Successful efforts that advance peace and justice are too often not noticed. One reason is that they sometimes are regarded as boring; lacking enough violence, they do not seem to warrant media, political, or even analytic attention. Effective peace and justice efforts are also frequently unrecognized because the success is imperfect. But, the results may be much better than had been anticipated and they therefore deserve great attention. Perfection is not to be expected, but avoiding, limiting, or ending destructive conflicts and reducing injustices can be accomplished.

In recent decades, many protracted destructive conflicts have become transformed and long enduring structures of injustice were ended. In many cases, the transformations have been remarkably profound and nonviolent. Particular events have been stunning: the tearing down of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the unconditional release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990 and his election as President of South Africa in 1994. Other transformations lacked highly symbolic events, but were notable nonetheless. In the United States, these include the current development of a multicultural society, with
increasing mutual respect among peoples of different ethnicities, religions, and styles of life.

Some of the conflict transformations have been surprising and some have been relatively unrecognized. In either case, the relative lack of attention to constructive conflict transformations obscures the publics’ and the experts’ understanding of how the transformations were accomplished. Most people have their gaze fixed on the dreadful failures and how to explain them, not so much on how they are avoided or overcome. The constructive waging of struggles over many years often has been crucial in the successful transformation of destructive conflicts (Kriesberg 1998).

Conflicts need not be conducted destructively. Adversaries can wage their fights in ways that minimize violence or even coercion, for example, by trying to persuade members of the other side that what is being sought has mutual benefits or by promising benefits for acceding to what is being asked. Even coercion or violence can be less rather than more provocative of fear, hatred, and the desire for revenge. Furthermore, the scope and the duration of the destructive aspects of a conflict vary.

Conflicts are never wholly destructive nor wholly constructive. One side may use more constructive methods than the other may and some members of each side may use constructive methods. Furthermore, the constructiveness of a conflict varies over time. One party may initiate a conflict in a relatively constructive way and yet, given the other side’s responses and the actions of external actors, the destructive qualities increase as the conflict escalates. On the other hand, even terrible, mutually destructive conflicts may eventually become transformed and be waged constructively, and at their end yield a relatively constructive outcome.
A crucial aspect of constructive conflicts is that the adversaries come to regard the conflict as a problem confronting many people in each side of the fight. Members of one or both sides come to see a possible solution to their problem that is acceptable to many persons in each camp and that is preferable to continuing in a conflict that is harmful to them.

Nearly everyone justly celebrates the successes of the American civil rights struggle, during the 1950s and 1960s. That struggle provides a model of what works. It was conducted by people in all walks of life, utilizing local and national organizations, and appealing to shared values about equal opportunities and rights under the U.S. constitution. It was waged by African-Americans in alliance with many other Americans, not against any ethnicity or so-called race. It was waged by nonviolent direct action that aroused widespread attention and admiration. The opposing forces resorted to violent means of suppression and that proved to be counter productive.

**Illustrative Cases**

I will note the role of constructive struggle in four great transformations, which have reduced destructive conflict and injustice. The transformations are (1) the ending of the cold war, (2) the dismantling of apartheid, and (3) the movement toward a multicultural society in the United States. Clearly, in each of these cases, many destructive aspects of the relations between opponents continue and new ones have developed. I will also discuss recent efforts to prevent destructive conflicts in these cases.

**Ending the American-Soviet Cold War.** Despite decades with the threat of mutual nuclear annihilation, ideological antagonism, and the rivalry that included proxy wars in many parts of the world, the cold war ended without violence, even before the Soviet
Union dissolved (Kriesberg 1992). The end followed periods of de-escalation and the transformation of the conflict. Agreements were reached about arms control; many confidence-building measures were established in Europe; and official and non-official social, cultural, and economic exchanges developed. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, with the facilitation of European governments that did not belong to the North American Treaty Organization (NATO) or the Warsaw Pact, signed the Helsinki Accords in 1975. The Accords included Western recognition of the borders established in Europe at the end of World War II, which had entailed a shift to the east of Soviet, Polish, and German borders. Trade and other exchanges increased between Western Europe and the Soviet bloc.

Even the intensification of the cold war by President Ronald Reagan in his first Administration, in the early 1980s, was accompanied by congressional constraints and popular peace movement activities countering the intensification. In addition, nonofficial groups in the United States expanded their interactions with many groups in the Soviet Union.

This reassurance and the increasing penetration of Soviet society and economy by Western culture and products undermined the Soviet ideology. Soviet elites began to value the rule of law, civil and human rights, and the kind of goods and services available in the West. The leaders of the Soviet Communist Party selected Mikhail Gorbachev to be the Soviet leader in order to reform the system, which he undertook to do. Gorbachev and his associates believed that ending the cold war was necessary to carry out the needed reforms, and they undertook initiatives that convinced Ronald Reagan and other U.S. leaders that this was possible.
The end of the cold war and the later dissolution of the Soviet Union have created a whole new set of relations among the countries formerly part of the Soviet Union, the countries formerly dominated by the Soviet Union, the other countries of Europe, and the United States. Despite the transformation of many old conflicts, new conflicts emerged, and some of them have been waged destructively. Much more needs to be done to build cooperative relations between the United States and Russia and among many other countries in Europe.

**Dismantling apartheid.** During the long struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the leaders and rank-and-file members of the African National Congress (ANC) pursued non-racialist goals. South Africans of European descent were not to be excluded or denied political and civil rights. Some whites were allied with the ANC in the fight against apartheid. After decades of nonviolent action, the ANC undertook armed struggle, for which Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders were imprisoned. The violent means, however, were always directed toward a negotiated settlement. The government’s repression was extreme, but ultimately failed.

To transform the conflict and to reach a mutually acceptable accommodation, many constructive conflict methods were adopted by various parties (Kriesberg 1998; Sparks 1995; van der Merwe 1989). Opponents of apartheid pursued many nonviolent policies, individually and collectively, that undermined the apartheid system, demonstrating that it could not be sustained. Small meetings were held outside of South Africa between ANC leaders and white South African students, journalists, business leaders, and later even government security officials. High officials of the South African government began to meet with Mandela, while he was imprisoned, to discuss possible
solutions to the ongoing conflict. External economic and political pressures imposed heavy economic costs and undermined the white’s faith in the morality of apartheid.

Within a few years a negotiated agreement was reached between the government led by President Frederik W. DeKlerk and representatives of the ANC. Each adult would have one vote and the majority would rule, but assurances were given for the protection of basic rights for all. The building of a rainbow country for all the peoples of South Africa was begun with widespread support and high hopes. Symbolic and substantive measures were taken to express the readiness of all peoples to work together.

Of course, the enduring economic and social deprivation problems and the bitter legacies of repression and destructive relations cannot be overcome instantly. A variety of official and unofficial policies and programs were initiated and continue to build a society of increasing peacefulness and justice. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has played an important role in this process. Also, many unofficial conflict resolution centers provide mediation services and projects to reconcile people from groups that have gravely injured each other. This is needed among blacks as well as between blacks and whites. During the anti-apartheid struggle and since, various black organizations and groups have fought with each other, often with deadly violence. Some of those fights were instigated and fostered by actions of agents of the previous government. One method of rebuilding relations has been to bring together a few persons from opposing black groups that had engaged in violence against each other, and for them to cooperate in making video about the way people in each group experienced that violence (Visser 1998).
Moving toward a multi-cultural American society. The effectiveness of the nonviolent civil rights struggle in the American South often has been examined, and I focus here on subsequent changes and the continuing ethnic, religious, racial and other conflicts in the context of an emerging multi-cultural America (Williams 1977). The availability of legitimate political and social institutions through which those conflicts can be conducted makes waging them constructively more likely. But it does not ensure that some people will not pursue destructive and self-defeating strategies.

The civil rights struggles, and many other social movements that composed the American cultural revolution of the 1960s, were initially waged in terms of equalizing opportunities. In many ways this was consistent with an assimilationist or melting pot vision of America. Many people in these movements, however, increasingly strove for acceptance and respect for their differences in appearance, life style, religion, or way of life from those of the previously dominant white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant-males.

The gains in equal opportunity and respect for various sub-cultures in America were resented by many Americans who felt that their interests and values were endangered. Some of them became fearful and they tried to limit and even to reverse the gains that had been made earlier. At the same time, the gains won by those seeking equal opportunities and respect for their group’s distinctive qualities had not yet satisfied past hopes, let alone newly raised expectations. Consequently the struggles continue at a different level.

The current and ongoing struggles are largely waged by efforts at persuasion. In addition, political and judicial institutions are used. Everyone, however, does not rely on
constructive methods. Small and large eruptions of destructive violence still occur. But these often arouse widespread condemnation.

Many efforts by organizations to adapt to the changing demands help prevent outbreaks of destructive acts, to limit escalation, and to build new institutional arrangements. These efforts include conducting training programs for employees about diversity in the work place, providing training for students about conflict resolution, developing dialogue circles for neighborhood people of diverse ethnicities, and establishing government offices to investigate and rectify violations of human rights.

Official and nonofficial institutional and organizational structures and procedures continue to be established and improved to foster greater equality of opportunity in employment, education, and access to goods and services. Many of these are directed to improve the quality of interactions among diverse ethnic communities. For example, efforts to improve interactions between police and members of various communities include training of police in human relations, establishing citizen and police review boards, and hiring persons from underrepresented ethnic communities to increase police effectiveness.

Members of organizations, in responding to the changing ethnic composition of the work force or of residential areas often adopt new emphases, procedures, and structures to enable them to continue. Such adoptions may help create new environments and experiences that are inclusive of diverse communities. For example, Oak Park, Illinois underwent a rapid transition in the late 1960s and early 1970s, from a white community to a stable integrated one. Some churches moved away, some began drawing members from a wide suburban area, and some stayed and developed new identities.
Congregations adopting multiracial and multicultural identities did so in various ways, drawing from diverse Christian theologies and were able to thrive (Becker 1998).

**Inferences and Principles**

Several inferences can be drawn from these and other cases of conflicts waged constructively to enhance peace and justice. First, reducing and avoiding destructiveness and injustice are difficult, and backsliding is inevitable. Some actions become stepping stones toward greater cooperation and justice, while others contribute to new destructive conflicts and injustices. Second, at least one side and ultimately each major adversary must formulate goals that recognize the legitimacy of the other side and provide some reassurance that vital needs will be met.

Third, to wage conflicts constructively and enhance justice, at least one side must rely on methods of struggle that minimize provoking and humiliating the members of the other side. Using brutal methods may create terror, but they also generate desperate resistance and the desire for revenge. Fourth, often one side must initiate overtures to assure the other side that the conflict can be transformed and conducted constructively.

Fifth, large-scale conflicts are never simply between two unitary camps. Each side consists of groups with varying interests and perspectives. Moreover, each group is involved in more than one conflict. Consequently, changes in the salience of different conflicts can alter the belief that a particular conflict is zero sum and that what one side wins must be at the expense of the other side.

Finally, intermediaries often play useful roles in facilitating and mediating a conflict, helping to avert or end the conflict’s escalation and reach a mutually acceptable accommodation. They include, notably, individuals and organizations acting as
mediators, from groups not engaged as partisans in the conflict. In addition, mediating services may be provided by quasi-mediators, persons or factions within one or more of the adversaries in the fight (Kriesberg 1996)

On the basis of analyzing these and many other cases, I propose six principles that can guide adversaries to struggle constructively. It should be obvious that most partisans in a conflict would be better off if their struggle against each other did not become destructive. Often, destructively waged conflicts are self-defeating, with many people in every camp suffering irreparable losses.

1. Each adversary should try to formulate goals that do not threaten the vital interests of all members of the opposing side. This means that goals are developed that take into account the interests and concerns of many partisans of the opposing side. This task is eased if a long-term time perspective is taken and the other side is not regarded as a monolithic entity. Such goals may be established from the initiation of a conflict, but also at a later time, even after protracted destructive struggle. If members of an antagonistic party do not follow this guideline, they risk intense, ongoing resistance. Opponents will feel compelled to resort to methods of struggle which brutalize them as well as their adversaries.

2. Members of each adversary should employ non-provocative means that do not so threaten the other side that it is provoked to counter threats in a destructively escalating manner. Each side should employ means that do not so injure and humiliate opponents that they engender hatred and the desire for revenge. Nonviolent direct action, efforts at persuasion, promises of future benefits, and even limited use of violence in certain contexts can foster constructive escalation and de-escalation. They also can ease the
difficulties in reaching a mutually acceptable accommodation. If members of an adversary party do not follow this guideline, they risk a desperate, violent response. The adversaries may become locked into a self-perpetuating and mutually destructive conflict, and legacies of guilt and shame.

3. Members of each adversary party should avoid demonizing people on the other side. Recognizing the other side’s humanity helps reassure members of the opposing camp that their vital interests will not be denied. Furthermore, as demonization of the other side becomes widespread and entrenched, the obstacles to movement toward de-escalation and accommodation increase. If this guideline is not followed, members of each adversary party risk continuing in a destructive conflict. The costs of waging the struggle and of trying to end it tend to grow.

4. Adversary parties must be careful to avoid expanding their goals and over reaching, even when they are winning. Leaders may seek to mobilize their constituency by promising great future gains, then as the struggle goes on, the goals may be expanded in order to justify the costs already borne. Such goal expansion makes settling the conflict increasingly difficult and raises the likelihood of failing to win them. If an adversary party fails to apply this guideline, the chances increase that its members will encounter backlashes and defeats.

5. Members of one or more sides in a conflict should try to reframe their conflict as a problem that they face together. After all, in one way or another, the adversaries will almost inevitably have a relationship in the future; every war ends and the former enemies somehow must live with each other. The way the struggle is waged and how it is ended
have enduring consequences that entail risks to all parties in the conflict. If this guideline is ignored, the adversaries risk a lengthy and recurring destructive struggle.

6. Adversaries becoming embroiled in a destructive conflict should seek assistance in avoiding, limiting, and ending it. Outside assistance can be helpful in providing mediating services to explore possible solutions and to gain support for them. The outsiders may be officials or unofficial and they may bring considerable resources to help sustain an agreement or they may come with few resources except those of a facilitator for the adversaries themselves. Disregarding such possible assistance will tend to prolong a destructive conflict and perpetuate injustice.

Closing Observations

This discussion has emphasized what the partisans in a conflict can do to wage their struggle more constructively and so enhance peace and justice. Intermediaries can, and often do, perform many services that help prevent, limit, and end destructively waged conflicts. Many different actors can provide some of these services; they may be at an elite or grass roots level, be officials or private persons, and with varying resources and links to the conflict. This discussion and the suggested guidelines can be useful for actors providing intermediary services. They suggest ways to foster peace and justice constructively.

Advances toward peace and justice are being made all the time. They are, however, never complete and the struggle for them is never ending. Frequently, newly achieved gains generate new fights and injustices. I have tried to suggest some ways that the gains can be made without too severe costs and be enduring.


