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CHAPTER 17

Protective Accompaniment: How Peace Brigades International Secures Political Space and Human Rights Nonviolently

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Conflict between individuals and groups brings forth diverse responses from those involved directly in the conflicts, and from others who are on the sidelines. One such response is that of interpositioning, physically interposing oneself between the conflicted parties in the hope of deterring attack and reducing the level of violence. Interpositioning of this sort is often useful on the interpersonal level, where the parties in conflict are two individuals (O'Gorman & Coy, 1992). Indeed, simply stepping between two hostile individuals, literally pulling them apart, or stepping between them and talking down the emotions of the antagonists is a practice used by children on playgrounds, teachers in classrooms, and parents in the home on nearly a daily basis.

But interpositioning is less often utilized between groups on national or international levels. This has begun to change, however, especially since 1965 when the United Nations established a formal framework for peacekeeping operations. The U.N. has subsequently deployed peacekeeping forces to Lebanon, Cyprus, Cambodia, Namibia, Croatia, and many other places where unarmed observer forces, or lightly-armed buffer forces were deemed expedient. Not surprisingly, there is a growing field of literature examining U.N. peacekeeping operations of this sort (James, 1990; Rikhye, 1984; Wiseman, 1983).

Although U.N. efforts at interpositioning in national and international conflict garner serious attention from the mass media and from the scholarly community, there is also a rich tradition of nonviolent interpositioning in national and international conflict that is outside the efforts of the U.N. This tradition, which includes initiatives from various international nongovernmental organizations, is not nearly as well known. With only a few exceptions it has received far too little study in the professional literature (Hare and Blumberg, 1977; Keyes, 1978; Weber, 1991).

What follows is meant to be a contribution to that literature. This chapter examines the nonviolent interpositioning efforts of Peace Brigades International (PBI). While PBI's main deployments are in Guatemala (beginning in 1983), El Salvador (beginning in 1987) and Sri Lanka (beginning in 1989), due to space

limitations I will focus primarily upon the Guatemala program.

I will sketch the developments leading to the founding of the Guatemala project, and proceed to an examination of the various social and political dynamics at play in PBI interpositioning. I argue that Peace Brigades International's use of "first world" nonviolent escorts for endangered "third world" human rights and political activists is a creative, and ultimately helpful use of the privileges that accrue to citizens of first world nation-states. While not supporting the value-laden connotations inherent in "first world" and "third world," I use the terms here for convenience and ease of reading. I further suggest that this sort of transnational citizen peacemaking can be an important first step in breaking the hegemonic grip of the nation-state in international affairs.

But all is not rosy in PBI's experiment in nonviolence. I also examine the potential pitfalls in PBI's attempt to exploit positions of first world privilege in their nonviolent interpositionary work. Most notable here are the issues of promoting first world cultural hegemony and paternalism. And I conclude with some reflections on future trends in the practice of unarmed international peacekeeping, especially as it is practiced by transnational social movement organizations like PBI.

History

Peace Brigades International was founded in September, 1981, in Canada by a group of internationals, many of whom were long involved in independent nonviolent interpositioning efforts. In constituting PBI, its founders relied on the experience of the World Peace Brigade (Walker, 1979), and the Cyprus Resettlement Project (Hare, 1984).

The PBI "Founding Statement" describes an ambitious work load that goes far beyond simple nonviolent interpositioning. It encompasses "nonpartisan missions which may include peacemaking initiatives, peacekeeping under a discipline of nonviolence, and humanitarian service." The document further claims that PBI will have the "capability to mobilize and provide trained units of volunteers. These units may be assigned to areas of high tension to avert violent outbreaks. If hostile clashes occur, a brigade may establish and monitor a cease-fire, offer mediatory services, or carry on works of reconstruction and reconciliation."

By May, 1982, plans were well under way to field the first brigade. A PBI advance delegation toured Central America on an information-gathering mission, visiting major conflict areas, meeting with government and church officials, and with popular and community groups.

In Guatemala, human rights violations, death squad activity, forced relocations of indigenous communities and overall political repression had marked social and political life for some time. But Guatemalan President Rios Montt announced a "political opening" to begin in March, 1983. The opening would relax the severe restrictions on political activity in Guatemala. In January and February, 1983, another PBI exploratory delegation spent four weeks in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Panama. Honoring a precept of intermediate theory, which calls for

extensive information gathering and trust building amongst the conflicted parties by the intervener (Curle, 1986; Young, 1967), the team met with a full range of people working on various Guatemalan human rights, political organizing, and refugee issues. PBI decided to deploy an ongoing team in Guatemala, coinciding with the "political opening."

The team's functions were threefold: (1) develop contacts across the political spectrum of the country; (2) monitor and report human rights abuses (at the time, no human rights group operated openly in the country; (3) and use its international presence as an intermediary or interpositionary element (*PBI Reports*, March, 1983). When PBI evaluated the program and decided in December, 1983 to continue the Guatemalan project, the expanded and revised statement of the project's goals deemphasized human rights reporting. But it also included an increased emphasis on peace education, and on what was to become a central aspect of PBI programs in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Sri Lanka: protective accompaniment for those threatened with physical violence and intimidation. (*PBI Reports*, January, 1984).

Nonviolent Interpositioning

This "escort" work is at the heart of PBI's interpositionary activities. It is the key contribution PBI is making to the field of unarmed peacekeeping. An activist who receives a death threat, a threat of physical violence, or who is in fact attacked, may request accompaniment by PBI. The organization then conducts interviews to determine compatibility between PBI and the activist. One criterion is that the activist or the group can not use, or promote the use of violence.

Unarmed volunteers then accompany those threatened, literally interposing their bodies between the target and the likely source of the threat. For example, when walking down the sidewalk, the PBI member will walk between the activist and the street, from whence most abductions or attacks come. This accompaniment may be 24 hours a day, it may be only while the threatened person is in public, or it may be only while they are in contact with certain people or social elements. The particulars of the accompaniment vary according to the needs of the situation.

Sometimes the "client" is not simply one individual, but a group. Examples include: PBI maintained an around-the-clock presence at the Lunafil textile factory near Guatemala City when striking workers occupied the plant for a year beginning in June 1987; representatives from the Village Communities in Resistance of the Mountains (indigenous villagers resisting service in the government-sponsored "civil patrols") came to the capitol for the first time to argue their case and tried to safeguard their human rights, with PBI providing protective accompaniment; PBI furnished a protective presence at rallies of the Organization of the Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared in Maratuwa, Sri Lanka. These are just three examples drawn from hundreds in the ten years of PBI activity.

PBI escorts are always foreign nationals. The presence of unarmed international escorts functions as a deterrent since violence or freedom restrictions directed toward foreign nationals often brings much higher political costs than the

same actions directed at local citizens. This general rule (which is subject to exception) is further exploited by PBI since it primarily uses escorts who are citizens of first world, western nation-states. PBI thus takes advantage of the unequal structural power relations in the world, theoretically granting the escorts and their clients a heightened degree of safety or immunity. In the event a client and their PBI escort is arrested, escorts from first world nation-states have tended to be accorded better treatment than PBI escorts from third world nation-states (Bilski, 1989).

But any immunity enjoyed by PBI team members is far from total; a former member of the team in Guatemala called it "quasi-immunity." A sampling of violent incidents involving PBI demonstrates this point.

In Guatemala on August 15, 1989, the office of GAM (Mutual Support Group), a community organization accompanied by PBI, was bombed. And the PBI residence a mile away was also attacked with hand grenades on the same day. Although both buildings were occupied, the bombings caused no injuries (*Boston Globe*, 1989, August 30, editorial). On December 20, 1989, three PBI team members returning to the PBI residence suffered serious lacerations when they were attacked by men with knives. Since they were not robbed and a pocketbook that was dropped during the attack was not picked up by the attackers, it seems likely that intimidation motivated the attack.

Beyond demonstrating that PBI's immunity is only partial, these attacks are interpreted by some in the organization as proof of the effectiveness of PBI's work. They are said to indicate a desire to intimidate the organization into abandoning its mission in Guatemala (*Peace Brigades*, April, 1990).

When the U.N. fields unarmed peacekeeping and observer forces, they often gain quick respect simply because of the fact that they represent the U.N. and are a symbol of the entire international community (Galtung, 1976a; Urquhart, 1983, p. 166). But unarmed peacekeeping forces fielded by nongovernmental organizations are far less fortunate. This is another reason why PBI puts primarily first worlders in the field.

First world media outlets dominate and control the dissemination of world news (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). However sad, it remains true that first world social movement organizations can more easily generate international media attention than can third world organizations. To attack a campesina agitating for her land rights in the rural Guatemalan high lands is one thing; indeed, such a scene often seems like the tree that no one heard fall in the forest. But to attack that same campesina and her first world nonviolent escort—who is equipped with a camera and notebook—may be something completely else: now not even the leaves can fall without being heard.

Ed Griffin Nolan was the media coordinator for Witness for Peace in the mid-1980s. In its program in Nicaragua around the contra war, Witness for Peace utilized elements of interpositionary nonviolence. Griffin-Nolan (1991) says that the use of first worlders as "human shields" drew the media "like flies to honey." By using first worlders in this way, PBI exploits the mass media's fixation on first world news, making it work on behalf of those whose voice and struggle is seldom acknowledged.

To compliment the escorting, PBI created an Emergency Response Network (ERN). Similar to the "Urgent Action Appeals" of the human rights organization, Amnesty International (Clark & McCann, 1991), the ERN consists of hundreds of people across the world who have signed on to receive fast-breaking PBI information calling for immediate action on a crisis case. That action takes the form of letters, faxes, telexes or phone calls to key government officials to correct the perceived injustice. One example, from El Salvador, will suffice to demonstrate.

In July, 1991, PBI team member Phil Pardi, a U.S. citizen, was escorting Gloria and Ernesto Zamora. Gloria is with the Association of Women for Dignity and Life; Ernesto is the brother of Ruben Zamora, then Vice President of the National Assembly and the leader of the opposition party. Both Gloria and Ernesto received death threats for several weeks previous to the attack. Along with Pardi, their PBI escort, their vehicle was stopped by uniformed men who searched them. All three were handcuffed and spirited away in a National Police truck. Within hours, PBI's Emergency Response Network members sent 350 telexes to President Cristiani, and made hundreds of phone calls to the U.S. Embassy. By the next morning, the three were released, unharmed, with no charges and no explanations. However, a U.S. embassy officer reportedly told Pardi upon his release, "You have one hell of a lot of friends" (Funding Letter, PBI-USA Development Office, Fall, 1991).

This example demonstrates another creative use by PBI of the privileges that accrue to first worlders in the present world order. The team members cultivate contacts and access to a relatively influential diplomatic corps (E. Kinane, personal interview, September 3, 1991), whose governments can bring diplomatic pressures to bear in the short term, and perhaps even political, economic and trade pressures in the long term. Many third world countries are dependent on economic aid from first world nations and are therefore susceptible to pressures from their benefactors. The October, 1990 European Economic Community aid package to Sri Lanka, for example, called on Sri Lanka to improve human rights conditions and made explicit reference to a PBI accompaniment case.

Richard de Zoysa was a journalist who was abducted in Colombo in February, 1990. His mother, however, recognized the abductors as high-level members of the Colombo police force; she enlisted a lawyer to help her press for prosecution. They both received death threats, so PBI provided accompaniment for her and her lawyer for nearly the whole of 1990. But PBI also put them in touch with sympathetic European diplomatic contacts, including the Swedish and Dutch embassies. This may have contributed to the case being cited in the EEC aid report as an example of why the EEC wanted to see Sri Lanka make more progress in protecting human rights (E. Kinane, personal interview, November 21, 1992).

I have shown that PBI's nonviolent interpositioning is more than simply physically deflecting the attack. It also involves a deterrence based on symbolic and real geopolitical power relations that are exploited by PBI to decrease the likelihood of violence, while increasing the political space within which local activists can work. This concept of political space deserves further exploration.

Political Space

Peacekeeping is often used by the powerful to control the less powerful, by the few to prevail over the many. Such control usually aims to preserve the political and economic status quo. Here peacekeeping may be motivated less by a desire for peace founded on justice, and more by a fear that conflict or violence could lead to significant social change. But the waging of conflict can be an important tool for the oppressed, winning recognition and legitimacy for groups that are traditionally cut out of the political marketplace. Moreover, it can lay bare the reality of structural violence and unleash powerful social forces that upset the status quo.

In vertical conflict situations such as these, where social and political domination is a factor, proponents of peacekeeping must take special care not to simply halt direct violence and thereby safeguard ongoing structural violence. Johan Galtung (1976b) argues that the only form of peacekeeping that is tenable in situations of vertical conflict is third party intervention on the side of the first or oppressed party. Arguing that keeping peace by ending direct violence is not a worthy goal because it serves the status quo, Galtung suggests that peacekeeping in situations of vertical violence must also be concerned with abolishing structural violence.

Galtung's reflections on peacekeeping relate to wars of liberation, but his analysis applies equally well where the oppressed are organizing for change nonviolently. Galtung says that modern wars of liberation involve liberating territories and turning them into models of what the future state shall be once structural violence is abolished. While peacekeeping in a horizontal conflict (between equals) can be likened to a two-way wall separating the parties, Galtung (1976b) suggests that peacekeeping in vertical conflicts (between unequals) should be more like a one-way wall, permitting freedom fighters out to expand the liberated territories, but preventing oppressors from getting in. This conception of peacekeeping is acutely aware of unequal social and political factors, and it puts the tools of peacekeeping to work for the oppressed. Since Peace Brigades International works only with those who do not use violence, Galtung's terminology does not exactly fit, but the basic notions do.

If we exchange "freedom fighter" for "human rights activist," and "liberated territories" for "political space," we are talking about essentially the same phenomenon. The one-way wall that PBI endeavors to build is there to give human rights and political activists political space to use as an organizing base. Somewhat like Galtung's freedom fighters, the goal is to secure more political space so a just society can begin to be prefigured in the structures, processes, and work of the social change organizations themselves.

This dynamic is illustrated by how the PBI house in Guatemala City was used in the mid-1980s. The PBI office and residence became an important meeting space for human rights, labor and indigenous activists, especially those working to end the "disappearances" (Lernoux, 1982) that rocked Guatemala in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1984 the PBI house hosted monthly meetings of relatives of the disappeared. On

the night *New York Times* reporter Steven Kinzer attended, over 100 people were at the meeting (Kinzer, 1984).

In 1985, these meetings led to the formation of GAM, the Mutual Support Group of relatives of the disappeared, the first independent human rights group to survive in Guatemala. By September, 1986, GAM membership reached 1,300, most of whom were indigenous women whose villages and families suffered many political disappearances. GAM's bold and vocal organizing gained it increasing attention, both domestic and international. Many of the groups leading activists began receiving violent threats; they asked for and received PBI protective accompaniment. PBI continued to host the GAM meetings during the crucial first three years of the group's existence, a concrete expression of the "one-way wall" advocated by Galtung.

When coupled with the nonviolent escorting of GAM members, this demonstrates the kind of political space PBI strives to create with and for local activists. Knowing that one is not alone in the struggle, but standing with others for basic human rights and a new social and economic order, can enliven people to exploit what Richard Falk (1992, p. 132, 136) calls the "hidden spaces," those social pockets empty of state control that are present in even the most authoritarian and repressive state structures.

Implications

In his search for a more viable world order, Falk (1992, pp. 83-99) argues that the nation-state system itself is a powerful brake on the creation of a more people-centered politics, what he names "humane governance." Falk calls not only for the development of alternative problem-solving frameworks that are not inherently prejudiced toward the political status quo, but for alternative "problem-solving" frameworks.

How an issue is stated, or framed to the larger public, and who frames it, can have far-reaching effects on how the issue is perceived and responded to (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford, 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988). Indeed, how an issue is framed can determine what the issue is since framing has the potential to be defining. Simply by being "on-site" and recording the violent reality of social and political oppression in a manner that increases understanding of the forces undergirding the oppression, PBI takes an important first step in building a viable transnational movement for social and political rights. Moreover, nongovernmental organizations like Peace Brigades International can frame the issues in a way that highlights the extraordinary struggle of ordinary people for control over their own lives. The far-flung appeal of this framing is hard to miss.

By framing the issue in such a way that the threatened third world activist remains the central actor--the main focus of the story and no less than the subject of her history--PBI invites very concrete responses from others, reciprocal actions of resistance and involvement. The focus on the personal--on the human--helps prepare the soil of the soul for the seed of solidarity. I suggest that part of the long-term significance of PBI's work lies herein. For such solidarity builds bridges between

peoples, tearing at the interlocking but artificial barriers that define the nation-state system. The information-gathering aspect of PBI's work--striving to be the voice of the voiceless by publicizing human rights violations--and the Emergency Response Network itself, are both examples of the kind of "globalism from below" that is the pathway to a more viable and humane way of conceiving of international relations, and ultimately of the future itself (Falk 1992, p. 124; Kavaloski, 1990). This more viable conception is illustrated by the way PBI volunteers often explain their willingness to take risks on behalf of others suffering persecution. They understand their own liberation to be tied up with the liberation of their third world colleagues (E. Kinane, personal interview, September 3, 1991).

But Peace Brigades International's reliance on first world citizens has both strengths and weaknesses. While this paper has focused on the strengths, the potential drawbacks are many and deserve attention here, in the hope they can be explored more fully in a later study.

The current relationship between the first and third worlds cannot be separated from its history. That history is defined by colonialism and various manifestations of neocolonialism. While neocolonialist patterns are often less visible and appear on the surface to be more hospitable, in fact they are little less exploitive than their predecessors (Anin, 1989; Nandy, 1987; Sklar, 1979). Given that history and current reality, it would behoove first worlders working in the third world to be extraordinarily sensitive to issues of paternalism and the exporting of ideologies and solutions.

Peace Brigades International seems vulnerable here given its reliance on citizens from first world nation-states. Because PBI exploits the fact that the safety and well-being of first worlders is valued more highly in the current world order than is the safety and liberty of third worlders does not put PBI outside of that system of unequal worth. An argument could be made that PBI's use of and reliance upon the system of unequal worth--even though PBI exploits the current system's weaknesses to the advantage of third worlders in the short run--also serves to bolster the current world order in the long run by continuing to grant it credence. Here we must at least acknowledge, if not in fact resolve, a familiar dilemma in social change work: whether to focus on reform or on radical, substantive change. To the degree that PBI is able to focus on the work of local and indigenous social movement organizations to reconstitute community and reclaim social institutions, it is less vulnerable to the danger of simply perpetuating the current world order.

PBI will not offer its services to anyone who has used or promotes the use of violence as a means of social change. This rule raises still more issues. While not exactly a forced imposition of views or tactics, these conditions may, in fact, be perceived or experienced as constraining by third worlders. These conditions can hardly, in any event, be separated from the larger issue of cultural hegemony which so colors relations between the first and third worlds (Hoogvelt, 1982; Roxborough, 1979).

Concluding Reflections

After a decade of increased use and prominence, the United Nations peacekeeping forces received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988. There are at present many proposals to further expand the work of the U.N. peacekeeping forces to include such tasks as humanitarian relief, drug interdiction, combatting terrorism, and coordinating development projects in conflicted areas. (Rikhye, 1990). Now that the Cold war paralysis that afflicted the U.N. has abated, the agency is moving from ad hoc peacekeeping initiatives to institutionalizing its peacekeeping activity. Hence some of these proposals may eventually be undertaken by U.N. peacekeeping forces.

Likewise peacekeeping endeavors launched outside of the U.N. may also increase. Indeed, the numbers of non-U.N. efforts rose significantly in the 1980s. And as more people become aware of peacekeeping and interpositioning in the 1990s through the increased prominence of the U.N. efforts, it seems likely that increased interest and respect will also accrue to non-U.N. efforts.

Already a network of North American churches and synagogues are active as "companion communities" to Central American political refugees living in Mexico but preparing to return to their home villages. These companion communities befriend the refugee communities, sending delegations to accompany them on their often dangerous journeys to resettle their homelands. The delegations serve as buffers, deterrents, and the eyes of the world community.

In January, 1993, for example, the first negotiated return of Guatemalan refugees will occur under the Central American Peace Accords. Five thousand of the 45,000 refugees currently residing in officially recognized camps in Mexico will be the first to test whether a safe return can be made to their homelands in Guatemala. The refugees successfully negotiated with the Guatemalan government for the right of international accompaniment during their return and resettlement. Among the nongovernmental organizations sending delegations to accompany their return are PBI, Witness for Peace, and Going Home.

Maximally, it is hoped that delegations like these and the ongoing accompaniment of PBI actually deter human rights violations and offer some protection for populations traditionally at risk. If so, that is a significant contribution, especially in the lives of those individuals who have already experienced oppression and the loss of loved ones. Minimally, it is hoped that the availability of protective accompaniment is a factor in helping those at risk decide how to respond to those risks. For past violence, coupled with the threat of future violence and oppression, is frequently enough to make some feel they have few choices other than surrendering their human rights.

But these transnational citizen peacekeeping initiatives also serve as something more, something that reaches beyond this moment in time, and beyond the lives of the individuals receiving nonviolent accompaniment. These initiatives can be likened to a sign, a symbol that points away from the constricting boundaries of the nation-state system, and toward a new globalism, one that arises out of the experience of solidarity in the shared struggle to create a different, more humane future.

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