
PART III

Sanford High Race Riot: Opportunities and Choices for the Third Side

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The authors, all Graduate Fellows at PON for 2000-2001, collaborated on the following simulation of a third side approach to conflict. It is based on actual events described in the Resources section at the end of the simulation. It is designed to highlight the choices third-siders must make when confronted with an emerging conflict. The simulation is to be used when reaching about the third side as espoused by Dr. William L. Ury in *The Third Side* (New York, 2000). The authors assume that the participants have read or are currently reading *The Third Side*.

Scenario Description

You are Robin Smith, Director of Conflict Resolution in the Schools Initiative, Office of the Attorney General (OAG).

You just got a phone call from a colleague in the mayor's office about a student riot that occurred yesterday at Sanford High School. The mayor of Sanford and the principal of Sanford High have asked you to help restore order. The reason the mayor and principal called you is that your office was created to handle and/or organize people to address conflicts that arise in the school system. The mayor explained that state and local police were called in to quell the riot involving over 50 black and white students. To stop the riot the police used mace and dogs, which called further attention to the situation. The community and parents were angered by the way this was handled. To avoid any more fights and to try

to ease tension the principal has cancelled classes until this situation can be sorted out.

After receiving the call from the mayor, and in accordance with OAG protocol on intervention, you called the principal, Dr. Pinelli, to conduct an intake and assessment of information. (Before any intervention is contemplated, you need some basic information about the situation, the school, and the City of Sanford.) Still in shock from the incident, Dr. Pinelli tells you that based on his information a fight broke out yesterday during lunch in the cafeteria between a white and black student when the former shoved the latter. Racial slurs were exchanged and punches were thrown. Friends of both students got involved, and the fight turned into a melee that eventually spilled out into the corridors. The police were called in and they broke it up, arresting 15 students for disorderly conduct and assault and battery—most of those arrested were black. One white student, the captain of the baseball team, was seriously injured and taken to the hospital.

Nothing like this has happened in Sanford for over 25 years, Dr. Pinelli explains. Sanford, after all, is known for its racial harmony. Pinelli conveys that blacks of African and Caribbean descent have lived in Sanford, a largely Italian- and Polish-American suburb of the state's largest metropolis, since the Civil War. In fact, they have settled in South Sanford and have created a nice middle-class neighborhood that is well integrated into the rest of the city. Lately, Sanford (population 50,000) has been undergoing substantial demographic change as a large number of urban families have moved there (to escape a steady trend of increased violence in the city). The high school minority student population of 240 (or 20 percent) reflects this change.

Pinelli admits to you that there have been some problems as the high school has become more diverse, but he did not realize that they were so serious. He vehemently rejects the allegations some black parents

and students have made about his administration, particularly that he has been avoiding the growing racial tension between and among students and teachers in the school. He explained that he has an open door policy, and any student, faculty member, or administrator can meet with him to air complaints. In fact, a black student, accompanied by the sole black teacher in the school, did meet with him about racial insults another teacher allegedly made, but the student refused to put the complaint in writing so there was nothing he could do.

As for other complaints made by black students, parents and community leaders, he does acknowledge that blacks are woefully underrepresented in Sanford's school system (e.g., there is only one black teacher out of a faculty of 100). Unfortunately, under Proposition One property taxes have been cut back and the overall budget for staff and faculty has shrunk as a result. He has had to dismiss a number of teachers and staff along seniority lines, many of whom were minorities.

The principal thinks an influx of new students, a breakdown of discipline, and a lack of student teachers to supervise students during certain periods are the roots of the problem. He admits to you very frankly that he really does not know how to proceed. He is afraid that if he reopens the school new fights might break out. There is also the potential problem of whether parents will even let their children return to the school.

As you deliberate on intervention strategies, you ask the principal if there is anyone you could talk to in the school who might have another perspective about what is going on there. He refers you to Mrs. Roberta Benton, the Director of Multicultural Programs at the high school, with whom you speak later in the day.

Mrs. Benton, one of only five black administrators, states confidentially that the principal, while an honest man, is naïve. He does not believe that racism, along with sexism, homophobia and anti-Semitism

exists in the school. But over the last year racial tensions have grown. Many black students have come to her to complain about how they have been treated by white students and faculty. Teachers who did not know their names called them "Tyroné" and stood by while white students made racial remarks. In yet other cases, particular faculty members ignored or even demeaned black students who asked to have their history taught as well. She is adamant that the principal was warned about these problems but turned a blind eye to them. The brawl during lunch last Thursday was simply the last straw. Black students, frustrated by how they have been mistreated by whites in this school, simply could not take it anymore.

The overreaction of the police—the excessive use of force—has only made things worse. Now black community leaders, a very powerful and often productive force in the community, are meeting with parents to consider filing a lawsuit alleging police brutality. She also heard from some observers that the police only went after the black kids; 13 of the 15 students arrested were black. Apparently, according to Benton, the schools are not the only institutions that are racist. Finally, Benton did say that parents from both sides of the conflict appear very concerned by these recent problems and they had met with local clergy to discuss the situation.

Benton is especially angry that some school committee members are blaming her for the violence and intolerance in the school. They say that she has not implemented any multicultural programs or diversity curricula since she was hired. She counters that a pilot peer mediation program was set up a year ago but there was only enough money from the city and the state to create and operate one program. Regardless of what others claim, the bottom line for her is that a message of disrespect is sent when black and other minority points of view are ignored. The school system is responsible for what happened, not she, and change is needed at

many levels. The city has to learn to deal with its racial problems. Finally, Benton thought the Department of Justice's Community Relations Service might be able to help with this problem. You are unsure whether or not to bring them in because of a negative past experience with them and it might suggest that the state office cannot handle the situation.

What is clear to you from your discussion with Dr. Pinelli and Mrs. Benton is that they both desire to heal the wounds opened by last Thursday's riot. Immediate aid is needed to restore calm and help the school reopen. Your office has been given a budget of \$75,000 for expenses and to pay mediators, facilitators, arbiters, and other conflict resolution trainers for their services when necessary. (Some will do this work voluntarily, but their availability is sporadic.) However, due to an unprecedented increase in problems this year, your budget has dwindled to \$5,000. The mayor was uncertain if any additional funds would be available for your potential efforts, so you must not rely on any more monetary support.

You have the weekend to develop a strategy. You must decide what to do and from whom to seek help. Here are some questions that will help you to do so:

1. Initial Reactions

- A. Where might you begin and what is your logic?
- B. Would you try to get the third side to prevent, resolve, and/or contain this conflict? Why?
- C. At what level(s) of the problem, for example, the city, Sanford High School, students involved in the riot, would you seek to mobilize third parties and why?
- D. What questions would you need to ask people involved about the past, present, and future in order to make this determination?

Must We Fight?

*From the Battlefield
to the Schoolyard—
A New Perspective
on Violent Conflict
and Its Prevention*

William L. Ury, Editor



A Publication of the Program on Negotiation
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