

Moving Beyond Intractability

Conflict Frontiers
Massive Open Online Seminar

**See the Complexity
It's not Just "Us versus Them"**

Guy Burgess & Heidi Burgess
Co-Directors

Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado
UCB 580, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0580, (303) 492-1635, burgess@colorado.edu
Copyright © 2018 Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess

Hi! this is Heidi Burgess. Today I would like to talk about the first step people need to take if they're going to be a participant in massively parallel peace building. That is seeing the complexity in the conflicts that they are dealing with, and breaking out of the assumption that it's just "us versus them."

Conflict Frontiers

Simplified to "Us vs. Them"

Peter Coleman – *The Five Percent* – And Us!

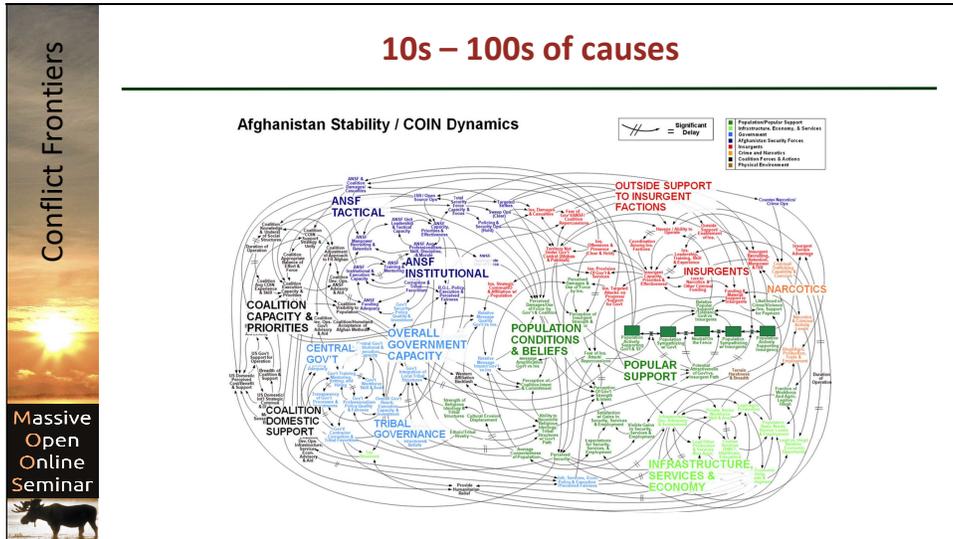
"Intractability happens," according to Coleman, "when the many different components of a conflict collapse together into one mass, into one very simple "us versus them" story that effectively resists change."



Coleman, *The Five Percent*. P. 9

Massive Open Online Seminar

In his book *The Five Percent*, Peter Coleman observed that “when the many different components of a conflict collapse together into one mass, into one very simple “us versus them” story that effectively resists change.” This happens all the time! We tend to oversimplify the story or our understanding of what's going on in the conflicts we are confronting.



For instance, here's a diagram that General McChrystal created and showed about what was going on in Afghanistan a number of years ago. Everybody laughed at the time because they thought this was an impossibly complex diagram that could not *possibly* be understood. In reality, it's quite an oversimplification! But it shows that there are lots of different parties and lots of different issues. Hundreds of things are influencing what's going and there are many different dynamics. So if you intervene in one place, then your actions are going to reverberate throughout the system. So you have to understand where you have influence and where you don't, and what the effects of your intervention are going to be.

Conflict Frontiers

“Good Guys” (Us) versus “Bad Guys” (Them)

- Have a picture of US military and another picture of Taliban fighters.



Massive
Open
Online
Seminar



But we tend to oversimplify all the complexity by describing the conflict simply as “good guys versus bad guys”, “us versus them.” We then assume that if we can defeat the “bad guys,” then everything will be fine, But it's not that simple.

Photo credits: U.S. Military – public domain; Taliban fighter:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/55361146@N08/9019774588>. by newsonline. Attribution 2.0
Generic (CC BY 2.0)



The war on terror, overall, has been framed as a simple story: “we, the good guys, are fighting them, the terrorist bad-guys, and if we can just kil, or otherwise get rid of all the terrorists, everything will be fine. We all know how well that’s working!

Photo Credits: War on Terror: <https://vimeo.com/61077518>. Beginning screen of video available on vimeo.

Conflict Frontiers

Other Examples....

- Very complex conflicts about...

Massive Open Online Seminar

Other examples of conflicts people tend to vastly over-simplify are Syria, Israel/Palestine, and in the United States, conflicts over trade, abortion, race (blacks versus whites and blacks versus the police), and immigration. These are all extremely complex conflicts! You could draw a map of any of these that would be a lot like that Afghanistan map in terms of complexity.

Photo Credits: Rubble – us govt photo in public domain, https://upload.wikime://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/44/Checkpoint_near_Abu_Dis.jpg. By Picture taken by Justin McIntosh, [CC BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], from Wikimedia Commons. Nebraskans: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mharriger/501627101/> by Matt Harringer. CC BY-SA 2.0

Black lives matter protest: dia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/83/Black_Lives_Matter_protest.jpg
Attribution: By The All-Nite Images [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons/

No abortion: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/Abortion-sign.svg>. By Дoнop [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)], from Wikimedia Commons.

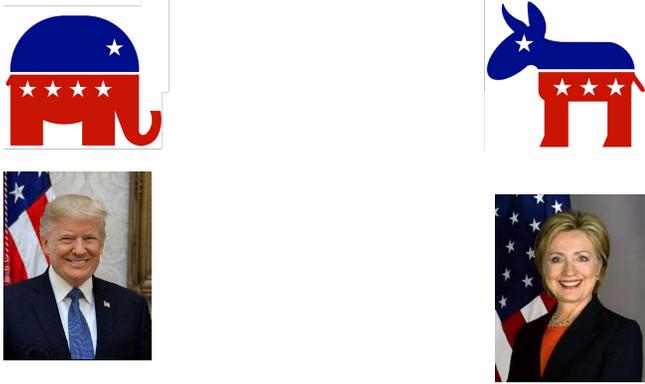
Prochoice: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/24/Prochoice.svg>. By Rizome [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], from Wikimedia Commons.

Nafta: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/134262628@N02/33259730536>. By Netivist. (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Conflict Frontiers

Massive
Open
Online
Seminar

For instance



The slide features a vertical sidebar on the left with the text "Conflict Frontiers" and "Massive Open Online Seminar" above a small image of a bull. The main content area is titled "For instance" and contains a 2x2 grid of images. The top row shows the Republican elephant logo and the Democratic donkey logo. The bottom row shows the official portraits of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

But again, we tend to completely oversimplify it by thinking (and saying) that it is just a case of the “good guys versus the bad guys.” Some of us think that the good guys are on the right, and some of us think that the good guys are on the left. (I have this picture reversed; I should have put the Democrats on the left!) But it's never that simple!

Photo Credits: Hillary Clinton: public domain. Donald Trump:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/56/Donald_Trump_official_portrait.jpg.
Public domain.

Conflict Frontiers

You have to do more than “Get Rid of the Bad Guy(s)”



Yassir Arafat

Saddam Hussein

Muammar al-Gaddafi

Massive Open Online Seminar

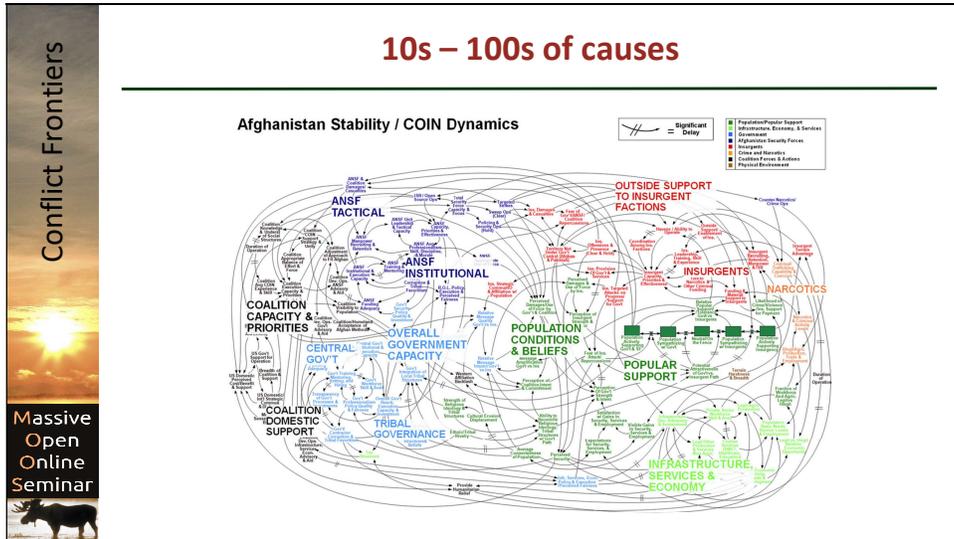
You have to do much more than get rid of the bad guys! We thought in Iraq, if we just killed or imprisoned Saddam Hussein, the population would welcome us with open arms and they would create a democracy much like we had in the United States. That didn't work! We thought if we could get rid of Qaddafi in Libya, then Libya would establish a stable democracy. That didn't work either! We thought if we could have gotten rid of Arafat, who was the head of the Palestinians for many years, that peace would come between Israel and Palestine. That didn't happen either.

Why do I have Trump's and Clinton's picture up here along with Saddam, Qaddafi, and Arafat? It is because we are making the same assumption here. Many Democrats are assuming “if we can just get rid of Trump, everything will be fine! And the Republicans are assuming “if we can just get rid of the Democrats, in fact, if we can “lock Hillary up,” everything will be fine! But again, it is not that simple!

Photo Credits: Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump: Public Domain, Yassir Arafat: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/aa/Yasser_Arafat.jpg. By Tibor Vég (Arafat.jpg) [CC BY 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Saddam Hussein: Public domain.

Gaddafi: Public Domain.



You can draw a diagram like this of any of these conflicts. Indeed, mapping the conflict in some way is one of the first steps that you need to take toward successful massively parallel peacebuilding. How to do that is what I'm going to talk about in the next several videos.