

## *Beyond Neutrality:* A Review Essay

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**Bernard Mayer, *Beyond Neutrality: Confronting the Crisis in Conflict Resolution*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004. pp. 312+xvii.**

Events are forcing those of us who have been in the conflict resolution field a long time to reconsider what we do and why we do it. Some of those events are global in scope—the two wars the United States has initiated in the last three years, the continuing violence between Israel and the Palestinians, the ongoing carnage in Chechnya, and more. Some of the events are specific to us, most notably the Hewlett Foundation’s decision to end their funding of our work.

So, Bernard Mayer’s *Beyond Neutrality* could not have been published at a more opportune time. Mayer calls the book a loving critique of our work. Loving because he has been a practitioner for more than a quarter century. Critique because he thinks the field is at a crossroads at which we could either stagnate or make a huge leap forward in the quantity and quality of what we do.

What I have therefore tried to do here is to write a review essay that starts by assessing Mayer’s argument. Then, actually takes it farther and, I hope, deepens the importance of what he has to say.

But first, some “truth in advertising.” Bernie and I have known each other since we were undergraduates at Oberlin in the late 1960s. Our professional relationship began when I became engaged in the conflict resolution field in the 1980s not long after he and his colleagues formed CDR. It intensified after I joined the staff of Search for Common Ground four years ago.

At first, I did not want to write this essay because I was concerned about conflict of interest issues. But I quickly realized that we shared different avenues to getting beyond neutrality, both of which should illuminate why his book is one of the few “must reads” in our field. I will use the work of organizations like Search that have already addressed each of Mayer’s most important critiques to a degree to illustrate the power of his argument.

Mayer’s overarching claim is that colleagues whose roots lie in mediation and related practices miss many aspects of conflict engagement where we could and should be engaged. By contrast, because of the way it was founded, Search for Common Ground does very little formal mediation and, without often being conscious of theoretical underpinnings of what we do, have at least intermittently acted in ways consistent what I take to be Mayer’s four most important specific exhortations.

## Two Paths

Much of the conceptual core of conflict resolution practice comes from work on mediation and arbitration. Colleagues who start from that part of the field focus on finding alternative forms of dispute resolution through which a win/win agreement can be struck about disputes, ranging from divorces to the Oslo peace process of 1993.

Mayer and I come to the field from a very different starting point. As I jokingly put it, we majored in ending the war in Vietnam. Political issues have always been high on our professional agendas ever since. Bernie and his colleagues formed CDR in part as they struggled to figure out how to fit into the anti nuclear movement in Colorado.

That said, CDR's practice has been largely in the traditional mediation and training field. Their practice has expanded to include public policy and international dispute resolution, but it is still one someone trained as a classical mediator would recognize.

I entered the field through the Beyond War movement in the 1980s. Beyond War was an educational effort to help people see how they could take personal responsibility for an increasingly interdependent world with nuclear weapons and a host of other unresolved conflicts. So, for me as a political scientist, conflict resolution has always been political. That belief has only been strengthened by my work at Search for Common Ground and in the Washington national security community since 9/11.

From my experience, when you move from mediating a divorce (which I will gladly acknowledge can be very difficult) to brokering a peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, the power of the conceptual models underlying our field begins to fall away.

We need to think bigger. We need to think bolder.

That is why *Beyond Neutrality* is a book everyone in our field needs to not only read but to think long and hard about.

## Beyond Neutrality

Mayer makes four overarching points, which are of value to us all as well as others of narrower appeal that I'll leave you to read about.

The first is to try to break the equation many of us make between conflict resolution and mediation. One of the consequences of that often unspoken assumption is our focus on "making the deal" that leads to a win/win outcome—or at least not a win/lose one. It also leads us to underplay the role of power, values, and other factors in our efforts to reach agreements.

In fact, Mayer comes close to saying that having such a strong home in mediation is a liability for our field now that it has to tackle his other three points. Those of us who work on intractable political conflicts understand this. Search for Common Ground, for instance, has very few mediators on its staff and none in its senior leadership. Little of its work involves mediation. In none of our work can we avoid the inequalities that are at the heart of every conflict we work on from either a practical political or ethical point of view.

Indeed, ours would be a very different field if its main origins lay elsewhere. For instance, the few political scientists who work in the field have a more complex and nuanced view of what conflict is like, a more realistic and often skeptical opinion of what can be accomplished, and understand that disputes that can take people to war require long-term processes of reconciliation. I'm not saying the field would be better. We would be less interested in win/win outcomes for instance. But it would be different.

The second and related lesson is conveyed by the book's title. Another unintended consequence of our reliance on mediation is our normally cherished role as third party neutrals. In some instances of conflict, we can be neutral and it is important for us to be so. There are certainly divorces, labor management disputes, or even conflicts in far away countries in which we or our colleagues have no preexisting beliefs or vested interests.

But, Mayer warns us that even that neutrality is problematic on two levels.

To begin with, as I tried to convince my political science professors thirty years ago, there really is no way we can be neutral or objective except under very unusual circumstances. In other words our self-definition as third party neutrals is a myth. Can we truly be neutral if one of the parties to a divorce physically abuses the other? Can we be neutral were we asked to mediate the looming conflict between the National Hockey League and its players? Can we be neutral were we asked to help the truth and reconciliation commission in Greensboro, North Carolina, which is trying to help people in that city come to grips with a Ku Klux Klan attack which killed five people twenty five years ago?

We need to be fair as we try to facilitate conflict resolution processes. But that is by no means the same thing as being neutral

In addition, neutrality is never a viable option in the kind of political work that Search for Common Ground does. Most obviously, we do not become political eunuchs who have to give up our own views when we enter this field. My opposition to the war in Iraq and racial profiling and my support for school vouchers and aid to faith and community based organizations invariably color the way I work as a conflict resolution professional on such issues (also see point four below). Even when I don't have firm views, I can't be truly neutral from the very first stages of a project. I have to determine who gets to "sit at the table" and who does not. Thus, in our work on the Faith Based Initiative, we did not include representatives from Latter Day Saints and other denominations, which were so opposed to the proposal that they would not consider taking federal money if it were offered.

Third, Mayer is convinced that our expertise is such that we should be engaged (his term) in all aspects and phases of conflict. In his book, *Managing Violent Conflict*, Michael Lund drew a curve of the life cycle of a conflict, starting with stable peace, moving on the creation and deepening of a crisis, the outbreak of violence, the end of the fighting, and the beginning of reconciliation which can lead to stable peace in the end. The conflict-resolution-as-mediation mindset leads to concentrate on only one of those periods—when we try to bring a heated dispute to an end. In fact, we have skills needed at all those stages.

Very few conflict resolution groups that do political work have much to do with the end-the-fighting-stage for a simple reason. More often than not, peace negotiations require governments, traditional diplomacy, and other forms of intervention that are outside any of our toolkits. And when we do, as in the Aria Group's work on the racial profiling law suit in Cincinnati, what we do has to be far more extensive than anything that looks like traditional mediation.

But it is not hard to see how we could and should be engaged in all aspects of conflict. Thus, political scientists talk about preventive diplomacy which is our equivalent of preventive medicine. The most recent visible instance of how we can defuse conflicts before they escalate was the international pressure that successfully led Libya to abandon its weapons of mass destruction program. Consensus building and Track II diplomatic efforts can similarly do things that formal government officials cannot. These require facilitation, but rarely formal mediation. Finally, almost everything Search for Common Ground and similar organizations do concentrates on reconciliation and other post-violent tasks when we often have to play a rather active role to bring long-time adversaries together.

Fourth, Mayer says we also have to become advocates, which is perhaps the opposite of being a neutral. Like an attorney, there are times when we could and should advise clients on how to proceed. If Mayer is right, that may sometimes require us to escalate a conflict or at least threaten to do so using such forms of coercion as a strike or a suit. In short, Mayer is arguing that our expertise in analyzing as well as resolving conflict is part of what we offer to individuals, organizations, and governments suffering from disputes they can not settle on their own.

I actually think we have to go farther.

To begin with, there are times when we are morally obliged to take a stand. Conflict resolution professionals in South Africa during the often violent transition to democratic rule after Nelson Mandela's release made it clear that their professional job was to reduce tensions but that could only be done as part of their equally clear commitment to ending apartheid. Search for Common Ground has put much of its conflict resolution work on hold in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in an attempt to build support for nonviolence since the second Intifada broke out almost four years ago.

There is another way we could be of service, which is more generally to create environments in which people could both take strong stands on issues and do so in a way that welcomes those they disagree with into cooperative and constructive dialogue. Thus,

we have been particularly interested in the work of consensus councils and similar bodies at the state level which use trained facilitators to help stakeholders reach agreements on contentious policy issues that then are referred to the official legislative or regulatory institutions where they often pass easily because the stakeholders are already on board. We are trying to create such a body at the federal level and experimenting with such processes on individual issues such as the faith based initiative and prisoner reentry. There are likely also to be opportunities for us to serve as consultants to interest groups and others who would like to be advocates *and* do so in a way that encourages cooperative problem solving.

I agree with Mayer that no one of us is likely to play all of these roles. I, for instance, never expect to take on the mantle of a mediator, but I'm not particularly interested in those conflicts. It would difficult—at best—for a single organization to both be a reasonably neutral convener of policy consensus processes and advise advocates on how to do their job in a more cooperative way.

And, I agree with him that we would be foolish to abandon the mediation-based work we have been doing for a quarter century or more. It is our intellectual (and for many of us, our financial) bread and butter. It is what we are known for. And, frankly it is what most of us do best.

But change we should. Change we must.

### *Beyond Beyond Neutrality*

If I have a critique Mayer's book is that it doesn't go far enough in at least two ways. First, we need to grow up professionally. A group of senior colleagues (including Mayer) have been talking about making our field more professional, especially as lawyers, state agencies, and others talk ever more seriously about accreditation.

Neither of us thinks that's where professionalization should go. After all, how can you set up a single set of credentials if our field diversifies in the way Mayer proposes?

I think a better model would be the American Political Science Association of which I am an active member. To be sure, I don't want Association of Conflict Resolution conferences to become like APSA annual meetings at which men and women in suits primp and preen and try to impress each other with how brilliant they are.

But there is one way in which APSA could be a role model for us as we try to develop organizations like ACR. In its century of existence, APSA has helped develop a degree of credibility and gravitas for our community of scholars, activists, and civil servants. I could see that in recent years when ACR rented space in the APSA building and I was probably the only person who worked with people on all of its floors. The difference was palpable. It wasn't that there were more suits and ties at APSA but that it just seemed to have a more substantial presence that seemed more consistent with the contexts of Washington and Dupont Circle.

The most tangible way I can express our lack of professional credibility is in the way we are paid. For those of us on salaries, they should be roughly equivalent to that of an academic, NGO official, or civil servant at our level. Search does very little fee for service work, but in general we should be paid consulting fees that would lead to the equivalent of such a salary. Thus, I won't spend a day on a college campus unless I'm paid at least \$750 plus reasonable expenses.

Don't get me wrong, I shudder to think of our moving into the world of the billable hour. I don't think we should give up doing low cost or pro bono work of which I do plenty. But, we need to find other sources of income, perhaps from more affluent clients, to pay the freight.

Second and more importantly, Mayer only touches on what may be our biggest political liability. At a national conference of a sibling association two years ago, *America Speaks* ran a straw poll of the attendees and found that two thirds had voted for Vice President Al Gore, 22 percent for Ralph Nader, and only 5 percent for Governor George W. Bush. I was one of the few people in the audience who found that unusual, let alone unacceptable.

We are, in short, a profession that attracts colleagues primarily from the left. There is nothing wrong with having lots of leftists on board; Mayer and I both are, of course. However, unless we are perceived as serious by conservatives, we can only go so far in the direction(s) Mayer proposes. That can probably only happen if we bring conservatives into our midst.

One way to do that is to proactively build relationships with moderates and conservatives. We know we can do it—the success of consensus councils and consensus problem solving on regulatory issues shows that. There are also people in the faith based world who do conflict resolution work similar to what we do, and for the most part we do not know each other because we move in different circles. World Vision spends more on conflict resolution than we do at Search. The Institute for Global Engagement is about the same size as CDR. Miroslav Volf of Yale's divinity school is one of the two or three leading experts on reconciliation. Ken Sande ([www.hispeace.org](http://www.hispeace.org)) has trained hundreds of conflict resolution specialists who based their work on Christian scripture. Most individual denominations and the Alban Institute which works in most denominations have services that help divided congregations overcome their problems. Finally, there are hundreds of organizational development specialists in the public and private sector who incorporate conflict resolution principles into their practices.

Another way is to change the way we train and place our students. Very few of the students who attend our graduate programs in conflict resolution enter either the private sector or government service. Some of my colleagues are flat out opposed to their doing so. Most seem not to see it as a viable or important avenue for students to consider. USIP recently held a conference on the role our students could play in mainstream foreign policy making institutions. Four recent George Mason and American University graduates were on the panel. I could not think of any others who have gone into national security work (where there is definite interest in hiring people with conflict resolution backgrounds) or any who have gone into the corporate or consulting worlds.

## Read This Book!

In short, *Beyond Neutrality* is one of those books that come along way too rarely that has the potential of reshaping the way a profession thinks of itself. In political science, the only book that has come close to doing that in recent years is Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* which should also be must reading for conflict resolution professionals.

Like Putnam, Mayer could only write what he did because of who he is. Both have spent almost an entire career learning from others as well as doing their own work. Both are men who can synthesize amazingly broad bodies of material. Both are men who are more than willing to question the conventional wisdom, including the parts of it they helped create. And finally, both are men of intense personal integrity.

So, *read this book!*

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