

Ambivalence of Peacemaking

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Compromise and “peacemaking” are often considered a universal value, essential to a peaceful, civil society. However, it is worth remembering that compromise does not always result in a just or reasonable answer, especially if some interested parties are absent from the conference table. Consider two examples: the U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction, and the coming of World War II.

In 1860, after the election of Abraham Lincoln and the beginning of Secession, it appears that war could have been avoided, at least for a time. (Lincoln’s Inaugural address implies that he hoped to avoid war.) Had Lincoln refrained from military action against the seceding states, thus tacitly accepting their action, there need have been no war, and the state of Virginia might not have joined the Confederacy. The cost of this compromise would presumably have been a permanent division of the nation and the perpetuation of slavery, and the benefit, avoiding the bloodiest war in our history. (War might still have broken out later over the desire of the Confederacy to annex and extend slavery into the western territories.) But in fact, Fort Sumpter was attacked and surrendered, Lincoln called for troops to suppress the rebellion, and war began.

Following the defeat of the Confederacy and Lincoln’s assassination, for a time, war fervor in the Union states supported harsh treatment of the Confederate states, in what was called the period of Reconstruction. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution were passed, former leaders of the Confederacy were disfranchised, and extensive efforts were made to enfranchise and raise the status of former slaves. Until very recently, especially in the old Confederacy, “Reconstruction” is treated as the essence of vindictive, misguided injustice. It was resisted throughout the former Confederate states, often violently. (Ku Klux Klan and similar groups were founded at this time, to retaliate against Black voters and office holders and their White supporters.) After the disputed election of 1876, a compromise was reached in which Republican Rutherford B. Hayes was allowed the Presidency, but all the elements of Reconstruction were ended, and White supremacy was allowed to dominate the South. This “compromise” prevailed almost unbroken for the next 40 years: Republicans continued to hold the Presidency and white supremacist Democrats (“Dixiecrats”) ruled the former Confederacy. A cynic might say that the Union nearly lost, but finally won the Civil War, but the Confederacy finally won the peace, until modern times, when the Republican

and Democratic parties traded sides! The compromise of 1876 could be justified on the grounds that military action and significant loss of life would almost certainly have been needed to enforce Black civil rights.

Those who have not seen the famous 1915 film of D. W. Griffith, *Birth of a Nation*, may wish to do so: It portrays slavery as a benevolent institution, Northern abolitionists as malicious and irresponsible, Reconstruction as corrupt and incompetent, and the first Klansmen as heroic defenders of white womanhood. (Note that Griffith portrays Lincoln as a martyr, who would have dealt generously with the defeated Confederates had he not been assassinated.) It was shown in the White House by President Woodrow Wilson, to protests by the NAACP. It is both a classic of film history, eloquently anti-war, and shamelessly racist. The biography/autobiography *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me*, by Lillian Gish, tells the story of the film as it appeared to Ms. Gish and to Griffith, as a blow for tolerance and compromise. D. W. Griffith's next film, *Intolerance*, was in part his response to the critics of *Birth of a Nation*.

The 1930's rise of Fascism in Italy and Spain, Naziism in Germany, and the "appeasement" of Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco by European and American democracies is another informative example. It might be fairly observed that World War I came because of militarism and indifference to compromise in the major powers of Europe. But it is hard to avoid observing also that World War II was far more disastrous because of an unreasonable desire to compromise and avoid war at all costs, especially by Britain, France, and the United States. It is noteworthy that opposition to military intervention came primarily from the political right and interventionism from the left, just the opposite of "Cold War" sentiment after the War. (The appeasement of Hitler at Munich was primarily due to Neville Chamberlin, the British Conservative prime minister; Churchill and his followers were isolated in the Conservative party. Note that Czechoslovakia, the country partitioned at Munch, was excluded from the conference, much as former slaves were ignored in the compromise ending Reconstruction.) To illustrate with another popular film, Barbra Streisand's *The Way We Were* (1973), shows the leftist central character moving from pacifism in the 1920's, to military interventionism in the 1930-40s, and back to pacifism in the 1950's. The right, particularly in America, could be seen making the opposite journey, from isolation in the late 1930's, to intervention and passionate anti-communism in the 1950's and 60's` (which became anti-Islam in 2001), and finally (inconsistent) isolation again under Trump.

It seems very hard to make an “enlightened” anti-war argument, in retrospect, that Lincoln ought to have avoided war in 1860, or that Roosevelt ought to have avoided war with Germany and Japan in 1941, incredibly bloody as both those wars were. However, if one contemplates U. S. intervention in Korea, in Viet Nam, and then again in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is no easier to justify the cost in terms of what, if anything, was achieved. But who would want to see all of Korea ruled by Kim Jong Il, Iraq still under Saddam Hossein, or Afghanistan under the uncontested rule of the Taliban?

I would surely not claim to have any definitive answer to any questions of the morality of compromise or the justification of war, but it is essential to acknowledge the complexity of these questions. They cannot be answered by the rhetoric of any party.