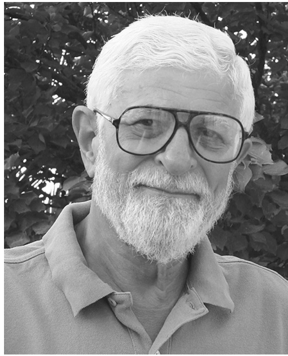
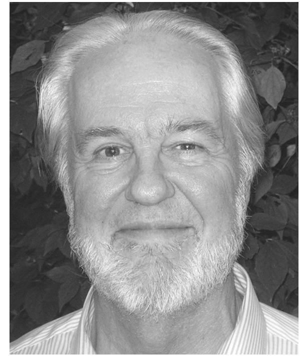
Interview with Vamik Volkan

John Rhead





Vamik Djemal Volkan was born to Turkish parents in Cyprus in 1932. He describes himself as having had three professions: psychoanalyst, medical administrator, and "political psychologist." This third profession involves his work on understanding and preventing large-scale violence such as wars and ethnic cleansing, through investigating large-group psychology and group identities. He is still very active in this work and spends a great deal of time traveling all over the world to provide consultation and interventions. He is a professor emeritus of psychiatry at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, a training and supervising analyst emeritus at the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute, and the Senior Erik Erikson Scholar at the Austen Riggs Center. He has authored or co-authored 40 books and edited or co-edited 10 more, and has been the recipient of numerous awards. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008, supported by letters from over 25 countries.

The interview below was conducted by email during a two-week period when he withdrew from his professional life to immerse himself in a gathering of his children and grandchildren. Obviously, his professional credentials are extremely impressive; however, I am all the more impressed because of his deep involvement with his family. This man does not appear to live in an ivory tower. Parts of his responses to the interview questions are taken from the book he is currently writing, Without Bullets and Bombs: A Psychoanalyst's Journey into Political Psychology.

I OBTAINED MY FORMAL TRAINING AS A PSYCHOLOGIST when the "Boulder Model" was in vogue. The premise was that a psychologist should be trained to be both a clinician and a researcher and it worked for me. I love being a psychotherapist and I also continue to be fascinated by research, addressing what I perceive to be the Big Issues. Stated differently, I am happy to have a positive impact on the lives of those who visit me and to have my life similarly impacted by them, but I am also a researcher continually questioning what we can learn about ourselves through psychotherapy that might have a larger applicability to the discontents of humanity as a whole. As I ride my life's wave, and hear the waves ahead of me crashing on the rapidly-approaching shore, I become increasingly convinced that these discontents have a lot to do with Big Issues like the search for happiness and meaning and our tendency to kill each other in staggering numbers. *jrhead@umaryland.edu*

You have been astoundingly passionate and productive in terms of conducting research, writing, and providing real-world interventions aimed at reducing and preventing large-scale group violence. Can you tell us a little bit about how you understand the developmental dynamics of your own life that put you on this course?

I was trained to study human nature. In spite of the fact that Sigmund Freud called my profession an "impossible" one, I have felt comfortable and confident as a psychoanalyst. When I found myself in situations where I needed to understand psychological processes shared by thousands or millions of persons, most of whom would never meet in their lifetimes, or explore the role of political leaders, diplomats and ordinary persons in wars, war-like situations and terrorism, I felt very humble and often helpless. But through it all, I continued to be actively curious about what has become known as "political psychology."

(I am only referring to political psychology conceptualized and practiced by a psychoanalyst.) I ask again and again, "What is a large-group identity?" and wonder why people kill and maim in the name of shared tribal, ethnic, national, religious or ideological sentiments.

Unlike my years-long preparation to become a psychoanalyst and a medical administrator, I was completely unprepared for my third profession—a "political psychologist." I did not give myself this title, but have accepted the fact that, for some decades now in many academic and political circles, I have become identified with this term.

When I was born in Cyprus in 1932, the island was a British colony. In my pre-teen years my family lived in Nicosia, the capital city, in a rented house at a location where the Turkish section of the city joined the Greek section. Next to our house stood an identical house occupied by a Greek family. They had a daughter, Elena, who was probably a year younger than I. The two families living in identical houses next to one another had no meaningful social contact in accord with the existing cultural tradition of those days in Cyprus.

During my latency years both Cypriot Turks and Cypriot Greeks were preoccupied with the impending danger coming from outside the boundaries of the island, dangers that as a child, my mind could not fully comprehend. After the Nazis' 1941 airborne invasion of another Mediterranean island, Crete, it was expected that they would next invade Cyprus. We dug a bomb shelter in our garden and took refuge there on many occasions, sometimes roused from our beds by sirens in the middle of rainy nights. Food was rationed and we were forced to eat dark, tasteless bread and taught how to wear gas masks. I began noticing Indian Sikh soldiers with turbans and long beards walking through the streets of my neighborhood. I witnessed a British Spitfire shooting down an Italian war plane just above my elementary schoolyard where I was playing with other kids. This must have been a frightening experience for me because I kept a small piece of

glass from the plane's wreckage among my valuable objects until I came to the United States as an adult in early 1957. I suspect that this piece of glass was a kind of "linking object" to this terrible event and by keeping it, and in a sense controlling it, I might have been attempting to master my childhood anxiety that I might lose my life.

The gardens of my house and Elena's were divided by a wall built of mud bricks, and as I grew taller I could see Elena in her garden. I do not remember when she and I become acquainted, but we would meet in the street in front of our houses. I would point at a car or bicycle that happened to be in the street and tell her their Turkish names. In turn she would point at things and try to teach me the Greek words for them. Soon she and I reached puberty and accepted cultural patterns that made us "taboo," as intermarrying between the two groups was considered to be as deeply forbidden as incest. Whatever I learned from Elena about real "Greekness" was thus denied more strongly. Without being aware of it during my childhood, I experienced concretely how large-group identities divide people. There was one English School in Nicosia where both teenage Cypriot Turks and Cypriot Greeks could attend, but most Turkish and most Greek youngsters went to schools in which the education was only in Turkish or Greek. I went to Turkish gymnasium and never learned to speak Greek, even though Greeks were everywhere on the island, and I would meet them almost every day without negative prejudice. We were different, but all of us were human. By the time Cypriot Turks and Cypriot Greeks became murderous enemies I had left that part of the world and was living first in Turkey as a medical student, and then in the United States as a physician.

I remember an important event that I was told about throughout my childhood. One morning, at the age of two, I was kidnapped from the front of our house—not the house next to Elena's—by a Greek woman. Ransom was not the motive. Apparently this troubled woman hoped to raise me as her own and intended me no harm. I was found in the late afternoon in Nicosia's electric factory where she had hidden me away. I have no recollection of this incident, but I can recall my mother's and grandmother's anxious expressions as they retold and relived the story. I was fascinated by it. Thus, this incident was mythologized in my mind. As a youngster, I had fears that I might be killed by electricity, but I was also curiously pleased that I, a Turkish child, had been a Greek person's object of desire.

In the summer of 1956 I finished Ankara University's School of Medicine and six months later I came to America, where I remained. During the last two and a half years of my life in Ankara, first as a rather poor medical student and then as a newly graduated physician, I shared a small room in an apartment complex with another Cypriot Turk named Erol. He had come to Ankara, as had I, for his medical education and was two classes below me at the same medical school. He called me *abi* meaning "my big brother." Since I only had sisters and no brother, I considered him to be my brother. During the time we were roommates, ethnic conflict began between the Cypriot Turks and Cypriot Greeks.

Three months after my arrival in the United States, I received a letter from my father. In the envelope there was a newspaper article with Erol's picture describing how he had gone to Cyprus from Ankara to visit his ailing mother. While trying to purchase medicine for her at a pharmacy, he was shot seven times by Cypriot Greek terrorists. These people killed Erol, a bright young man with a promising future, in order to terrorize the ethnic group to which he belonged. After receiving the news of Erol's death I felt numb. I did not cry. I was in Chicago in a foreign environment in which I was close to no one, so I did not share the news of Erol's murder with any other person. Even when I was undergoing my personal analysis some years later, I did not dwell on losing Erol. My "hidden" mourning process, I believe, largely remained just that—hidden.

As a young psychoanalyst I felt close to the late William Niederland and, in a sense, I thought of him as a mentor. At the time it never occurred to me that my seeking out Bill, who had coined the term "survivor syndrome," as a mentor might have something to do with my own "survival guilt" over losing Erol. In 1979 I began my involvement with the APA Committee's Arab-Israeli dialogue series and a lifetime of similar involvements in other conflicted areas. At the same time I was trying to understand the psychology of ethnic, national, religious or ideological conflicts which are associated with massive losses. During these years I also visited Northern Cyprus on many occasions, but it never occurred to me to visit Erol's family or find out where his grave was.

Thirty-some years after Erol's death, I once more visited Northern Cyprus. One summer night some friends took me to a garden restaurant and one of them who knew Erol's story pointed out a bearded man behind the bar and told me that this man was Erol's younger brother. I spontaneously got up from my chair, approached this man and said to him, "My name is Vamik. Does this name mean anything to you?" He began to cry and I found myself also crying out loud, right in the midst of people dining, with soothing classical music playing in the background. I had experienced an acute grief reaction which was followed by the reactivation of my mourning process that lasted many, many months. Upon reflection, I realized that I had kept the newspaper clipping with Erol's picture, which my father had sent me, as a linking object. Erol's mental double now is futureless. But when I was keeping it "alive," I used what it represented for me psychologically as a motivational source for many of my professional activities.

My reaction to Erol's death included many elements that are described in Otto Kernberg's description of "normal" mourning after the death of a spouse. As I had done previously, Kernberg observed that even a normal mourning process is not time-limited. Erol's death obviously induced elements of survivor guilt in me. Furthermore, when we were sharing lodgings, there were times when I treated him as a younger brother and ordered him around, and now he was no longer available to forgive me. Losing him also initiated reparative efforts in me. I became fully aware of this after my mourning process was activated in the restaurant. I realized then that the main reason for my choosing to study the topic of

mourning in individuals and societies was connected with my previously unconscious response to Erol's death. I was fascinated with my new understanding that my spending considerable time in conflicted areas of the world and in refugee camps where victims constantly deal with losses was connected with my reparative efforts. I can say that I felt, using Kernberg's terms, a "moral obligation" or a "mandate" to work on behalf of Erol's wishes. In my mind, his main wish was to remain alive and not to induce guilt in me. I wished that people under the influence of ethnic, national, religious or ideological conflicts would not kill others belonging to opposing large groups. Instead, I wanted them to make peace. I realized that— besides my being an object of desire for a Cypriot Greek woman who kidnapped me and my nostalgia about my budding relationship with Elena that was stopped for cultural traditions—my response to Erol's death encouraged my stubborn continuation of my work in international relations. I became fascinated with the realization that I had also chosen a Greek-American psychiatrist, Demetrius Julius, as my primary co-worker in our international efforts because of my perennial mourning. I realized that for decades I had partnered with a Greek in another arena as well. I co-chaired the American Psychoanalytic Association's so-called Sexual Deviations Study Group with the late Charles Socarides, another Greek-American, for ten years. I was not fixated on the past; I was able to find other "brothers," and some of them were even Greeks.

If we consider my "moral obligation" and "mandate" to work on reversing Erol's murder to be sublimated activities, it will be difficult to call my long mourning process pathological. I wish to believe that Erol would appreciate my efforts to find peaceful solutions to massive human aggression.

In your writings you report on many research findings and provide various theoretical concepts as a way to understand these findings and to extrapolate them to useful interventions. In your opinion, what are the most important findings and theoretical concepts that have emerged from your work?

Starting with Freud (1921), while discussing large-group psychology psychoanalysts primarily explained what a leader represents for the followers, for example as an oedipal father, and later they focused on what a large group itself represents for the individual group member, for example as a milk-giving mother. The time has come to evolve and expand a psychodynamic large-group psychology in its own right and explain how large groups interact in certain patterns in times of peace and war.

Large groups do not have one brain to think or two eyes to cry. When thousands or millions of members of a large group share a defense mechanism such as projection or a psychological journey such as mourning, what we see are societal, cultural and political processes. In order to explain this I will give three examples.

The first example: In our daily clinical practice we see behavior patterns in our analysands that can be explained by the concept of regression. In order to

evolve a psychoanalytically informed large-group psychology, we should ask how large-group regression exhibits itself. Kernberg rightfully explains that regressed large groups experience narcissistic or paranoid reorganization. We need to be more specific if we want to contribute to the understanding of a particular international conflict. I will mention one key sign of societal regression.

When individuals regress, they "go back" and repeat their childhood ways of dealing with conflicts contaminated with unconscious fantasies and mental defenses. When a large group regresses, the large group also goes back and inflames certain shared images of its ancestors' history. For example, under Slobodan Milošević, Serbians inflamed the 600-year-old image of the Battle of Kosovo. I call such images of the past "chosen traumas" and "chosen glories." Each chosen trauma or chosen glory belongs to only one specific group. Wounded Knee only belongs to Sioux Native Americans. When the images of these traumas are reactivated they change function and become key identity markers that confirm the existence and the continuity of the large group. They are "chosen" to patch up the wear and tear of the large-group's identity and maintain the narcissistic investment in the large-group identity.

When enemy representatives get together for unofficial diplomatic dialogues, they become spokespersons for their large groups. When one side feels humiliated, they reactivate the images of historical events. For example, while discussing current international affairs, Russians might begin to focus on the Mongol-Tatar invasion or Greeks may refer to the loss of Constantinople; both events occurred centuries ago. When such images of past historical events are reactivated within a large group, a "time collapse" occurs. Shared perceptions, feelings, and thoughts about a past historical image become intertwined with perceptions, feelings and thoughts about current events. This magnifies the present danger. Unless a way is found to deal with the time collapse, routine diplomatic efforts will most likely fail. Today's extreme Muslim religious fundamentalists have reactivated numerous chosen traumas and glories. We need to study and understand them in order to develop new—and hopefully, more effective—strategies for a peaceful world.

The second example: We are very familiar with a person's externalizing his or her unacceptable self and object images, or projecting unacceptable thoughts or affects on another person. This creates a personal bad prejudice. "I am not the one who stinks; my neighbor is the one who stinks!" If we want to develop a large-group psychology in its own right and understand at least one key aspect of societal prejudice, we will try to describe what happens when a large group uses externalization and projection. When a large group finds itself asking questions such as "Who are we now?" or "How do we define our large-group identity now?"—usually following a revolution, a war, a humiliating economic trauma, or freedom after a long oppression by "others"—it purifies itself from unwanted elements. Such purifications stand for large-group externalizations and projections. After the Greek struggle for independence, Greeks purified their language from all Turkish words. After Latvia gained its independence from the Soviet

Union, its people wanted to get rid of some 20 dead "Russian" bodies in their national cemetery. After Serbia became independent following the collapse of communism, Serbs attempted to purify themselves of Muslim Bosniaks and that led to tragedies such as the one in Srebrenica. There are non-dangerous as well as genocidal purifications. Understanding the meaning and psychological necessity of purifications can help to develop strategies to keep shared prejudices within "normal" limits and from becoming destructive.

The third example: Large groups, like individuals, also exhibit complicated mourning. In our clinical setting, we see many individuals who suffer from perennial mourning. I will mention one key sign of unending mourning among some large groups. Decades after a major shared trauma and loss at the hands of enemies, a large group may develop what I call political entitlement ideologies—a shared sense of entitlement to recover what has been lost in reality and fantasy. Holding on to such an ideology reflects a complication in large-group mourning, an attempt both to deny losses as well as a wish to recover them. What Italians call irredentism (related to Italia Irredenta), what Greeks call the "Megali Idea" (Great Idea), what Serbians call Christoslavism, what Turks call Pan-Turanism and, at the present time, what extreme religious Islamists call "the return of an Islamic Empire" are examples of entitlement ideologies. Such ideologies may last for centuries and may disappear and reappear when historical circumstances change. Often they contaminate diplomatic negotiations. They may result in changing the world map in peaceful or dreadful ways. The influence of complications involved in large-group mourning is one of the most significant aspects of studying international relations from a psychodynamic angle.

Considering large-group psychology in its own right means making "formulations" as to the unconscious and dynamic aspects of shared psychological experiences and motivations that exist within a large group and that initiate specific social, cultural, political, ideological processes that influence this large group's internal and external affairs, just as we make formulations about the internal world of our individual patients in order to summarize our understanding of their internal worlds and interpersonal relationships. My interest in developing a large-group psychology in its own right is to study what shared psychological phenomenon exists within a large group that only belongs to that large group: how it started, how it changed function to become a large-group identity marker, how it can be manipulated and reactivated to initiate massive violence and create major obstacles against peaceful realistic diplomatic negotiations, or how it can create an atmosphere for peaceful co-existence with "others." There are various types of shared psychological phenomena that are present within a large group.

Your own writings have ranged far beyond the psychoanalytic domain into many other disciplines, and have involved you in collaboration with others within these disciplines. Do you have any larger framework that you use to integrate this diverse body of work?

Interdisciplinary work is necessary. No one discipline can explain large-group activities.

Do you have a personal set of beliefs or practices that could be described as spiritual, religious, or existential? If so, how have these influenced your work?

None.

You have noted that "cracks" in an individual's identity may be filled in with elements of a large-scale group identity, thus impelling an individual to become, for instance, a suicide bomber. I thought of this concept when I came across a quote from Jung on individuation, arguably the opposite of large-scale group identity. The quote is from the closing paragraph in Jung's "The Technique of Differentiation" from volume 7 of his *Collected Works* and I would be interested in your comments on it. It is as follows:

> **Here one may ask, perhaps, why it is so desirable that a man should be individuated. Not only is it desirable, it is absolutely indispensable because through his contamination with others he falls into situations and commits actions which bring him into disharmony with himself. From all states of unconscious contamination and non-differentiation there is begotten a compulsion to be and to act in a way contrary to one's own nature…**
>
> **For these reasons individuation is indispensable for certain people, not only as a therapeutic necessity, but as a high ideal, an idea of the best we can do. Nor should I omit to remark that it is at the same time the primitive Christian ideal of the Kingdom of Heaven which "is within you." The idea at the bottom of this ideal is that right action comes from right thinking, and there is no cure and no improving of the world that does not begin with the individual himself.**

During the last decades I have had no time to re-read Freud or Jung. However, adapting Erickson's description of individual identity, I define *large-group identity* as the subjective experience of thousands or millions of people who are linked by a persistent sense of sameness, while also sharing some characteristics with others who belong to foreign groups. Using an analogy of a large canvas tent helps explain large-group identity. Think in terms of learning to wear two layers of clothing from the time we are children. The first layer, the individual layer, fits each of us snugly. It is one's core personal identity that provides an inner sense of persistent sameness for the individual. The second layer is the canvas of the tent, which is loose-fitting but allows us to share a sense of sameness with others under a common large-group tent. The canvas of the tent refers to one's core large-group identity. Some common threads, such as identifications with intimate others in one's environment, are used in the construction of the two layers, the individual garment as well as the canvas of the tent. Thus the core individual identity and the core large-group identity, psychologically speaking, are interconnected. While it is the tent pole—the leader—that holds the tent erect, the tent's canvas (large-group identity) protects both the leader and the group.

Under a huge large-group tent there are subgroups and subgroup identities, such as professional identities. A person can change a subgroup identity without much anxiety, unless such a change unconsciously becomes connected with a psychic danger such as losing one's mother or facing castration. But for practical purposes an individual cannot change his or her core large-group identity, especially after the individual goes through the adolescent passage and his or her core identity is crystallized. I am referring to general and typical situations here and not considering unusual individuals in a society, such as those who may be products of parents from a different ethnic group, or immigrants or dissenters. Think of a man—let's say he is German—who is an amateur photographer. If he decides to stop practicing photography and take up carpentry, he may call himself a carpenter instead of a photographer, but he cannot stop being a German and become a Frenchman. His Germanness is part of his core large-group identity, which is interconnected with his core individual identity. Both core identities evolve in childhood and become intertwined and crystallized during the adolescent passage. A group may evolve a new large-group identity only through the influence of some long-lasting historical events. For example, a large group of South Slavs became Bosniaks while under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.

The more the members of a large group are traumatized by an enemy group, the more they hold on to their large-group identities at the expense of their investments in their individual identities. They become preoccupied with "we-ness," the wear and tear on the canvas of their large-group tent, and emotionally become ready to do anything to protect their large-group identity and differentiate it clearly from the "other's" identity, even if this necessitates an increased tolerance for shared masochism and sadism.

The majority of the readers of *Voices* are clinicians working with clients in their private practice consulting rooms. As a group they place very strong emphasis on the importance of the person of the therapist as the most potent factor in therapeutic outcome. This orientation puts them (us) on a life-long path of intensive and intentional growth and development, usually involving a great deal of personal therapy. What would you recommend to these clinicians as a way to think about and conduct their clinical work if they want it to bring more peace and less war to the world? Are there arenas in which you believe such clinicians might apply their skills outside the consulting room to bring more peace and less war to the world?

In 2007, Lord John Alderdice—former leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland and of the Northern Ireland Assembly and now the head of Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords—and I started an unusual project. We began by bringing together twice a year people representing United States, United Kingdom, Turkey, Israel, Iran, Jordan, Egypt, Arab Emirates, Russia, India and Germany. Talking among ourselves, the group articulated its goals: to truly understand how international relations are perceived by different countries and to

open the possibility for understanding and overcoming potential distortions and stereotyped reactions. We now call ourselves the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI) group. We carry out this work for no government or organization, but we are available for consultations, and we look for *entry points* for future actions that may tame enemy images, remove irrational thinking, initiate empathy between the opposing groups, and begin the process of healing severe splits. There are 8 clinician members (psychoanalysts, psychotherapists from 5 countries) of the IDI plus former diplomats, political scientists, media people, etc. Without much work in the field it may be difficult for a clinician to be involved in this type of work.

But there are so many NGOs [non-governmental organizations] now. Some are helpful. Some are "dangerous." Clinicians may choose to join some "good" NGOs.

During the last decades we have become more aware of the influence of external events on individual psychology, transgenerational transmissions, etc. We can educate the public about the intertwining of the internal and external wars.

On your website there is a section entitled "My Father's Memoirs" which contains several pages in a language I cannot read or even identify with any certainty. I presume these writings may give some hint about your father's influence on you. Would you please say a little bit about what is contained in these writings and why you have included them on your website?

My, father who died in 1970, had written about his life. I published his writings with my comments in a Turkish newspaper in North Cyprus. He was the only child among 8 siblings of a farmer in a village in Cyprus who received education and became a teacher. He was born when the island was an Ottoman island (rented to the British). After WW I (when the British annexed the island to the British Empire) he became a British citizen. Then he was a citizen of the Republic of Cyprus for few years. When the island was divided in 1974 he became a citizen of the Turkish Federation of Northern Cyprus. He never moved away from the island, but changed his citizenship several times. Now he is buried in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. He was a brave man, a close follower of the Kemal Atatürk's modernization in Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. He met my mother, whose family were the Ottoman big shots in Cyprus (when the Island was an Ottoman Island). When the Ottoman sultan rented the island to the British and a British governor was sent to the island my mother's family lost its wealth and fame. There were no wars. Only a political change. So, history affected my family's life. This is another reason why I wanted to understand the intertwining of history and our lives.

What do you see in the world that gives you cause for hope? What do you see in the world that depletes your hope and perhaps even gives you cause for despair?

When I underwent my own psychoanalysis in the mid-1960s, my analyst sometimes told me that "good things have their own way of taking care of themselves," and later I used this phrase when I was analyzing others. Of course, there are many good things that human beings—individually and as members of large groups—perform. They dazzle us and earn our respect and awe. But we need to understand the meaning of "bad things" that human beings are capable of, above and beyond surface and logical explanations. We do this in order to keep hope alive that one day we will develop new strategies that include in-depth psychological considerations in order to tame destructive large-group behavior worldwide. In my advanced age, it is clear to me that I will never see the day this will be substantially accomplished. Leaders and rulers of governments and other small or large groups will continue to spend money to manufacture or buy more bullets and bombs, or whatever new fascinating and incredible technological devices replace them. It is an illusion that "bad things" in large-group behavior will ever end. However, even now I am optimistic that in some specific and limited international conflicts, the more we explore and understand the psychology of the "bad things" relating to them, the more hopeful we can be about resolving them without bullets and bombs.

People will continue to kill and humiliate "others" in the name of large-group identity (it may be contaminated with ideology or religion). Human nature does not change. Due to incredible advances in technology we are entering into a new civilization. It does not include further examination of the human nature, however. New technology first is used (at least most of the time) to kill people (enemies). Wars will continue to exist. I am hopeful, however, that sometime in the future more psychologically informed methods will be used to deal peacefully with some international conflicts.