.<sup>25</sup> It also suggests that neither the British in 1985 nor the Argentines in 1986 seemed to be risking anything substantial. In 1977, Sadat risked a great deal. Hence the hypothesis:

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H.9. *The more an action renders an Initiator obviously vulnerable, or places him in a risky situation vis a vis the Target, or some third party, the more likely the action will be seen as genuinely conciliatory by the Target.*

From the general discussion above, an initial outline of the qualities of an action likely to increase the probability of its being recognized as genuinely conciliatory by a Target has emerged as a series of testable hypotheses. Clearly, actions that are non-costly and irrelevant are unlikely to be seen as conciliatory. Equally, gestures which appear to be playing to some international gallery, buying time or heading off some domestic problems will easily be dismissed or rationalized as not “truly” conciliatory. Moreover, our Israeli/Palestinian anecdote indicates that reluctant or tardy acceptance of an already existing set of circumstances about which the Initiator can do little (at least in the foreseeable future) is an almost wholly *negative* gesture and unlikely to be perceived as even minimally conciliatory. Acceptance of a status quo is most unlikely to be perceived as any kind of concession!

Our tentative list of key characteristics contains eight central qualities that, arguably, increase substantially the likelihood that a gesture or signal will be both *communicated* and *received* as a genuine conciliatory gesture. Tentatively, therefore, we suggest that, to have a high probability of being recognized by the Target as genuinely conciliatory, an action must display the qualities of:

- (1) *Benefit*—it must confer some substantial and unambiguous benefit on the Target and *not* the Initiator or, at least, the *balance* of benefits must clearly favor the Target.
- (2) *Novelty*—it must be clearly precedent breaking.
- (3) *Irrevocability*—once made, it must be difficult to annul, rescind or amend; return to the status quo should not be an option.
- (4) *Non-contingency*—its implementation must not depend upon some action by the Target, or the fulfillment of some prior conditions.
- (5) *“Voluntariness”*—it must clearly be made unilaterally and not seen to be undertaken as a result of prior pressure, coercion or extortion.
- (6) *Cost*—it must impose a price or some cost on the Initiator
- (7) *Activity*—it must involve some positive action by the Initiator, rather than being merely an abstention from [damaging] action.
- (8) *Risk*—it must increase the Initiator’s *vulnerability* in some fashion, without having a similar effect on the Target.<sup>26</sup>

Combining the list of characteristics outlined above with our arguments about how an Initiator might increase the likelihood that a gesture intended to be conciliatory will be so recognized by its Target, we arrive at a working hypothesis along the following lines:

*An action which is precedent-breaking and carried out on a non-contingent basis by one party, that clearly confers benefits on its Target while both imposing costs on and increasing the vulnerability of the Initiator to negative reactions by the Target, has a high probability of being recognized as a “genuine” conciliatory gesture by the Target. That probability is increased if the action is carried out voluntarily, consciously and deliberately, rather than because of coercion and expediency; without apparent*

*achievement or expectation of immediate advantage, either domestic or international; and in such a way as to make subsequent revocation of the effects of the action difficult if not impossible.*

It seems unlikely that any move by an initiating party would ever likely embody all, or even most, of this list of desirable characteristics. Should some moves embody a greater number than others, there remain questions of the appropriate, most effective mix and the relative effects of various qualities. For example, will purported conciliatory gestures which are wholly unprecedented but confer little of immediate substance on the Target be recognized and responded to by a Target *more often* than initiatives which are merely minor alterations to a previous position but which confer more of value on the Target? On this, , hard evidence is lacking, although some practitioners have put forward arguments that the qualities of benefit conferred, novelty, irrevocability, and non-contingency are more central to a process of recognition and positive evaluation by a Target than other, more peripheral qualities.<sup>27</sup>

We would argue that the kind of action outlined above undoubtedly represents an unrealizable ideal, given the constraints of practical politics, especially in conflicts where the Target is mistrusted, feared, and (probably) hated. However, our argument here is merely that, if an action is to have any chance of being perceived as a conciliatory gesture, it must contain some minimal level of the qualities outlined in our working hypotheses.

#### **4. The Context of Successful Conciliatory Gestures**

For practical politics, the nature and characteristics or *content* of the conciliatory signal itself are merely one aspect of the overall process of communication at the start of a de-escalation process. Other factors extraneous to the action itself (*contextual* factors) can profoundly affect its success or failure. Put another way, we have spent some time discussing the *what* of communicating a willingness to talk through the making of conciliatory gestures, that is, the nature of the conciliatory action and its characteristics. It is also important to consider, in as much detail, the *how, where, when* and *by whom* aspects of the process, as well as the overall environment (particularly the relationship of the adversaries) within which the action occurs. All of these features, the context of the gesture, will influence the recognizability, credibility, and thus the success of conciliatory gestures by affecting, among other things, the ability of the Target to rationalize the purported conciliatory move into something else. Each of these aspects needs thorough consideration in our overall framework.

As regards the *where* of a concession, the actual place chosen in 1985 by the British for announcing the lifting of the embargo clearly shows that the forum within which a conciliatory gesture is announced can radically affect its likelihood of being seen as mere playing to the gallery. The choice of Brazil may have seemed appropriate from London, but the Argentine reaction showed that decision makers in Buenos Aires were more likely to see the British Foreign Minister as actually a part of the gallery to which he was playing!

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Generally, the forum chosen for announcing the concessions or other moves is likely to affect which potential audience might be perceived by the Target as the "real" target the Initiator is trying to affect.

Logically, one would think that the best policy for communicating concessions while avoiding suspicions of playing to some gallery would be to announce them directly, privately, and exclusively to the Target. Unfortunately, here one comes up against another of the paradoxes that besets the making of conciliatory gestures. Publicly announced concessions lose deniability and increase the Initiator's commitment to any promised action. Potential conciliators are thus caught in a dilemma of where and how best to make their gesture, recalling that the more specifically and secretly it is aimed at the Target (and only at the Target), the more worried that Target will be about holding the Initiator to any commitment; but recognizing that the more widely broadcast any announcement of a concession, the greater the risk of the Target's perceiving that the Initiator is "really" playing to a gallery somewhere. In many cases, parties try to minimize both risks by preliminary, private soundings about conciliatory gestures, but the procedures appear to have been followed neither by the British in the summer of 1985 nor the Argentines in November 1986.

Somewhat similar dilemmas confront parties contemplating conciliatory gestures with respect to issues of timing (*when*) and the means of making a concession (*how*). Appropriate timing can minimize a Target's perception that a signal is "just" to buy time, to head off criticism in some international forum, compelled by a worsening balance of advantage in the dispute. Inappropriate timing can reinforce all such impressions, as well as creating the belief that a gesture results from internal divisions or rising domestic opposition to a continuation of the struggle.

Similarly, the recognizability and credibility of a conciliatory gesture can be helped or harmed by the method by which it is announced or carried out. There seem to be no clear guidelines on this. The British gesture towards Argentina was simultaneously announced by the Foreign Minister replying to a formal welcome from his Brazilian hosts, while an official announcement was made in the national legislature by his deputy in answer to a planted question. On the other hand, the series of concessions that initiated a conciliatory process between the USA and the USSR which culminated in the Test Ban Treaty began with a speech by the US President to an audience at an American university.<sup>28</sup> A substantial Soviet concession during the Cuban Missile crisis was privately conveyed to a US journalist and a major conciliatory gesture by the Sudanese Government in Khartoum to the South Sudanese Liberation Movement appeared in an article in a Sudanese English language newspaper some nine months before the negotiations at Addis Ababa to end the first Sudanese civil war. Presently, there seems to be no discernible pattern in elucidating what method of announcing or making conciliatory gestures will assist or hinder their recognition and acknowledgement by a Target. One may emerge later, of course, as a result of systematic, comparative study.

It is somewhat easier to suggest some guidelines about the question of the actual source of the conciliatory gesture—that is, who actually makes the initiative—and how this affects the recognizability and credibility of the gesture in the eyes of the Target. Once again, a key element seems to be the degree of commitment implied by the status of the source and whether it is possible (in the case of sources with no obvious personal status) to trace back an unambiguous line to some source whose position will provide some imprint of official approval and commitment to a promise or action.<sup>29</sup> The general rule of thumb that the higher the status and position of the conciliator, the less deniable or revocable the concession, is a reasonable starting point, although cases where senior officials find their own hands tied and thus have to act indirectly through proxies complicate our proposing any simple relationship.

The crucial question that decision makers who become the Target of a conciliatory gesture seem likely to ask themselves is; Who can *really* commit the adversary? There is a proper wariness of unofficial Greeks bearing gifts, even though, on occasions, their adversary may find these officials are the only people available to send with private, exploratory offers. Hence, the tendency is to wait for official approaches or announcements, for the higher level of commitment that results from even a private offer from a top leader. Sometimes, of course, there are elements of recognition involved in this procedure. It seems clear that the series of semi-official emissaries visiting Eamon De Valera between January and June 1921 were treated with polite skepticism by the Irish leader, partly because he wanted the commitment of an official approach from someone such as the British Government, but also because he wanted an element of recognition for his own position (as well as that of Sinn Fein) which would be embodied in a direct offer to him from somebody like the British prime Minister, David Lloyd George.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, one set of factors likely to affect the recognizability and credibility of any conciliatory gesture arises from the inescapable fact that such a gesture is unlikely to occur in perfect isolation. Usually, the signal that one party is ready to talk will merely be one signal embedded in a host of others, frequently hostile and coercive or, at best, ambiguous and contradictory. A Target will usually have the problem of “pulling out” the conciliatory gesture from a welter of other communications arising from the continuing conflict and of subjecting it to the careful scrutiny its senders require. Parties in conflict seldom speak to the adversary with a united voice or coordinate their actions and behaviors in any very coherent manner. Add to this the sheer difficulty presented by the overwhelming number and variety of signals emanating from any party to an intense dispute and the difficulties inherent in the task of recognizing a conciliatory gesture become apparent.<sup>31</sup>

It is seldom possible in the midst of conflict to do the equivalent of announcing; “Quiet, please: I am about to send a conciliatory signal”! Even when one wishes to send such a communication, it has to be done against a background of “noise” arising from the continuing prosecution of the campaign to win. This cannot practically be suspended and will seldom be halted on the chance that a conciliatory “trial balloon” will bring the desired

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response. The “noise” of coercion surrounding a concessionary signal is often enough to drown it. The Target, in turn, may not reciprocate which would be interpreted as a rejection, given the imbalance of attention given to signals by senders and receivers.

Consider the period leading up to the ceasefire in Ireland in the summer of 1921 and the subsequent negotiations between Sinn Fein and the British Government. During that time, Lloyd George and the British administration in Ireland made a number of gestures indicating that they might be willing to talk and offer concessions to meet Sinn Fein’s goals. However, at the same time, they were: carrying out a policy of coercion and repression; announcing that the gunmen were on the run and that they “...had murder by the throat...”; holding elections under a new constitution that divided Ireland; announcing martial law in parts of southern Ireland; and generally behaving as though their main objective was to achieve victory rather than a compromise settlement in their struggle against Irish independence. In such circumstances (the rule rather than the exception in intense conflicts) conciliatory gestures are either drowned or cancelled out by the sheer business of trying to resist coercion by one’s adversary. In this, as in many other cases, it is likely that the overpowering nature of the environment for the conciliatory gesture, rather than any qualities (or lack of them) in the action itself, is the crucial factor in determining whether a conciliatory gesture is even perceived, let alone acknowledged and reciprocated.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper points up a lack of any systematic, comparative knowledge about one aspect of the complex process of conflict termination, namely signalling a willingness to talk in such a way that the likelihood of an adversary recognizing the gesture as conciliatory and perhaps responding positively is maximized. In the absence of systematic analysis, we have suggested a number of not too implausible working hypotheses about the characteristics of actions that have the best chance of being recognized by an adversary as “real” or “genuine” in the midst of conflict. In doing so, we have tried to isolate a number of general principles that could be helpful in explaining why certain actions were effective in starting a process of de-escalation (at least leading to “talks about talks”), while other actions were not.

We have focussed on the likelihood of successful communication of a credible conciliatory gesture, if this is what a party wishes to convey. The real world of political conflict presents numerous examples of false conciliatory gestures made for tactical advantage, concessions extracted from a reluctant adversary and de-escalation processes begun purely to obtain a breathing space, which will be repudiated once the balance of advantage changes. However, sorting out the genuinely intended signals from those designed as a ruse or smoke screen does not seem to be an inherently hopeless task for further research. It is unlikely that the accurate perception of genuine concessions in past conflicts has occurred in a wholly individual or random manner. Our hope, as scholars, must be that systematic empirical analysis will indicate patterns in this phenomenon, throwing light on the manner in which conflicts begin to terminate, even if this proves only a



temporary halt. This paper seeks to contribute to such an understanding, by setting out the problems clearly and suggesting a framework within which useful questions can be posed.

### ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES.

Ideas for this paper arose originally from work carried out in the Conflict Termination Project in the Department of Systems Science at the City University, London. Sincere thanks are due to Dean Pruitt of SUNY, Buffalo; Louis Kriesberg of the Peace and Conflict Resolution Program, Syracuse University; Alan Simpson, Visiting Fellow; Shaw Smith, Diplomat in Residence at the Center for Conflict Analysis & Resolution; and to doctoral students in CONF 751 for helpful comments and criticisms.

1. Paul Pillar, *Negotiating Peace: War Termination as a Bargaining Process* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).
2. Among other works, see particularly Robert Randle's comprehensive study, *The Origins of Peace* (New York: Free Press, 1973); Fred C. Ikle's *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971); and the symposium edited by W.T.R. Fox, *How Wars End*, produced in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 242 (November 1970).
3. As early as 1966, Kalevi Holsti pointed this out; "...both (parties) must initially agree that a partial withdrawal of demands...is preferable to continued conflict, and only after this decision has been reached can they begin discussing the substantive terms of a compromise agreement..." K.J. Holsti "Resolving Conflict Internationally" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 10 (September 1966) 272-96.
4. Some research work on the problems of de-escalation and the process of pre-negotiation has recently been undertaken, most notably by Louis Kriesberg in, for example, "Non-coercive Inducements in US-Soviet Relations," *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 9 (Spring 1981) 1-16; and "Social Theory and the De-escalation of International Conflict" *Sociological Review* 32 (August 1984) 471-91.
5. Kriesberg refers to such actions as "...overt, unilateral gestures in initiating de-escalatory changes..." in "De-escalating International Conflicts," *Maxwell News and Notes* 18 (Fall 1983) 2.
6. Dean G. Pruitt "Indirect Communication and the Search for Agreement in Negotiation" *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 1 1971 205-39.
7. Louis Kriesberg "Non-coercive Inducements."
8. A basic paradox of de-escalation is that, at least as far as signalling some concession is concerned, the less one side has publicly defined its bargaining range and "sticking

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- points”, the easier it is to make some retreat as a concession; but the more difficult it is to have that concession recognized by an adversary.
9. It is not infrequently the case that one or both sides have made de-escalation difficult by proclaiming that certain issues cannot be discussed, let alone negotiated. They thus paint themselves into an inconvenient corner not merely when talks *do* come about but earlier, when they decide that the time has come to signal greater flexibility in their existing position and a willingness to talk about talks.
  10. Even though the actual actions/statements used as conciliatory gestures may vary from case to case, and the environment varies from ambiguous to unambiguous, the essential purposes underlying the conciliatory act remain similar, being some combination of: (i) reducing tension and hostility in order to de-escalate, (ii) developing trust, and (iii) eliciting reciprocal concessions.
  11. It may be that such a bargaining map was overtly laid out at an earlier time but is subsequently revised, perhaps covertly. Therefore, it may not be desirable to give this revision away to an adversary.
  12. President Nixon first publicly signalled his desire for a *rapprochement* with the Government of Mao-tse-Tung by referring to China as “the Chinese Peoples Republic” in a speech made in Washington on October 25, 1970. See Seymour Hersch, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983 365.
  13. It is reasonable to hypothesize that the probability of an action’s being perceived as conciliatory will depend very much upon (i) the intensity of the conflict and resultant suspicion, (ii) the efficiency of the information gathering and processing system of the Target, and (iii) the personality of the decision makers involved in interpreting in-coming signals from the adversary. In almost any conflict, it becomes increasingly difficult to recognize a conciliatory gesture from the adversary as that conflict escalates and intensifies. Participants confront an “enemy” and tend to see what they anticipate from that enemy as well as what they want to see—signs of weakening, lack of resolve or diminishing capability rather than efforts to move toward some mutually beneficial compromise.
  14. Even gestures which individual decision makers define to themselves as “genuine” can be dismissed in cabinet or committee as “tactical ploys” or “playing to the gallery,” should admitting to a more positive evaluation prove dangerous or embarrassing. Moreover, even generally and openly shared agreement among leaders as to the genuineness of an adversary’s gesture might not be enough to elicit a positive response if such a reaction were deemed costly or fraught with domestic risk.
  15. However, viewed another way, the British gesture could be interpreted merely as a move back towards a status quo existing before the 1982 War and hence as part of a

process of “normalization”. See, Ikle’s discussion of negotiations that have “normalization” as their main goal in *How Nations Negotiate*. Usually, “precedent breaking” implies a change from some immediately preceding set of circumstances, in this case, the continuation of wartime sanctions, so that our characterization of the British announcement as “precedent breaking does not seem too perverse.

16. Quoted in Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979) 100–101.
17. See L. Kriesberg, *Social Theory* for this concept.
18. See E.A. Nordlinger, *Conflict Regulation in Divided Societies* (Harvard University: Center for International Studies, 1972) 29.
19. In many respects, this quality is intimately connected with that of *reversibility*, or the revocability of the concession.
20. The costs confronted and born by Sadat as a result of his visit to Israel and subsequent pursuit of a negotiated settlement do not need to be underlined.
21. This is one of the factors that deters leaders from making *any* gesture or, at least, persuades them to search for some alternative that does not expose them to the uncertainties of providing opportunities for damage from a distrusted adversary. Lorenz, in his classic work on animal aggression, has pointed out that, in many species, a gesture of conciliation and submission consists of one animal deliberately exposing some vital and vulnerable part of its body to an adversary, thus providing the latter with an opportunity for striking a killing blow.
22. See Robert L. Swinth, “The Establishment of the Trust Relationship,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (September 1967) 11 335–45.
23. See Warren G. Bennis “Changing Organizations” *Journal of Applied behavioral Science* 1966 2 247–63.
24. “Trust”, in this sense, is defined as a mutual expectation that one party will not deliberately hurt the other to satisfy his own needs.
25. Many of the arguments arising from attribution theory tend to support this hypothesis. Lindskold, among others, has noted that attribution theory would hypothesize that trustworthiness would be attributed to an Actor by a Target, or an Observer, the more the actor’s behavior was consistently trustworthy, the more it was unusual or “out of role” and the more it was perceived as being internally motivated rather than the result of external pressures. Most importantly, however, they note that a person’s action will be taken to be genuinely expressive of his true dispositions if the action in question involves risk of loss or actual costs.

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S. Lindsfold and M.A. Finch, "Styles of Announcing Conciliation" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 25 ( March 1981) 145-55. See also H.H. Kelley "The Process of Causal Attribution" *American Psychologist* 28 1973 pp. 107-128.

26. My colleague from the State Department, Shaw Smith, has argued very vigorously that by far the most important content characteristic of a purported conciliatory gesture is the level of *benefit* it confers on a Target (including in this concept *potential future benefit*) and that, frequently, this will be the deciding factors, outweighing all others, in a Target's perception of the genuineness and worth of the initiative, and hence in its ultimate *success*. From this viewpoint, benefit far outweighs factors like conditionality and is likely to dominate Target's evaluations and response.
27. These are, of course, the very qualities which characterize actions that decision makers usually try to avoid. In their search for some gesture that will appear to be conciliatory to the other side, then, there is a tendency to search for the least costly and least risky act leaders feel they can "afford". Unfortunately, given the inherent difficulty in actually recognizing and appreciating self-imposed costs or risk taking in an adversary, such affordable concessions are least likely to be perceived as meaningful gestures by the Target within his own frame of reference.
28. See A. Etzioni, "The Kennedy Experiment," *Western Political Quarterly* 20 1967 361-80.
29. Sydney Bailey, the Quaker scholar, has reported an instance in which an initiative from President Sadat via the Egyptian Embassy in London ( and thence through Quaker channels) broke down in Israel because, although the Israeli Government displayed interest, it could not be demonstrated conclusively that the initiative actually originated from Sadat. See S.D. Bailey  
  
"Non-Official Mediation in International Disputes: Reflections of the Quaker Experience," *International Affairs* 1985 205-22.
30. See Lord Longford and T.P. O'Neill, *Eamon De Valera* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971) Chapter 10.
31. Both Osgood and Etzioni deal with this problem of sending "mixed signals" in their work and conclude that conciliatory gestures can be negated if they take place while other signals are being prominently transmitted. See A. Etzioni, *The Hard Way to Peace* (New York: Crowell Collier Books, 1962) 103 and C. Osgood, *Perspectives on Foreign Policy 2nd ed.* (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1966) 28.