

How Governments Can Build Peace

by Jane Oslin

Introduction

Nations, like individuals, shape their image and identity through their actions and expenditures. Canada and Costa Rica are two countries that strive to be known as peacebuilders. Within the borders of the United States, the Onondaga are a sovereign nation of Indigenous people committed to creating peace.

Peacebuilding on a governmental level is defined as the effort by a society to strengthen its ability to manage conflicts without violence. According to the Canadian International Development Agency, "peacebuilding aims at building human security, a concept which includes democratic governance, human rights, rule of law, sustainable development, equitable access to resources, and environmental security."

Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a country in Central America, which has chosen to make peace a main part of its government policy. In 1948, Costa Rica was the first country in the modern world to abolish its army and ever since has not had a military. Former President of Costa Rica, Rodrigo Carazo, led efforts to establish the United Nations' University for Peace, and in 1980, the University for Peace opened in San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica, to provide education, training, and research for peace. Currently, a peace museum is being designed and constructed in San Jose to educate visitors about peace.

Costa Rica received global attention for its commitment to peace when former President Oscar Arias Sanchez was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. In Costa Rica, Arias worked towards his vision of a more equal distribution of wealth, more justice and better earnings for farmers and urban workers, and a more open government, accessible and responsive to the

common people. Arias refused to re-arm his nation, choosing to use diplomacy instead of military force. Arias is internationally recognized for spearheading the Central America peace plan signed in 1987 by executives from all five Central American countries. Arias' peace plan included the withdrawal of foreign military support, **amnesty** for political prisoners, **cessation** of hostilities, and free elections.

Canada

Canada is another example of a country that focuses on peacebuilding. This focus influences many government decisions such as those made in foreign affairs and international trade. Government resources are directed to peacebuilding programs. While Canada has a military, one of its major roles is as a member of United Nations peacekeeping teams deployed into areas of conflict throughout the world. They have a distinguished history. Canada provides more troops towards the peacekeeping effort than any other country.

Canadian Peacekeepers are among the best trained in the world. When the U.N. needs a specialized unit for a new mission, Canada is often called upon. As mediators, they are recognized for their discretion along with their results. Canadian Peacekeepers have an advantage over those from some countries because most speak at least two languages.

Onondaga

Near Syracuse, NY, is the homeland of the Onondaga, one of the Six Nations of the Iroquois. They follow a traditional form of government and are recognized by the U.S. government as a sovereign nation, even to the point of issuing valid passports.

The Onondaga tradition is that a thousand

years ago they were visited by a spiritual entity called the Great Peacemaker who brought them the concept of democracy. He brought five warring nations together into a peaceful confederacy. As Chief Oren Lyons, who has been invited to speak on peace before the United Nations, explains, the Peacemaker taught the elders how to run a democratic government. In the October 2004 Schumacher Lecture, Lyons goes further. "The Peacemaker said to build our nation on peace, **equity**, unity, and health. The Peacemaker was very fundamental. He said, 'You can't have peace without health, you can't have justice without equity, you can't have continuity without unity.'"

The United States

Recently, there has been a movement toward developing new approaches to policy-making in the United States. Representative Dennis Kucinich, when he was a candidate for President in 2004, suggested that a Department of Peace be created to focus on developing nonmilitary peaceful conflict resolutions, preventing violence and promoting justice and democratic principles that expand human rights. Supporters of this idea see it as helping our nation to become more creative in

the way it approaches problems both abroad and at home.

In order to honor the deeply held principles of peace activists who oppose war and as a result do not want their taxes going to support it, the Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund Bill (HR 2631) was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives on May 25, 2005. This bill would enable taxpayers whose conscience requires them to oppose participating in and paying for war to make sure none of the federal taxes they pay are spent for military purposes. The bill does not excuse such taxpayers from paying their full taxes. Instead, the federal taxes of such **conscientious objectors** would be placed into a special trust fund in the U.S. Treasury, called the Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund. The Treasury could spend this money on any governmental program that does not fulfill a military purpose. This movement might be seen as a re-emergence of the legacy of the Peacemaker.

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DEFINITIONS

amnesty - a general pardon, especially for those who have committed political crimes

cessation - end, stop

conscientious objector - a person who objects to participation in all forms of war and whose belief is based on a religious, moral, or ethical belief system

equity - the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think the U.S. can learn from Costa Rica and Canada about making peacebuilding a priority? What changes, if any, do you think we should make?
2. When the United States was founded, it borrowed some of the principles of democracy from the Onondaga nation. Do you think we are still being true to those principles?
3. In order for a government to be a peacebuilder, what does it need to focus on?
4. Do you think giving people choices as to how their tax dollars are spent is a good idea? What are some of the things you'd like our nation to spend more money and energy on?
5. Can you think of any ways to encourage the U.S. government to do more work for peace?