

Bridging the abyss of revenge: Forgiveness in politics

by [Donald W. Shriver](#) in the [December 1, 1999](#) issue

"For almost 50 years, South Korean villagers have insisted that early in the Korean War, American soldiers machine-gunned hundreds of helpless civilians under a railroad bridge near a hamlet some 100 miles southeast of Seoul," read a front-page article in the *New York Times*. "When survivors and victims' relatives told their story, and sought redress, they met only rejection and denial, from the United States military and from their own government."

The story is now hard to deny. The memories of a dozen American soldiers, interviewed by the Associated Press, and the persistence of two national councils of churches—Korean and American—have brought to light one of the few documented intentional killings of civilians by an American army unit.

Many embarrassing questions accompany the revelation. Why has the testimony of the Korean survivors been summarily dismissed by both their own government and ours? Do only Americans have credibility with other Americans? When AP reporters told the Pentagon about the forthcoming testimonies of elderly American veterans, why did the Pentagon so quickly respond that it "found no information to substantiate the claim"? Soon after the *Times* report, Defense Secretary William Cohen announced that the department would reinvestigate the matter. The State Department's new office for war crimes is also looking into it.

Americans are not used to worrying about painful events of half a century ago and are no more eager to admit to wrongs committed in their name than are the peoples of any other country. Nations, even more than individuals, resist admitting guilt. Is there indeed such a thing as collective guilt—and forgiveness—in politics? During the past 50 years no people has struggled with these questions more publicly than the Germans. Americans can learn a few lessons from them.

World War I was nearing its agonizing end when Max Weber stood before a Munich University audience to deliver a lecture that would become famous: *Politik als Beruf*.

As if anticipating and trying to prevent the "war guilt" clause of the Versailles treaty soon to be written by the Western allies, Weber raised the question of forgiveness in politics: "A nation forgives if its interests have been damaged, but no nation forgives if its honor has been offended by a bigoted self-righteousness. Every new document that comes to light after decades revives the undignified lamentations, the hatred and scorn, instead of allowing the war at its end to be buried, at least morally." Weber went on to accentuate the responsibility of political leaders to focus on the future. But none of the combatants allowed the war to be "buried, at least morally." And Adolf Hitler's manipulation of German memory of World War I and its aftermath prepared the way for World War II.

Post-World War II Germany, however, has confronted the truth of the Nazi era, decade by decade, in an accumulation of public reminders of its evils--evils that must be remembered before they can be forgotten. As Kierkegaard said: "Forgetting is the shears with which you cut away what you cannot use, doing it under the supreme direction of memory. . . . When we say we consign something to oblivion, we suggest simultaneously that it is to be forgotten and yet also remembered."

In front of the Weimar train station stand signs noting that this classic center of German culture is only a few kilometers from Buchenwald. I can think of no place in America where officials have juxtaposed such reminders of historic good and evil. Similarly, as I came to know Berlin during four months' residence there in early 1999, I could think of no other national capital that has raised so many monuments not only to the heroes but to the victims. Many a young German is weary of hearing about the Holocaust and the other crimes of the Nazis. But I cannot forget a 17-year-old gymnasium student who told me, "We have had to study the Holocaust at three different stages in our curriculum. You will hear young people complain that they are fed 'up to here' with Holocaust studies. But my experience is that each new study has gone deeper than the one preceding it. Perhaps we should never stop trying to understand it."

Post-1945 German history convinces me that there is such a thing as repentance in a nation's life and that political leaders play a major role in cultivating such repentance. But is there also forgiveness in politics? In general, political philosophers and theologians have answered no. They have confined forgiveness to personal relations and church ritual. Yet in recent years public talk about forgiveness has penetrated the worlds of journalism, international politics and theological ethics in unprecedented ways.

To understand this phenomenon one must reflect that "politics" is not only a contest for power but also a process by which diverse persons and interests learn to live together without killing each other. Sir Bernard Crick described politics as requiring "genuine relationships with people who are genuinely other people," some of whom may be or have been "genuinely repulsive to us." Decisive for Crick is whether "we have to learn to live with them" as the alternative to learning to kill them. Once people are locked into a history that has included much killing, they have a choice between preparing to continue the killing and preparing to stop it.

Almost alone among political philosophers, Hannah Arendt proposed a reckoning with the past that is a secular equivalent of forgiveness. Politicians who tell their constituents to forget about the past are asking some to forget pain and others to forget guilt. Modern psychiatry has made us aware of the folly of this advice. Traumatic pain and guilt plant a time bomb in both the human psyche and political history. In the Balkans, the Ukraine, South Africa, Guatemala and Germany, dealing publicly with the "negative past" has been a major political issue. Until leaders, citizens and institutions do something about this past, their present and future relations are likely to be corrupted by undercurrents of hostility. As William Faulkner put it, men have "learned how to forget quick what they ain't brave enough to try to cure." "Remember and repent" and "remember and forgive" are better mottoes for the restoration of political health than "Forgive and forget."

At least four major dynamics mark the path to such health:

Forgiveness begins when victims abandon revenge and perpetrators abandon professions of innocence. We resist doing so. What is more normal than for victims to want revenge and for perpetrators to fear it? Germans feared it in 1918, and the Versailles Treaty justified their fears. Exacting revenge is the perennial temptation of victors—a temptation they must resist if they mean to build a new, positive relation to the defeated.

The most eloquent recent illustration of a nation refusing to equate justice with revenge is South Africa. As Nelson Mandela explained, "It was very repugnant [in 1993] to think that we could sit down and talk with those people [the Afrikaners], but we had to subject our plan to our brains and to say, 'without these enemies of ours, we can never bring about a peaceful transformation to this country.' And that is what we did. The reason why the world has opened its arms to South Africa is because we are able to sit down with our enemies and to say, let us stop

slaughtering one another. Let's talk peace." Here is a compelling example of the momentous shift from the politics of murder to the politics of life. Under Mandela's leadership South Africa has granted murderers a right to live that they did not grant to their victims. South Africa has outlawed capital punishment for the strong reason that it repeats the crime it punishes. Breaking that vicious cycle is the true beginning of forgiveness in politics.

In a memorable 1985 speech German president Richard von Weizsäcker paid tribute to the relative generosity of the Western Allies to Germany after World War II. Though he did not say that Versailles had taught the Allies that vengeance doesn't work in international affairs, that background was undoubtedly in his mind when he stated, "We cannot commemorate the 8th of May without making ourselves aware how much conquest of self the readiness for reconciliation demanded of our former enemies. . . . For this there had to be a gradual growth of certainty that Germans would not once again attempt to correct a defeat with force."

In effect, the bundespraesident was saying that a moderation of the victors' resistance to revenge had to be met by the resistance of the defeated to claims of innocence. The bulk of his remarkable address catalogued the sins of die Nazizeit. His words set a new standard for national politicians who want to serve the future by a realistic remembering of the past. What might have happened to postwar German-American relations had Germans and their leaders practiced their own form of "bigoted self-righteousness" in relation to that Nazi past? Accusations and counteraccusations could have gone on and on. Rotterdam and London suffered, but then so did Hamburg and Dresden. Yes, Nazi anti-Semitism was terrible, but what about American and British racism?

The public truth about past evil so essential to repentance in politics can be recovered only in a context of public hope for reconciliation and a measure of forgiveness. Theologians sometimes debate whether one can forgive another if that other does not repent. But we should also ask if one can repent without the prospect of forgiveness. Avengers do not much care about relating again to their enemies, but those who forgive want to restore relationship.

In establishing its Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996, the South African parliament adopted the formula, "Amnesty for Truth." As the weakest form of a political act akin to forgiveness, amnesty sets aside questions of guilt and legal prosecution. All that the TRC demanded of its perpetrator-witnesses was that they

tell the truth about what they had done to their victims. It did not demand that they say "we are sorry," though some did so. Both victims and perpetrators will feel safe in telling their stories, the TRC legislation assumes, if victims are assured that the public will now really listen to them and if perpetrators are assured that they will not be prosecuted to the full extent of new law. For effecting a transition to a new civil society, the truth about the past can be more important than punishment for the past.

Protecting perpetrators and integrating them into the new society, however, was not the chief purpose of the TRC. It gave priority to restoring the dignity of the victims, renewing their membership in civil society, and making a place for them in public history. Lucas Baba Sikwepere, who was permanently blinded by his torture by South African police, said, "I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now I—it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you my story." As Professor Martha Minow of Harvard comments on this testimony: "Tears in public will not be the last tears, but to know one's tears are seen may grant a sense of acknowledgment that makes grief less lonely and terrifying." Such tears can nourish a new sense of place in one's society. They can moderate the thirst for revenge. Will such truth inevitably promote reconciliation? We cannot be sure. After ten years of truth-telling about the Stasi, not all Germans, east or west, believe that truth serves forgiveness. Much depends on whether such truth is intended as a weapon for keeping new neighbors at bay or as the clearing of a public space for the building of new political communities.

Forbearance, repentance and truth-telling advance a process of forgiveness when they produce new empathy between former enemies. In the politics of conflict, especially the propaganda of war, each side denigrates the humanity of the other. After the firebombing of Tokyo, a Japanese newspaper wrote about Americans, "[They are] utterly lacking in any ability to understand the principles of humanity. . . . They are nothing but lawless savages in spirit who are ruled by fiendish passions and unrestrained lust for blood. . . . Only through the complete chastisement of such barbarians can the world be made safe for civilization." While the Japanese were calling Americans "demons," we were calling them "monkeys." We each designated the other as subhuman, a ploy that is one of the awful weapons of war. As all torturers know, it is easier to kill people when you think of them as subhuman.

Can people who once labeled each other as "unworthy of life" (*lebensunwertes Leben*, as the Nazi concept had it) recover from this corruption? In his monumental

study *The Nazi Doctors*, Robert Lifton, an American psychiatrist, came to the conclusion that the gruesome "medicine" practiced in Auschwitz was possible only because of the doctors' systematic exclusion of empathy for their victims. So, at the end of his book, Lifton asks himself: Little as anyone ought to sympathize with these parodies of the medical profession, can one empathize with them? Can one identify the humanity in these doctors and acknowledge them as akin to oneself? Lifton's position is very different from Daniel J. Goldhagen's thesis—in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*—that Germans of that era shared a special "eliminationist anti-Semitism" that separated them from the rest of humanity. Would that it were so! How much wiser is one of the last lines of the Von Weizsäcker speech: "We learn from our own history what man is capable of." We are all vulnerable to collaborating in the doing of great evil to our neighbors. The recognition of this truth is one of the things Christians should bring to politics.

Evildoers must be understood as fellow humans if they and their victims are to be restored to the status of neighbors and citizens—which is the practical goal at which political forgiveness aims. As Gesine Schwan puts it in *Politik und Schuld*, those who barricade themselves in their own little worlds are inherently unpolitical. Political society depends on trust and some degree of fellow feeling. After deep fragmentation, the renewal of civil community requires the catalyst of empathy.

Finally, collective forgiveness requires that one move from apology to reparation. Apologies for past wrongs have become astonishingly common in political, church and other settings across the world. During a visit to Uganda President Bill Clinton apologized for African slavery; in Guatemala he apologized for what the CIA had done there. Tony Blair has apologized to the people of Ireland for Britain's passivity in face of the Irish famine of the 1840s. Recently the Natal Law Society apologized for the exclusion of Mohandas K. Gandhi from the practice of law in South Africa. Apology seems to have become an international fad.

Are such ceremonial gestures of any use in international relations? They can be, suggests Canadian sociologist Nicholas Tavuchis in his remarkable book, *Mea Culpa*. A well-crafted official apology can be "a prelude to reconciliation." Tavuchis concludes that "the consummate collective apology is a diplomatic accomplishment of no mean order." Willy Brandt's gesture of repentance before the monument to the Warsaw Uprising was such an accomplishment, as was Harry Truman's laying of a wreath before the Mexico City monument to young Mexican soldiers killed in one of the most imperialistic wars in American history. In response to that gesture, a taxi

driver told an American reporter, "To think that the most powerful man in the world would come and apologize!"

But if the integrity of apologies is to be sustained, they should be followed by reparations. Think of the contrast between the reparations which the Allies vengefully imposed upon Germany in 1918 and the reparations which the Federal Republic since 1949 has tendered to surviving victims of Nazism. The Bonn Information Office carefully qualified this gesture: "No matter how large the sum, no amount of money will ever suffice to compensate for National Socialist persecution." Much the same qualification was made by President George Bush when, in 1990, he transmitted to every Japanese-American survivor of the internment camps a check for \$20,000: "A monetary sum and words alone cannot restore lost years or erase painful memories." Above all, money cannot restore a lost life. But symbolic gestures can effect significant healing. They make forgiveness easier to contemplate. At the very least, they make more likely the consent of the victims to the idea of some new political community with the perpetrators and their descendants. Perhaps the wounds will never completely heal; but imperfect justice is better than none.

Weber defined politics as the "slow boring of hard boards." The hardest board of all may be the public facing of evils that a government and its citizens together have inflicted. Yet a nation whose leaders try regularly to protect its citizens from illusions of innocence will be a nation that other countries can more easily trust and even forgive. Contemporary Germany comes close to being such a country. American patriotism would be more honest if we Americans were as aware of the moral shortcomings of our past dealings with African Americans, Native Americans and the civilians of countries with whom we have been at war as Germans are of the Nazi treatment of Jews, gypsies and Russian prisoners of war.

Speaking of life in a small village, Robert Frost said, "To be social is to be forgiving." The new global village will need that rule, and its companion: to be social is to be repentant. Perhaps it is ethically wrong to believe that evils such as the slave trade and the Nazi camps should ever be forgiven, but it is may be equally wrong to believe that the evildoers and their descendants should be excluded from society rather than restored to it.