

*Section II of*

# **Eye of the Storm Politics**

## **The Art and Craft of Navigating Human Hurricanes**



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The Fourth National Symposium on Dispute Resolution in Special Education  
December 9, 2006  
Washington DC

## II.

# INTO THE FRAY



*"Conflict builds character. Crisis defines it."  
- Steven V. Thulon*

## *Starting Point*

### *The Mugwump Connection*

The impulse to manage conflict constructively goes back 40,000 years and spans 4,000 cultures and language groups. It runs parallel to our deepest destructive impulses. Across time and distance, biological necessity and social ingenuity have created artful political interventions in conflicts, among them, Hawaiian Ho'oponopono, the Leopard Chief practices of Central Africa, the Rabbinic interventions of Central Europe, Afghanistan's Loya Jirga procedures, the disentangling ceremonies of Melanesia, the peace pipe rituals of Native Americans, the Yoriai tradition of Japan, and the song contests of certain Eskimo peoples.

The tribes of the Papua New Guinea highlands, for example, have a long history of aggression. Fights typically start over the same things all of us dispute about: interpersonal disagreements, religious and philosophical differences, dominion and domain. The person who is good at preventing fights or settling them is called a "Big Man." A respected and effective Big Man will use all kinds of artful devices to help the conflicting parties try and achieve a parity that ends the conflict and averts bloodshed. Women - the "Big Meris" -- have equivalent roles in their own circles.

You might think of the Big Man as a "Mugwump," a term that dates back to the bellwether U.S. election of 1884. That was the year when a reform-minded faction of the Republican Party led by Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, and George Curtis refused to support the candidacy of James G. Blaine for the presidency. Instead, they formed a splinter group which came to be called the Mugwumps. Their particular political heresy was supporting a more progressive Democratic candidate, Grover Cleveland, who won the election.

After the election, the Mugwumps returned to the Republican fold and Teddy Roosevelt went on to become president a few years later. But over time, the word mugwump became synonymous with people who refuse to follow the party line. The term migrated to England where it has the same meaning. Albert J. Engle, a political commentator of the time, described a mugwump as "one of them boys who always has his mug on one side of the political fence and his wump on the other." Ambrose Bierce described a mugwump as "one who is afflicted with self-respect and addicted to the vice of independence."

The most interesting part of the mugwump saga though belongs to Charles Dana. A 19<sup>th</sup> century journalist with the New York Sun, Dana is the person who coined the phrase “mugwump” in the first place. He took it from the Algonquian Indian word “mogkiomp” which means, among other things, “Big Man.” Today, the term is out of fashion, but still signifies a person who acts independently in political conflict.

Mugwumpery requires a different way of thinking, behaving, and engaging. Lucy Moore from Santa Fe is a mugwump. She brokers difficult meetings between Indian tribes and government agencies. So too are Paul Cosgrave, Sister Marilyn Ross, former U.S. Senator George Mitchell, and Michael Lewis. Paul helped put together a “Liquor Accord” to combat drunkenness in one community in Sydney. Sister Marilyn of the Sisters of Mercy organized an improbable low-income housing coalition in Omaha. Former Senator George Mitchell helped forge the peace in Ireland. And Michael Lewis helped thousands of black farmers achieve negotiated settlements with the federal government.

If you think you may have mugwump tendencies, take comfort from this: there are more of you around than you might think and you will continue to be one of humanity’s best-kept secrets.

## 11. Tension.

*"I leaned into the storm as though my small house had transformed into some blockish barge floundering upon a white and roiling sea. The stovepipe howled. The dog hid. He knew it meant to lure us outside, entice us to have a better look at its magic." - Mark Spragg*

Conflict fuels change, change creates conflict, and politics is the transformer. The impetus to alter things and the countervailing drive to resist are in constant tension. Eric Shinseki, the former U.S. Army Chief who was fired by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld when he disagreed with Rumsfeld's Iraq strategy, put it this way: "If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less." The political eye of the storm is a peculiar vantage point, a center to things, a calm place where turbulence waxes and wanes around you, where gales arise and dissipate, where pyrotechnics terrify and energize, where harm and possibility occur in the same instance, where matters circulate for a time, and then fade away. The eye of the storm is not for everyone. If you practice being there or find comfort in it, you can use it to good ends and enjoy the intimacy of being part of the exercise of power. If not, find some other line of work.

## 12. Truth.

*"All great truths begin as blasphemies." - George Bernard Shaw*

Everyone holds their own corner on what is right. The sharper the conflict, the deeper the conviction grows. Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots fought over the truth. Mary lost her head. Stalin fought with Trotsky over the truth. Trotsky was assassinated. Burr and Hamilton argued about political truth and it grew progressively more personal until Burr dueled with Hamilton at Weehawken New Jersey and killed him. When controversy breaks out, there is no single truth, only different stories about reality. The most dangerous combatants are those who cannot acknowledge multiple realities. Conflicts are kaleidoscopic with many different truths. So the first order of business is to cease antagonizing each other long enough to explore the view planes people are operating on. The second is to understand the different and varied meanings the conflict is imbued with. Only then can you start the journey towards solutions.

### 13. Estimations.

*“Wars and elections are both too big and too small to matter in the long run. The daily work that goes on, it adds up.” - Barbara Kingsolver*

Not all conflicts are worth the fight. Sizing up the situation requires judgments: who and how many are affected, potential risks and benefits, and the consequences of action and inaction. Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson held each other in mutual contempt but managed to work together when they had to even if their faces were sour and their knuckles clenched white the whole time. Our language is rich with words and phrases that illuminate the finer gradations and distinctions of conflict and change. Of the former, we distinguish between feuds, fights, fusses, frictions, donnybrooks, brouhahas, kafuffles, and confrontations. Among the latter, we talk about variation, adjustment, modification, revolution, and transformation. No change is good by itself. No conflict is inherently bad. Both embody peril and prospect. Both can be influenced for the better.

## 14. Physics.

*“The Areopagites, finding themselves perplexed with a cause they could not unravel, ordered the parties to appear again in a hundred years.” - Montaigne*

It is one thing to talk about conflict in general, and quite another to immerse yourself in the details. The particulars are always more important than the sweeping generalizations we may like to make about the human condition. If you eliminate too much complexity, things lose their meaning. Both Newtonian and Quantum thinking are helpful here. The Newtonian approach assumes that the universe is ordered, linear, clock-like, and that we can take the problem apart as if it was a doorknob. Quantum thinking helps us grapple with complexity, multiple and uncertain outcomes, divergent values, and the dynamics of small things spiraling into larger effects. You can use the first to fix clocks, build skyscrapers, and design 787s. You can use the second to work with people, groups, and politics.

## 15. Windows.

*"People, things, unseen forces, sort of come together from time to time. That's what I believe." - Michael Connelly*

Galileo parried with the Catholic Church. Generals Patton and Montgomery had titanic egos and continually poked and jabbed at each other. So did J. Edgar Hoover and Martin Luther King. Political conflicts have an arc. They are passion plays, Kabuki performances, and Shakespearean dramas in the round. They begin with some actual or impending sense of injury: a grievance, a complaint, a sense - rightfully or wrongfully - of being victimized. Demands are made. When the offers are rejected, threats, bluffs, and brinkmanship ensue. As the fight escalates, matters move to action. People demonize each other. Communication channels sever. People rely on lawyers, handlers, and press agents. Fights ripple outward with unintended consequences and sometimes surprising revenge effects. Others, with or without an immediate stake in the fight, are swept into the vortex. Coalitions form. Battles become more tactical, heated, and fearful. All the while, there are little punctuations and hesitations, moments when the window of a possible resolution opens and closes.

## 16. Below.

"Things are not what they seem. Skim milk masquerades as cream." - Gilbert & Sullivan

The realpolitik of most conflicts lies composted in the layers beneath the pronouncements people make. Surface appearances are deceptive. Fact, fiction, and opinion jumble together. What looks like obstinate, enduring, intractable opposition is often an exterior expression of other things. Make no snap judgments about bad character, immoral behavior, and out-of-control personalities. In conflict, we see people at their worst. In resolution and reconciliation, we see them at their best. The core matters -- creativity, imagination, and forgiveness -- are possible in every conflict. Don't be put off or sidetracked by emotional intensity. Down below there are solutions there that can be mined.

## 17. Alignment.

*"The bamboo that bends is stronger than the oak that resists." – Japanese Proverb*

There are many simplistic strategies for handling political conflict. Avoidance is one. Defiance and opposition is another. Accommodation and capitulation is a third. The least used is "Flow" which requires give and take, push and pull, bending and curving, and the emergence of a combined energy. In 1666 the physicist Christian Huygens noticed that two pendulum clocks had moved into the same swinging rhythm. He experimentally duplicated that phenomenon and concluded that small amounts of energy are transferred between similar systems when they are out of phase. "Entrainment" is the process by which two connected but oscillating systems naturally synchronize and align. Redirecting negative intents in directions that are mutually advantageous is a form of constructive but wary engagement. The well-honed attitude towards subtle movements and shifting patterns allows for two-way movements of information and intuition, an irregular movement that can eventually become regular. Becoming comfortable with this is one of life's great challenges. Most people fail. Those that succeed find great satisfaction.

## 18. Rhythm.

*"jazz is the big brother of the blues. If a guy's playing blues like we play, he's in high school. When he starts playing jazz it's like going on to college, to a school of higher learning." - B.B. King*

Comes a moment when the problem seems clear. The room is full of noise and discord, or at the other end of the spectrum, an utter silence charged with hurt and anger. Each person plays their own tune, out loud or in their own head. Then something happens, a nod, a gesture, a momentary acquiescence, and the glimmer of a new idea emerges. A small theme pops up, the start of a possible melody. People move in for awhile and do solos and improvisations, then back as they blend with others. There are probes and resting points, saying things without saying them, moments when tempers flash, but also the slow, unfolding of cooperation. All the while, there is a subtle beat that someone is keeping, steady, easy, and just enough for the others to make music. The music is jazz. You are the drummer.

## 19. Breakdowns.

*"Never ascribe to an opponent motives meaner than your own." - John M. Barrie*

Too often, useful discussions seem to be defeated for the wrong reasons. No one quite knows how to organize a dialogue, a deliberation, or a civil debate. Perhaps there is no shared and accepted process for discussion. Perhaps there is a premature push for decisions and "us" versus "them" votes. Or maybe communication fault lines trigger an escalating spiral of suspicion. In the most extreme situations, people of high intelligence, great integrity, and vast good will suddenly explode and stalk off. Nietzsche said that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. Small breakdowns force you to work harder. Breakdowns are breakthroughs delayed. They are the precursor of success.

## 20. Luck.

*"Even a blind hog finds a truffle now and then." - Anon*

In June, 1944 on the eve of D-day, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander in Chief, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, European Theater of Operation, sat in England preparing to launch the greatest armed invasion in history. His aim: the liberation of Europe and the defeat of fascism. The weather inside and outside Headquarters, was uncooperative. General Charles de Gaulle was prickly. General George Patton was imperious. General Bernard Law Montgomery was preening and jealous. Every delay heightened the risk of losing the crucial element of surprise. Eisenhower adroitly managed all the quarrelsome and egotistical generals but couldn't do much about the three storm fronts moving south from Scotland. When a small but not fully ideal break in the weather finally came, he seized the opening, unsure of whether it was a clear enough window to accomplish the mission. It was the beginning of the end of World War II. You won't get damaged standing on the sideline. You also may take a beating jumping in. But fortune has a way of finding those who take the calculated risk. The same is true if you are making critical deals, leading the effort to find solutions, or waging peace.