

# THE PRICE OF SPURNING AMERICAN MEDIATION

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The U.S. House of Representatives recently passed a resolution, with no dissension, offering its good offices to help resolve Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Ordinarily a government fighting a secessionist rebellion should be favourably disposed towards welcoming such American assistance. The resolution itself was a skillfully balanced one. This is not surprising. Many of the best Sri Lankan academics, both Sinhalese and Tamil, today reside in the United States where they have a leading position in the universities.

Alone amongst the great powers of the world the United States stands as the country that successfully defeated a secessionist rebellion. Great Britain failed to keep Ireland and the Soviet Union failed with its non-Russian republics. But in the American civil war, the United States succeeded, even though it was at the cost of a million lives.

On the other hand, the United States greatly assisted in the processes that led to

the break up of the Soviet Union. But that was always an artificial unity forged by the Red Army and the Communist Party. Ending this undemocratic union was always a priority goal of the United States which considered the Soviet Union to be its major world rival.

But dividing united countries is not the American tradition. They are mentally conditioned to be on the side of those seeking to preserve the unity of their own countries. Americans are taught from childhood about the history of their own antiseccessionist war, and the memory of their great civil war heroes such as President Lincoln and General Grant loom large in their consciousness.

To Sri Lankans seeking to keep their country from being divided, the United States would be anatural ally. Unlike the Soviet Union, Sri Lanka is not an artificial entity created in the 20th century. True the country was re-united under one rule by the British in 1815 after some 400 years of fragmentation.

But right through the past 2000 years a recurrent theme in the island's history is the belief that it was a unity. Even the kings of Jaffna ruling only in the north claimed to be kings of all Lanka as did the kings of Ruhuna ruling only in the south.

As for the U.S. strategic interest in Sri Lanka, alas Sri Lanka would be one of the most unimportant places to American strategists today. Undoubtedly there was a time during the cold war years when Trincomalee harbour was a strategic location for a naval base. Perhaps also in the late 1970s Sri Lanka was important because it was one of the first of the least developed countries to adopt the open market system. At that time the United States may have wished to make it into a showpiece for other third world countries to emulate.

## Positive aspects

But today Sri Lanka is at the periphery of American strategic interest. The American market is gradually closing to Sri Lankan exporters with preference being given to other countries. Nor are American investors coming

in. Sri Lanka is far away to them and their are reports of the war that keep them away. This is a pity because Sri Lankans on the whole are highly pro-American in their outlook.

The anti-Americanism found so openly in South America and in most other South Asian countries is not found in Sri Lanka. People of all ethnic and political persuasions, big and non-bigots, eagerly send their children to the United States to study and settle down if possible.

The offer of good offices made by the U.S. House of Representatives needs to be viewed in this larger political, economic and social context. There are a number of positive aspects to this American offer that a knee jerk reaction would tend to obscure. Unfortunately many of Sri Lanka's political leaders appear unable to rise above the knee level in their ability to be humble in the face of their record of failures.

For instance when interviewed by the press political luminaries such as Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, Jeyaraj Fernando pulled,

Dinesh Gunawardena, Kumar Ponnambalam, Dharmalingam Sidharthan, Batty Weerakoon and Tyrone Fernando generally rejected the idea of foreign mediation with varying degrees of intellectual acuity.

Among the reasons they gave was an often pompous belief in their own capacity to solve the problem. Unfortunately the most visible capacity that many of our politicians have shown is to take ethnic conflict a lot worse.

It is common knowledge that ordinary people, if asked what is at the root of the ethnic conflict will reply that it is the politicians who, through lack of wisdom, lack of courage and lack of foresight, have been at its root. It is ironic that those whom the people judge to be at the root of the problem should be the ones to insist that they have the answers and who so firmly rule out foreign mediation.

A basic lesson from conflict theory and everyday observation is that when two parties are involved in a conflict they usually get into a closed cycle of escalating conflict. Their emotions rise,

their intellectual horizons narrow and their rationality shrinks. They stop trying to listen to the other side let alone understand them. When people are too close to a problem they become unable to see all the issues clearly. There is a need for a more distant and detached view. This is where external mediation comes in and is essential.

The Lord Buddha himself acted as a mediator on several occasions. He not only mediated between royal kingdoms but also between his own community of monks. His actions showed that mediation is necessary in conflict situations even when generally wise and spiritually advanced persons such as his monks were involved. As a mediator, however, Lord Buddha did not impose his will upon the conflicting parties. That would not be the proper role of a mediator as pointed out in John McConnell's "The Dhamma and Mediation" recently translated into the Sinhala language by the Dharmavadi Institute.

## \* Larger interests

The Nicaraguan civil war is one which American mediation was able to resolve to a considerable extent. This was all the more remarkable because the United States had earned the enmity of the ruling Sandinista government. Therefore (former) U.S. President Jimmy Carter's mediation initiative was one that had only a small chance of success.

A study done by David Wendt in the Washington Quarterly (Summer 1994) points out how President Carter's sincere approach helped his team of mediators to build relationship with even the anti-American Sandinista government members to a level where neither they nor their opponents felt they could step back from the peace process.

According to Wendt, "Trust, not in each other but in the third party observers, was a key ingredient in this process. The Carter group succeeded in the Nicaraguan elections in building leverage through investments in its own credibility. This paid off on election day when President Daniel Ortega evidently calculated he had already gone too far down the road of conciliation to turn

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