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New Risks of Prejudice, Ethnocentrism, and Violence

The world is now, as it has been for a long time, awash in a sea of ethnocentrism, prejudice, and violent conflict. The worldwide historical record is full of hateful and destructive indulgences based on religious, racial, and other distinctions—holy wars of one sort or another. What is new is the destructive power of our weaponry: nuclear, enhanced conventional, chemical, and biological. Moreover, the worldwide spread of technical capability, the miniaturization of weapons, the widely broadcast justifications for violence, and the upsurge of fanatical behavior are occurring in ways that can readily provide the stuff of very deadly conflicts. To be blunt, we have a rapidly growing capacity to make life everywhere absolutely miserable and disastrous.

Centuries ago, it was common for military conquerors to put captives to the sword or to reduce them to slavery. By the end of the 19th century, it was widely believed that we had achieved a sufficiently civilized status to make such horrors impossible. Yet the world since then has seen near extermination of peoples, massacres, and massive deportations. We have learned and are continuing to learn how great the horrors can be when supposedly civilized nations set about destroying depreciated people.

In a world full of hatred, repression, terrorism, small wars, and preparation for immense wars, human conflict is a subject that deserves the most careful and searching inquiry. The stakes are now so high that there is an urgent need for cooperative engagement with these problems over a wide range of inquiry involving the physical, biological, behavioral, and social sciences. There is no royal road to truth, no single perspective that offers overriding promise. Just as the sources and manifestations of human conflict are immensely varied, so too are there many useful approaches to understanding, preventing, and resolving conflict.

Conflict and its prevention or resolution have not been major subjects for scholarly inquiry until quite recently, and even now they attract only marginal interest in many of the world's great research institutions. Nevertheless, some interesting and useful work is being done, including research on biological evolution and mechanisms of aggressive behavior; deep inquiry into the origin and resolution of past conflicts and study of contemporary conflicts; formulation of fundamental concepts pertinent to a wide range of conflicts; experimental research on simulated conflicts; the study of negotiations, both in real-life circumstances and in simulated ones; the study of various intergroup and international institutions as they affect conflict; research specifically focusing on issues of war and peace; and the study of conflicts at various levels of organization, such as families, communities, and nations, in the search for common factors and principles, so that discoveries at one level may illuminate issues at another level. The strengthening of both experimental and observational research, keeping in mind actual conflict and real-world decision-makers, could probably lead to major contributions in the next decade.

It is certainly not beyond human ingenuity to move this subject higher on the world's agenda. Strong organizations covering wide sectors of science, technology, and education can take a more active role in coping with this critical issue. The scientific community is the closest approximation we now have to a truly international community, sharing certain fundamental interests, values, and standards as well as certain basic curiosities about the nature of matter, life, behavior, and the universe. The shared quest for understanding is one that knows no national boundaries, no inherent prejudices, no necessary ethnocentrism, and no barriers to the free play of information and ideas. To some extent, the scientific community can provide a model for human relations that might transcend some of the barriers that have long plagued us and have now become so dangerous.

In a fundamental way, the modern world is the creation of science and technology in all of its aspects—those we relish and those we fear. The time is ripe for the scientific community to provide worldwide leadership in addressing the ubiquity of prejudice, the profound and pervasive impact of ethnocentrism, and the greatly enhanced risks of these ancient orientations in the rapidly changing world of the late 20th century.—DAVID A. HAMBURG, President, Carnegie Corporation of New York, New York 10022