

International Affairs Forum Interview: Mr. John Marks, Search for Common Ground



International Affairs Forum speaks with Mr. John Marks, founder and President of Search for Common Ground. He served as a Foreign Service officer in Washington, DC and Vietnam, and as executive assistant for foreign policy to Senator Clifford Case. He also was a fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics and a visiting scholar at Harvard Law School. By Winston Harris. (IA-Forum, 7/8/2005)

IA-Forum: Mr. Marks, how would you describe the mission of Search for Common Ground?

Mr. John Marks: Our overall mission is to change the way the world deals with conflict; away from adversarial to non-adversarial approaches.

IA-Forum: On your website you claim that conflict isn't necessarily a bad thing and can be a learning process; therefore what is your position on war? Is it ever necessary or can it always be avoided?

Mr. Marks: I'm not a pacifist; this is not a pacifist organization. There are certain instances when war is justified. For example, fighting Hitler in World War II was completely justified. As a practical matter, I feel that it can be avoided in most circumstances. It usually doesn't settle what you think you are trying to settle with it. In many ways, war causes more problems than it solves. It's not a good way of dealing with conflict; there are much better ways, such as negotiations. Finding solutions that are mutually beneficial seems to be a much better way of dealing with extreme conflicts. What we are trying to do is find alternatives to war. But I don't rule out war in certain circumstances.

IA-Forum: Also stated on your website is that conflict can be transformed by finding common ground. Is there a particular method that Search for Common Ground uses to encourage peace?

Mr. Marks: We have an overall framework within which our methodology works which is to understand the differences and act on the commonalities. We have roughly forty different methods of doing that. One can use negotiations, facilitation, and mediation. We use the media: TV and radio. We also use sports - we took the US wrestling team to Iran. There are lots of different methodologies within that framework of understanding the differences and acting on the commonalities.

IA-Forum: With the recent election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran; do you think that Search for Common Ground will be able to continue this program?

Mr. Marks: We have been working since 1996 to try to build better relations between the United States and Iran. We've done a whole series of activities, ranging from small unofficial meetings, to meeting very high ranking people, to taking the US wrestling team to Iran, to bringing top film directors from Iran to the US and vice-versa. We continue to do that. We continue to look for better ways to deal with US-Iranian relations. It's a time when finding common ground between the US and Iran would not only be mutually beneficial to both countries, but beneficial to the entire world. We've been doing it for nine years and we're not going to stop now because a person of a certain ideology has been elected. After all, they've had hardliners in positions of power over that time and we continued to do this work. We keep the US government informed, we keep the European governments informed; we don't do anything secretly behind the scenes. We do everything in consultation with governments.

IA-Forum: What nations is the Search for Common Ground involved in?

Mr. Marks: We have offices in 15 countries around the world. Our largest program is in Burundi. We're also involved in the Middle East, West Africa, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Morocco, Ukraine, Macedonia, Indonesia, Angola, Congo, and the United States.

IA-Forum: Of the various missions that Search for Common Ground has been involved in, what has been the most successful and why?

Mr. Marks: One that I take a great deal of satisfaction in would be about ten years ago, before Israel and Jordan had diplomatic relations or had signed the security treaty - we were able to hold informal meetings between very high level retired security officials. We were about 6 months ahead of the formal negotiations; and the agreements our people worked out informally made up about 75% of the ultimate treaty. So we feel we contributed greatly to what became the Jordanian-Israeli Security Treaty. We've had great success in Burundi reframing the way people, particularly militants, look at the conflict there. We've been able to introduce ideas of negotiation, reconciliation, and peace into the common culture. I think we've had a real impact on the mainstream thinking of Burundi.

IA-Forum: Conversely, have there been any missions that were less than successful? Also what were you able to learn from those missions to avoid similar results?

Mr. Marks: I would say in Liberia our radio station getting sacked, seemed to me unsuccessful. What we learned is that it's not a good idea to get sacked (laughs). What we did was continue on, and when things calmed down, we rebuilt. We're back in business and we persevere. I like to use the metaphor of the toy truck that runs into a piece of furniture, then backs up and finds another route. We just keep going forward.

IA-Forum: Your documentary on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict became the first simultaneous broadcast in Israel, Palestine, and the rest of the Arab world. How were you able to arrange this broadcasting feat?

Mr. Marks: It wasn't easy. It was perhaps as complicated as making peace in the Middle East. It was a lot of hard work and it took us a long time. We had to approach the various stations; we had to get them to agree on things at a time when they were not talking to each other. It was the product of working in the Middle East for the past 13 years and having some sense of how to make things happen. I don't want to give the impression it was easy because the deal fell apart at least three times. It occupied a huge part of my life in the last year. I'm really happy that we pulled it off but I have no illusions that we could do it again tomorrow.

IA-Forum: What particular issues do you delve into in the series?

Mr. Marks: We look at the issues of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. We look at the issues of Palestinian refugees, how to situate the city of Jerusalem, and security. These are what I call final status issues; and we go deeply into particular issues of both sides. Then we look into possible solutions to solve these issues.

IA-Forum: How did you go about researching your documentary?

Mr. Marks: We did about two hundred interviews and spent a year on the ground before we got going. Talking to people was a very important part of this. Working in the region for thirteen years gave us a network that would recommend us to different people.

IA-Forum: Is there any way for any of us outside the Middle East to view this documentary?

Mr. Marks: English language DVDs and videos are available through our websites (www.sfcg.org and www.theshapeofthefuture.tv), along with a Viewer's Guide.

IA-Forum: What conclusions did you come to in your documentary?

Mr. Marks: The main conclusion is that it really is possible to find agreements that satisfy most of the people on both sides. About seventy percent of the people on both sides want to live in peace, want to find agreements; but compromises have to be made. Most people don't think it can be done, but by showing that it could be done, it becomes more possible.

IA-Forum: So far what have the responses been like from viewers in Israel, Palestine, and the Arab states?

Mr. Marks: The station that showed it in Israel had ratings up twenty percent from a normal Saturday night. I think we reached about fifty thousand people in Israel and hundreds of thousands of people in Palestine and the Arab states; we don't have exact figures on those. There have been a lot of articles in the press and we think it's made an impact. This is something that will go on for years. When you do a project like this you don't know all the outcomes, but I'm positive we're going to get a lot of really important, positive outcomes.

IA-Forum: Do you currently have any plans for any future documentaries?

Mr. Marks: No similar documentaries are planned in the near future but we have been doing more in the way of dramatic television. We have a dramatic TV series that has started production in the Palestinian territories. We have another one that's in production in Nigeria. As a practical matter, we think dramatic TV may be an even stronger way of communicating ideas of conflict resolution and mediation than documentary television.

IA-Forum: What are these dramatic TV series about?

Mr. Marks: In Nigeria, it is about a series called "Action News." It's about a multiethnic news gathering team that gets all the stories. The people on the team are both multiethnic and multi-religious. They look at every issue facing Nigeria, from corruption to religious intolerance all done within that multi-religion/ethnic framework. It will be a popular TV drama series. If the plot sounds familiar, it's because it's a lot like the Mary Tyler Moore Show and the Lou Grant Show. It is a plot premise that has been used, but not in as much of a multi-ethnic way as we use it. Then there will be a reality TV show connected to it. We think it will attract a huge amount of attention in Nigeria on all the major networks.

IA-Forum: Have you done a dramatic TV series before or is this a new endeavor?

Mr. Marks: We've done a five-year long dramatic children's TV series in Macedonia and a year-long one in Cyprus. So we have done drama, and we see drama as an important part of our toolbox.

IA-Forum: On the subject of NGOs in general, do you think external agencies sufficiently understand the specific problems/issues related to conflict areas in order to meet their needs?

Mr. Marks: Only governments can make peace. NGOs can't sign treaties or implement legal changes. But I think NGOs bring something very important to the table. I think you need NGOs and governments working together to create a more peaceful world. I would add business and corporations into that mix as well.

IA-Forum: How can organizations, from the United Nations to local organizations, work better with each other to achieve desired peace building results?

Mr. Marks: Bureaucratic structures and Bureaucratic needs often get in the way. We need to find a way to move through these barriers in places like the World Bank. We must find ways for them to work more effectively together. Organizational workshops can be quite effective in changing bureaucracies.

IA-Forum: How important is economic development in peace building?

Mr. Marks: Economic development is crucial. When people don't have enough to eat, when they don't have enough to sustain their families, they're much more likely to both experience conflict and tolerate it at the same time. We as an organization don't spend a lot of time on economic development. But I do think economic development is extremely important.

IA-Forum: Some NGOs have received criticism for the overzealous expenditures of funds that are not in direct support of their mission (e.g. expensive housing and transportation for workers in affected areas). What should be done to provide better oversight?

Mr. Marks: I think funders need to make sure NGOs don't spend in areas they shouldn't be spending. It's probably up to the funders to provide oversight. I think the marketplace should be used to even that out. Frankly I don't see this as an overwhelmingly large problem.

IA-Forum: How should the United Nations handle preventative action for potential areas of conflict?

Mr. Marks: The UN needs multiple mechanisms to work better among its various agencies. The Special Representatives need to be authority over the areas they have responsibility for. The UN needs to be funded, in needs the resources to make a difference.

IA-Forum: Lastly, about the role of media, what needs to be done to make it effective in the process of peace building and conflict resolution?

Mr. Marks: The media's primary job is neither conflict resolution nor peace building. I think the media can exacerbate conflict or it can help to solve conflict. Mainly it does both. But its primary job is neither. You're not going to get the media to take on, as a group, peace building as a mission. On the other hand, as citizens I think they need to be responsible. I think that accurate reporting, which is framed in a way that doesn't exacerbate conflict, is possible. It could be very much improved.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Mr. Marks.

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