How to make peace work

A show of strength in Johannesburg, June, 1986.

Future security policy can either intensify or reduce the militarism that wracks our society. LAURIE NATHAN makes a case for a "peace" policy in which the emphasis will be on either preventing conflict or resolving it without force.

OVER the past few years South Africa has been inundated with an endless stream of conferences and books on the post-apartheid era. But until quite recently one crucial aspect of the new society was ignored: the armed forces and policy on security and defence.

These issues were addressed seriously for the first time at the Idasa conference on "The Future of Defence and Security in South Africa" held in Lusaka in May this year. However significant this conference may have been, its real value will depend on whether it remains an isolated exercise or marks the start of a broad public debate.

The need for such a debate is crucial. Even the most optimistic prognosis of the future must anticipate some level of violent conflict and future security policy can either intensify or reduce the militarism that wracks our society. In any event, the armed forces will remain the decisive instrument of the state.

The conventional approach to developing security policy concentrates on strategic and technical considerations. It begins with a "threat analysis" that attempts to identify the possible future threats to the country, and concludes by working out the type and size of the armed forces required to meet them.

Fuelled by the self-serving interests of the military and the arms industry, the tendency is to predict "worst case" threat scenarios and to develop bigger or more sophisticated armies, improved weapons systems and larger arsenals to meet them.

This approach has obvious limitations. It has too narrow a military perspective, is over-reliant on the use of force and tends to ignore the underlying reasons for conflict. It diverts resources from more productive ends and contributes to a war psychosis in civilian society.

Most important, it is counter-productive. If all nations are engaged in extensive war preparations, their fear of each other is heightened and their sense of security undermined. As the vicious cycle of "bigger and better" escalates, war preparations are more likely to cause than prevent wars.

Is there a creative alternative to this approach? Without wider discussion and research it is too soon to say. But it is possible to imagine some of the dimensions of a different policy, that could be termed the politics of peace.

This new policy would differ fundamentally from the conventional approach in both its aims and means. To begin with, its main objective would be to establish and maintain peace, rather than security.

Peace would be understood as more than its dictionary definition of "freedom from war". It would include security, but would also encompass economic and social justice and protection of the environment. This broader definition has several advantages:

- It recognises that violence is not limited to direct physical harm to people and property, but can be psychological (for instance, censorship), economic (poverty), environmental (destruction of natural resources) or political (disenfranchisement);
- It focuses attention on the need to identify and address the causes of violence, conflict and crime;
- It aims to build something positive rather than to prevent something negative;
- It situates security in relation to other goals and a greater ideal;
- Its achievement lies primarily in a fundamental political and economic restructuring of society and not in military means.

'It makes sense to bring "peace" in from the fringe and include it in the mainstream of political thinking.'

The politics of peace would be as concerned with violent conflict as the traditional approach to security, but its emphasis would be on either preventing such conflict or resolving it without force.

At a regional level the prospect of a serious military threat to South Africa is extremely remote. All the countries of Southern Africa will undoubtedly welcome the post-apartheid state into their community.

The sub-continent may remain politically and economically unstable for some time, but a military response to this problem will only exacerbate it. The road to peace lies rather in South Africa becoming a member of the United Nations and Organisation of African Unity, participating in the joint economic and social programmes of the neighbouring states and refraining from interfering in their domestic affairs.

The most likely internal sources of violence would be right-wing and left-wing groups dissatisfied with the process of negotiations or the new government's policies. It should be obvious from the history of our country that the use of state force against them will only intensify their resistance.

THE recent experience of Namibia shows that competing ideologies and interests can be accommodated through negotiations. The spirit of co-operation and compromise that characterised the drafting of the new Namibian constitution has significantly reduced the potential for ongoing hostilities.

In other Southern African countries the transition to independence was quite different. For various reasons the leading liberation movements excluded rival groups from the formation of government and policy. This contributed to the latter's decision to engage in armed resistance aginst the new state.

The crucial lesson for South Africa is that the degree of future conflict depends to a great extent on the inclusion and accommodation of competing parties in the negotiations and shaping the new constitution and government. It also depends on the creation of a democratic political system.

The politics of peace would have profound implications for the new police force and army.

Their character, for example, would be

shaped by the fact that they are trusted by all citizens, reflect the values of the new society and are subject to civilian control. They would therefore have to be non-racial, committed to upholding the new constitution, accountable to parliament and non-partisan in relation to party politics.

Their role would be defined partly along conventional lines, that is, in terms of internal and external threats to security. They would obviously have to be capable of containing violence, if necessary through the use of force.

But their role would also be defined by the national goal of peace and a non-military approach to conflict. Their armed deployment would be an act of last resort when political solutions had been exhausted.

This definition of the role and character of the police and army, and the improved situation in South Africa and the region after apartheid, would have important consequences for the size, composition, training, structure, budget and strategies of both forces.

NONE of these ideas are new. Most have been argued in a more comprehensive way in other forums. But there will no doubt be many obstacles to their acceptance.

One obstacle is "peace" itself. Few concepts are simultaneously as desired and discredited. This is not surprising when governments engage in war and war preparations in the name of peace and regard peace movements as "the enemy".

In South Africa peace activities have been regarded with particular suspicion, in part because they have been seen by parties engaged in violence as undermining their cause. Peace activists are viewed as "idealistic and naive", or worse, as "cowards and communist dupes".

One way of overcoming this problem might be to avoid using the term and to motivate for it in more acceptable language. But it is difficult to see how we will ever approach a situation of real peace if we are frightened to embrace the word.

At this critical point in South African and world history, with years of conflict behind us and new possibilities ahead, it makes more sense to bring "peace" in from the fringe and include it in the mainstream of political thinking.

The main reason for the marginalising of peace initiatives is that they threaten the interests of states, militaries and arms industries that acquire status, power and profits from war and war preparations.

To secure public support for these activities, governments promote the view that force is an acceptable means of resolving disputes, military victories bring glory, "the enemy" is demonic, and "people are inherently aggressive".

The most powerful challenge to these ideas has been the educative work of progressive social movements. The anti-war movement in the United States, the European campaign for nuclear disarmament and the environmental movement are examples of the influence that can be exerted on public perceptions and government policy.

This is not to suggest that a peace move-

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Police in need of new ethos

Police liberalisation is an essential feature of democratisation in a society where the police have been a central pillar in the maintenance of apartheid. RONALD WEITZER offers some concrete proposals for reforming the SAP.

THE present transitional period offers a unique opportunity for serious discussion of proposals for reforming the South African Police. Yet neither the government nor opposition forces have given adequate priority to the issue of policing in a post-apartheid society. Major changes in policing are absolutely imperative to improve the image of the force and to bring its practices closer to the ideals of normal policing.

The ANC accepts the need for reconstructing the police. Its proposals have included improved crowd control methods, greater public involvement in policing at the local level, dismissal of policemen who have engaged in acts of brutality and the integration of ANC personnel into the force. But policy reconstruction must go much further in order to build an accountable, apolitical, demilitarised and publicly acceptable police force.

A policewoman being helpful.

It is not entirely clear that the De Klerk government considers the SAP part of the problem in the country, and, hence, in need of transformation. In January the State President informed 500 senior officers that the government wished to remove the police from "the political battlefield" and emphasise their civic responsibilities. In April the Minister of Law and Order announced that policemen would no longer be permitted to be members of political parties.

While such admonitions are healthy, they are only a limited first step on the road to sweeping renovation of the force. Indications that the government might be considering more extensive changes are belied by ministerial statements and actions, which have changed little.

Rather than taking seriously the myriad criticisms of the SAP made by responsible parties, the government continues, as in the past, to lavish praise on the force for its professionalism and accomplishments; to admit that "a few rotten apples" exist, but not entrenched organisational problems; to insist that officers involved in abuses of power are duly investigated and punished; and to brand concrete proposals for reform the concoction of persons on the lunatic fringe. These attitudes must change before any serious modernisation of the SAP can begin.

The following proposals are derived from my research on a number of deeply divided societies – Israel, Northern Ireland, Namibia, Zimbabwe and the old American South – where policing traditions bear some striking similarities to those in South Africa. The lessons of these cases underscore the vital importance of police liberalisation in polarised societies as well as the difficulties inherent in such a project.

In South Africa, this project is well worth undertaking since it promises to pay huge dividends, in the long-term, in winning popular confidence in the police and reducing the highly confrontational and dangerous aspects of police work.

The scrapping of discriminatory laws should reduce the frequency of abrasive encounters between the police and blacks. But it is also necessary that the police be removed from the internal security frontline and that exceptional posers granted under the security laws be repealed.

It appears that senior officers now appreciate the benefits of concentrating on conventional crime control, but they are unwilling to accept the need for a complete abandonment of police security duties, the dismantling of the security branch, and a thorough demilitarisation of the force.

Police normalisation is inconsistent with a prominent role in surveillance and detention of political opponents, use of agents provocateurs, torture and hit squads. Riot squads, however, have a proper place in most police forces and should be preserved in South Africa; but they should be retrained, properly equipped with non-lethal weapons, and enlarged so that they will not be so prone to overreaction when confronting hostile crowds.

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These changes are no guarantee against police violence during public disorders, but they should significantly reduce such incidents.

For decades the police were subjected to systematic political indoctrination in defence of white supremacy generally and National Party policy in particular. Political opposition to the government was interpreted as subversion and the SAP became one of the most intolerant institutions in the country. This authoritarian orientation must be reversed.

While organisational cultures are never readily amenable to radical change, the SAP is badly in need of a new ethos and mission based on a universalistic — as opposed to sectarian — approach to the various racial and ethnic groups and a concentration on ordinary law enforcement.

Personnel changes are also long overdue. The government should take steps to ensure that the most senior ranks consist of enlightened officers who champion a new vision of policing and are dedicated to diffusing that vision throughout the force.

Screening procedures should be designed to eliminate from the force the most racist and aggressive members and as a means of quality-control for new recruits.

The discredited kitskonstabel force should be dismantled immediately and municipal police, who have a slightly better reputation, should be retrained. Training of all personnel should stress norms of political neutrality, sensitivity to racial and ethnic differences, use of minimum force and professionalism.

Police accountability is an elusive ideal in all modern societies, and it should not be expected that a police force, or any other state agency, can ever be fully accountable. But steps toward enhancing supervision over the police are crucial in divided societies where the police are regarded as being above the law by members of the subordinate population.

The SAP has never been genuinely accountable to other branches of the state. Parliamentary debates and questions on policing matters have given opposition parties a forum in which to publicise controversial police practices and extract valuable information from ministers. But the National Party's control of parliament has guaranteed that it would rubber-stamp executive decisions.

Accountability to the courts has been severely hampered under the state of emergency, which indemnified policemen for actions undertaken "in good faith" to handle unrest. While the number of police convicted of killing or wounding persons hovered around 250 a year in the mid-1980s, the punishment meted out was often relatively lenient. Clearly the courts must take a more vigorous approach to crimes by agents of the state.

A study by Don Foster and Clifford Luyt found that only a small fraction of convicted policemen were subsequently discharged from the SAP. This raises the question of the adequacy of existing disciplinary mechanisms inside the force.

While the integrity of departmental inquiries is often problematic in police forces throughout the world, they are widely regarded as cosmetic and ineffective in the SAP. It is therefore vital that tighter controls be instituted and that the outcomes of internal inquiries be publicly disclosed.

Supervision can also be strengthened by the creation of two separate independent oversight bodies, whose members must be maximally impartial, legally trained, representative of the public, but not adversaries of the police.

One agency, with offices throughout the country, would receive complaints against individuals and be empowered to investigate the serious allegations; its findings would then be submitted to a public prosecutor. This would circumvent the current intimidating system where a complainant must file a complaint at a police charge office.

Another body would monitor and report on patterns in registered complaints and recurrent policing problems, with a view toward recommending changes to the responsible minister.

If these mechanisms function properly and are not undermined by police resistance to outside "meddling", as has so often been the case elsewhere, they should go a long way toward building public confidence in the system's control of deviant cops.

It may take officers and constables some time to recognise the long-term advantages. Morale in the SAP is already in short supply, and there is a danger that changes will be greeted with resistance or resignations by constables. It is therefore crucial that police commissioners and ministers explain fully the reasons behind each reform to all members of the force.

Some constables reportedly fear persecution in the event that a new government comes to power. Policemen need to be reassured that they will not be punished retroactively for their role in upholding the apartheid order. At the same time, all members of the force will have to accept that change is inevitable and that the SAP cannot continue with business-as-usual during this transitional period.

Ronald Weitzer is an assistant professor of sociology at George Washington University in Washington DC. He recently spent a month working with the Institute of Criminology at UCT.

Working at peace

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ment should necessarily be formed in South Africa. But people and groups who are committed to peace have to get involved in the debate on the future of the armed forces and security policy, and not leave these issues to military experts alone.

Another reason for the marginalising of peace campaigns is to be found in the argument that they are so idealistic that they dare not be taken seriously.

This argument is not without validity. "Nice ideas" will never be taken seriously if they remain at the level of ideas. The outstanding challenge is to translate them into viable policies that are properly researched, including investigation of the experience of other countries.

With the full weight of our violent past and the failure of traditional security policy bearing down on us, and with the possibility of ongoing hostilities in the future, it would be simply stupid to ignore the need for a new approach to building and maintaining peace.

Laurie Nathan is chairperson of the End Conscription Campaign in Cape Town and author of *Out of Step: War Resistance in South Africa.*

(With acknowledgement to Sash magazine, September 1990).

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For further information contact Liesel Naudé at (011) 403-3580 or Beverley Haubrich at (021) 47-3127