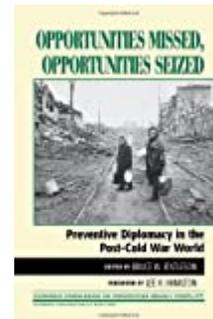




**Bruce Jentleson, ed.** *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized: Preventive Diplomacy in the Post-Cold War World*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. 431 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8559-2.



**Reviewed by** Tom Nichols (Department of Strategy, U.S. Naval War College)

**Published on** H-Diplo (July, 2000)

By one estimate in *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized*, the 1990s have seen at least 37 major armed conflicts in which over four million people have died. The question editor Bruce Jentleson and his co-authors seek to answer is: why did these conflicts and deaths take place while others were averted and lives were saved? In other words, when and how does “preventive diplomacy” work, and how could it have been better used in cases that descended into violence? Those noble and interesting questions are at the center of this volume, but after ten closely-documented case studies, there is little that emerges as a useful answer.

To their credit, the authors of *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized* adhered closely to a common format to make the cases as comparable as possible. Comparing events from Rwanda to Chechnya to Korea is a difficult undertaking, and most cross-national studies tend to founder because of poorly designed frameworks of analysis. Jentleson, however, presents a sensible set of criteria for comparison, and each case follows roughly the same outline: the facts of the case are presented, an assessment is made of the degree to which there was “early warning” of eventual violence, a discussion of what actions were taken at various stages of the case, and finally, an evaluation of the efficacy of the responses and consideration of alternatives. Overall, the chapters are crisply

presented, despite the fact that the adherence to a common framework makes them a somewhat arduous read.

Reasonable criteria were applied to case selection, and Jentleson is careful to explain the methodology behind the list of cases. All are important and worthwhile, and by and large they are not overdetermined (although the Chechen case, in my opinion, would inevitably have turned violent, while the Ukrainian case would never have). There are a clear failures of conflict prevention, such as Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union, Somalia, and Rwanda, as well as successes, such as Macedonia and the Congo. (Other putative “successes” are more problematic, as I discuss below.)

The real problem with *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized* is that in the end, its prescriptions both generally and specifically boil down to so much common sense. The determining factor in each case seems to be whether anyone had an interest in stopping the conflict: if an actor (the world, the UN, the United States, whoever) wanted to stop a conflict and did, preventive diplomacy worked. If it didn't, maybe it could have, and diplomacy might have worked. None of this is arguable or controversial, but it is not useful, either. Some specific examples show the degree to which the authors, in their search for solutions, are left arguing little more than that states and the world community or particular regimes should ne-

gotiate, intervene or acquiesce rather than fight or allow fighting.

On the issue, for example, of what policymakers should do when confronted with early warning of conflict, Alexander George suggests that they should “gather more information about the situation. Step up collection and intelligence and public information.” But is this advice to counter some putative conventional wisdom that when violence looms, policymakers should \*avoid\* more information? George is right, but who could disagree, and why would a policymaker ever do otherwise?

In some of the cases, the conclusions are equally obvious. Susan Woodward’s admirably thorough analysis of the disintegration of Yugoslavia ends with a warning that “Early warning is not sufficient to obtain early action. An institutional capacity to act must be agreed on and precede the conflict, and it must obligate collective action and a coherent message even when the leading powers perceive no national interest and disagree about the nature of the conflict.” Woodward is right, but this is little better than saying “to prevent violence in small states, big states have to agree to do it.” Just how that level of agreement is reached is unclear, and Woodward’s chapter, while excellent as a pathology, leaves little in the way of useful lessons.

Likewise, John Maresca’s study of the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh (in which Russian mischief was evident) notes that “a way must be found to integrate Russia’s ambition to play an important role, and its physical capabilities, with the impartial legitimizing character of international institutions, so that Russian efforts do not devolve into neocolonialism.” One can only look forward to the next installment in the series when we are told what that “way” might be.

In his conclusions, Jentleson likewise falls into broad or circular statements: “the international community did have specific and identifiable opportunities to limit the conflicts [in cases of missed opportunities]. But its statecraft was flawed, inadequate, or even absent. ”This, of course, is by definition true – if the statecraft were adequate, the cases wouldn’t have been failures, by his own criteria. Still, the idea that such conflicts were not foreordained is an important contribution, especially in the face of naysayers who point to various humanitarian disasters and argue that there was nothing that could have been to prevent them.

This is the strongest and most useful conclusion in the

book, but it defeats only a position that has been taken, in my opinion, by disingenuous critics of interventions. But elsewhere, readers will hardly be surprised when Jentleson concludes that “the onset of mass violence transforms the nature of a conflict” or that “putting...severely shattered societies back together again is enormously difficult...and, very possibly, just not possible.” These may be revelations to scholars of international relations, but to even the casual observer of international life these are obvious truths.

The book takes a more daring stance with its counterfactual cases, but the conclusions that such cases – nuclear non-proliferation in Ukraine, the status of Russians in the Baltics, and the North Korean nuclear program – are “successes” are open to question. In the case of Ukraine and the Baltics, what was at stake? Ukraine’s intransigence over dismantling former Soviet ICBMs was little more than a financial shakedown of the international community, and when that gamble failed, reasonable terms were found and the missiles taken away. But I would argue that there was no serious proliferation “threat” in Ukraine and that the missiles were going to go one way or another, either by negotiation or by just rotting in their silos in a short time. The real issue was whether the West would let an opportunist like Leonid Kravchuk engage in blackmail –but Kravchuk was playing a weak hand, and in the end he folded because he had to.

In the Baltics as well, what “threat” was averted? Western pressure led to better treatment of the Slavic minorities and the removal of Russian troops, but at what point could these issues have ignited major violence, or even war, between the tiny Baltics and the Russian Federation? The status of Russians in the region is still a thorny one, but it is hard to see where preventive diplomacy prevented anything.

The most startling chapter is the one in which Michael Mazarr celebrates the Clinton Administration’s efforts to buy off the North Korean nuclear program as a “success.” To put it mildly, I would suggest that the jury is still out; to believe that the North Koreans have abandoned their nuclear ambitions when we cannot reliably verify their compliance with international agreements strikes me as nave. Moreover, among Mazarr’s prescriptions he stresses the moderating influence that non-governmental organizations can have in such dangerous situations (he mentions Jimmy Carter’s visit to North Korea), arguing that such groups should “be involved in the process from the outset.” It is, frankly, hard to take seri-

ously an analysis that concludes that U.S. policy in North Korea has been a success and that what the world needs is more of Jimmy Carter's meddling.

Despite these criticisms, this is a volume worth owning. The reader is not likely to find so concise and direct a statement of the facts of each case anywhere else, and as cumbersome as it is, the disciplined imposition of a common framework does make for some interesting comparisons. The volume does not actually fail in its stated goal, which is to present preventive diplomacy as a viable instrument in averting violence; rather it merely points out that when diplomacy works, it works. The argument against preventive diplomacy is not a strong one

– it is foolish to contend that dozens of conflicts around the world are somehow foreordained by ancient hatreds – and the volume is better read not as a ringing defense of preventive diplomacy but instead as a fruitful excursion, via several well-written case histories, into the role that negotiation and diplomacy have played in some of the major crises of the 1990s.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu or H-Diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Tom Nichols. Review of Jentleson, Bruce, ed., *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized: Preventive Diplomacy in the Post-Cold War World*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4386>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).