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# STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

**15 Minutes**

**Aaron David Miller**  
President of Seeds of Peace

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## Aaron David Miller

### President, Seeds of Peace

**I**n 2003, Aaron David Miller left his State Department post as a top Middle East peace negotiator and adviser to six secretaries of state to take the helm at Seeds of Peace, a nonprofit that brings together teenagers whose societies are in conflict. Seeds attempts, over the course of a summer at an unusual camp in Maine and through follow-up programming in conflict regions, to transform them into eventual leaders capable of seeking reconciliation. Since 1993, Seeds of Peace has developed a network of nearly 3,000 potential leaders from 25 nations.

**You have spent your career focused on the most seemingly intractable issues facing mankind. What have you learned about the pursuit of peace, and how does it help you guide your organization?**

The Arab-Israeli conflict can be resolved. What led me to resign from the State Department was my conviction that it has become a generational conflict. We are in great danger of losing an entire generation of young Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians to a kind of hopelessness and despair that has characterized the situation over the last four years. I left the State Department not because I'd lost faith in what I call transactional diplomacy, which is the business of diplomats that I did for 25 years. But that is not enough. Transactional diplomacy has to be married to something else, and that something else is what I describe as transformational diplomacy – creating personal

relationships between future leaders.

**You really believe in achieving peace one person – one teenager – at a time?**

While saving the world one person at a time is not the most ideal way to proceed, it's critical if we're ever going to move beyond peace as the purview of diplomats to the kind of reconciliation and peacemaking that needs to be shared by broader constituencies. Contacts and relationships must be forged between young leaders who will emerge as journalists, attorneys, legislators, sports figures, scientists. This is the stuff of which relationships between nations are built. If there's a sense of sharing a common destiny and there are practical ways of cooperating, people see they're part of the same structure. One person's floor really is another person's ceiling.

**Can you truly be nonpolitical with so much politics involved?**

We're a nonpolitical organization in the sense that we don't take positions on discrete issues. I was asked to take a position on the Iraq war, and I wasn't going to because I've got George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton on my advisory committee. We need the support of Democrats and Republicans in this country. We need the support of Labour prime ministers and Likud prime ministers in Israel. So it involves a degree

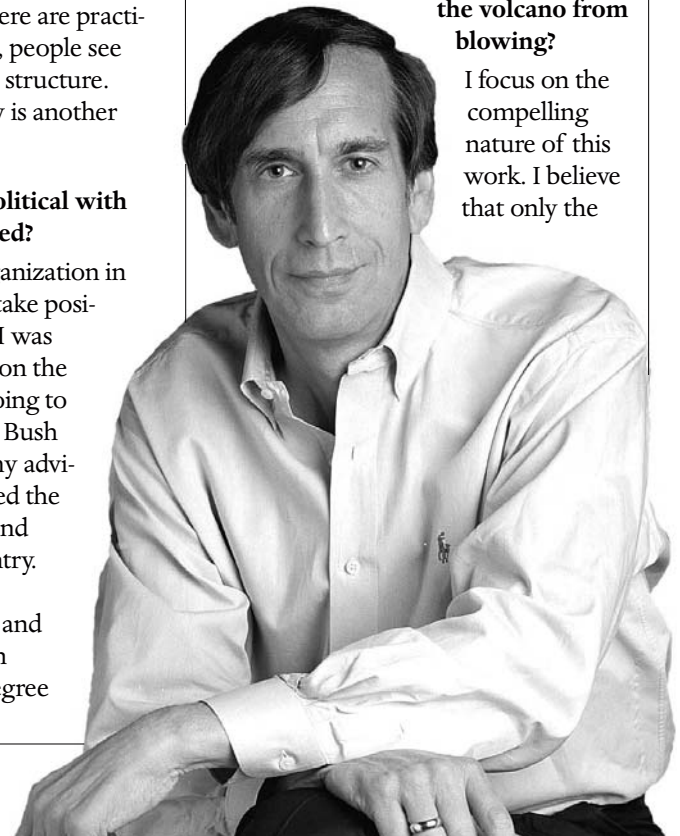
of diplomacy and very careful management. It's a nonprofit where there are all kinds of minefields.

**Minefields?**

We brought [Israeli Labour leader] Shimon Peres and [Palestinian university president] Sari Nusseibeh to Detroit, where we have a very large and very active friends committee. On the part of the Arab-American community, there were demonstrations against Peres outside the Ritz-Carlton where this event was held. I brought Queen Noor to Orlando, where we have another support group. There was great unhappiness among some elements in the Jewish community over things she had written in her book about her husband [King Hussein of Jordan]. So we're constantly sitting on top of a political volcano. It goes off occasionally.

**How do you keep the volcano from blowing?**

I focus on the compelling nature of this work. I believe that only the



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forces of individuals through their own sense of courage and purpose can defeat the forces of history. And if we abandon the field to those impersonal forces of history, we have abandoned the future. If Israelis and Palestinians, 14, 15, 16 years old, who have lost friends and relatives to this conflict, can make the physical and psychological journey to living with one another and developing mutual respect – and sometimes even affection – for one another, it seems to me no obstacle is insurmountable, and I’m not going to indulge myself in thinking otherwise.

**What enables you to achieve success with these teenagers?**

We’ve created an environment which provides four basic freedoms that these kids simply cannot get at home – freedom of association without stigma, which is absolutely critical to building any kind of trust; freedom of movement, which they do not have at home; freedom to think critically and independently, tough to do while caught up in these conflicts; and freedom from fear of mortal harm. Their parents cannot guarantee them 24 hours of absolute security. For three and a half weeks, we can.

**That creates big changes in them?**

This environment sets the stage for a phenomenal transformation. That first night, you’ll find Israelis and Palestinians who won’t sleep. Not because they are homesick, which they are, or have jet lag, which they do, but because they’re terrified that during the course of the night physical harm will come to them from the other side. At the end of three and a half weeks, they are in mourning over perhaps never seeing each other

again or being unable to have contact.

**Specifically, what do you do to foster this change?**

It happens because of the combination of the abnormal – 90 minutes every day with facilitators who use all kinds of techniques – with the normal. We used to call them coexistence sessions. We now call them dialogue sessions. Coexistence implies simply allowing the other side to be. Real reconciliation is more than that. They’re really detoxification sessions in which hatred and poison from years of conflict come out.

**Do they really change their outlook, ceasing all antagonism?**

Can we claim the Israelis and Palestinians have resolved their conflict? No. Can we claim that the Arabs and Israelis will never again think ill thoughts of one another? No. But we can claim this: For the first time in their lives, they hear the narrative of the so-called other – the enemy – not from a rabbi or an imam or a priest or a politician or a journalist or a parent. They hear the story of the so-called other from a friend, a peer whose humanity and decency they simply can no longer deny. One Palestinian said to me, during the worst of the confrontation in summer 2002, “I come for one reason, to hear and be heard.” So with this transformative experience – and a decade of follow-up that we do – you end up creating authentic leaders who not only understand the needs and requirements of their own constituency, but they truly appreciate the requirements of the other. That is the essence of conflict resolution. It’s also the essence of leadership.

**What makes for an effective leader of a nonprofit? What makes you effective?**

You have to believe in it and convey that passion. And because I come from a world that is the opposite of nongovernmental organizations, it may well be that people pay more attention. I mean, why would somebody who was an adviser to six secretaries of state want to work with young people? The reason is that being part of something bigger than yourself, particularly on historic issues, is an honor and a privilege.

**What did you learn at the bargaining table that enables you to do this?**

It’s the way I define my own life: “The perfect should not be allowed to become the enemy of the good.” That phrase should be emblazoned over the portal of every negotiating room and boardroom in the world. The insistence on the pursuit of 100 percent in conflicts will get you nothing. Or worse than nothing. Life is all about finding a balance between the real and the ideal. The negotiation of real peace will not be the property of the margins; it will not be the property of the right or left. It will be at the center, where Seeds is.

**What is the biggest challenge you face?**

Other than managing politics? Fundraising. We accept money from corporate sponsors and foundations, but most comes from individuals and event-driven development, which is not the most effective way to marshal resources.

**Why is it a challenge? Because of the time involved?**

No. Because of what we try to do. Hamas is running 5,000 young people

each summer through *their* camps. They're not coexistence camps. We're running 500. Those numbers don't make any sense. There is no greater challenge that this country faces than the challenge that is brewing in South Asia and the Arabic and Muslim world, and it's a generational challenge. Except for resources, there's no reason why Seeds couldn't bring 5,000 each summer to two or three camps and have a significant multiplier effect by doing follow-up in the regions.

#### **What's the greatest difficulty in setting the budget?**

The unpredictability of what we're able to raise against what we're spending. And making sure the budgets are real and that we can raise resources to cover it. This is the problem with any nonprofit – the need for some sort of financial cushion so chasing dollars isn't the single most important act in the organization. We're also putting a lot of resources now into evaluation.

#### **So you go back later and see whether your program works?**

Exactly. Zogby International has looked at a portion of our young people from camp sessions in 2003. The degree to which their attitudes – even in these circumstances – have been constant is encouraging. We are now doing a long-term study so we can see over a decade what a difference this program has made.

#### **Why did you commission those studies? Can data bolster fundraising?**

There had never been an effort to measure success and that was unacceptable. We need independent, credible evaluation to determine whether our program is working. Yes, of course it's driven by our donors, foun-

dations, corporate sponsors who want to know. And they have a right to know. The fact that you're a nonprofit doesn't free you from the kinds of standards all other credible organizations have to measure themselves by, and be measured by others. We also want to know whether programs work. We can adjust or modify them if they're not.

#### **What's the structure of your organization?**

I have a diverse board of 25 committed people and a smaller executive committee. Both help with fundraising. We're now doing a strategic plan, and that brings up many issues.

#### **Such as?**

A second camp. Should we concentrate on one conflict or continue to deal with two or three? Is event-driven development the best way to go? Should the focus of our activities be in the regions [where conflict occurs] or in the United States? I feel the region is where success or failure lies. Historically, we started with the camp in Maine.

#### **So there's tension over deviating from your original mission?**

Remember, this organization was created in 1993 by a Hearst journalist, John Wallach. Forty-five of the first Seeds grads – Israeli, Palestinian, and Egyptian teens – were on the White House lawn on Sept. 13, 1993 [when Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Accords]. In 2000, everything broke down. We've got to go to regional or even unilateral approaches, not as a substitute for dialogue, but to empower these young people within their communities so they don't become delegitimized.

#### **So you have to manage a transition?**

Some small nonprofits never survive the deaths of their charismatic founders. That whole process of transition – how you move from an entrepreneurial phase of a nonprofit with a founder beloved by all to the institutional phase, there's dislocation in that.

#### **How do all these changes – enlarging operations, disagreements internally, a polarized world – affect your organization and outlook?**

It is all infinitely more complicated. But it is also incredibly exciting and challenging. The opportunities to present a very compelling mission and a model for how to deal with these conflicts have expanded exponentially. I went down to talk to the ExxonMobil corporate board last month for possible support. They understand not only from the corporate public relations perspective but from also the global reality and substance that organizations like this one are worth supporting. So I believe political circumstances have broadened potential constituencies.

#### **So you feel more hopeful?**

I think 2005 will bring a break in the Israel-Palestinian stalemate. But if you ask me when you can see anything remotely resembling peaceful normal relations between nations, I think it will be a couple of decades. That's right about the time our oldest graduates will be coming into their own. □