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A Financial Push for Peace in Ireland

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LONDON -- The major deterrent to making the Northern Ireland Good Friday peace agreement effective has been the unwillingness of the Irish Republican Army to decommission its weapons. Is there a way to make decommissioning more palatable to the I.R.A. and more certain for the Unionists who demand the relinquishing of the I.R.A.'s arms as a part of the peace?

There may be an economic solution: Pay for each weapon that the I.R.A. and Protestant paramilitary groups turn over to authorities, giving the money not to the paramilitaries themselves, but to a special development fund to implement the peace agreement and to invest in the well-being of the people of Northern Ireland.

Far from being a sign of defeat, this sort of decommissioning would be a way for the I.R.A. and other armed groups to turn their weapons into resources that would benefit their communities. The money to buy the arms could come from three sources: the British government, which could finance the initiative in part from reduced spending on military forces in Northern Ireland; the Irish government; and the Irish abroad who want to see peace in the old country.

As in any bargain where money is involved, the parties would have to bargain over the price of each decommissioned weapon. The Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland would have the same goal — to obtain a high price for weapons — while the two governments and the overseas Irish communities would want to pay a lower price.

The parties to this exchange would also have to agree on the purposes for which the money could be spent — perhaps for schools, hospitals and funds for families that have suffered from the violence. Money for I.R.A. decommissioning could be spent primarily on projects that would benefit the Catholic community while money for Protestant paramilitary decommissioning could go to the Protestant community. Better yet, all the money might go into a single fund and be allocated jointly by the political leaders of both communities.

Paying people to turn over guns has been tried with limited success in the United States and Australia. But the money has typically gone to the individual gun owners, who could use it to buy new guns, legally or illegally. Putting the money into a fund for communities would prevent its being used to buy new guns. The American and Australian schemes did not greatly reduce the number of guns held by people. Similarly, an Irish buyback would probably leave considerable weaponry in the hands of the I.R.A. and paramilitaries, as well as in the hands of other citizens. The value of the scheme would not be in removing all weaponry from Northern Ireland, but in giving the Catholic and Protestant communities a new and different stake in getting the guns decommissioned. For the first time, the paramilitary groups would be able to make an immediate contribution to the well-being of their communities — alleviating poverty, improving economic opportunities and helping the families of victims of violence.

Would the I.R.A. and Protestant paramilitary groups accept an offer like this?

They would face a stark choice: Keep the arms or help their communities. At a sufficiently high price for the weapons, it is difficult to see how the paramilitaries could turn down the money-for-guns plan. Local communities would place pressure on them to give up their weapons when failure to do so would have a real financial cost. At a low price, the paramilitaries might continue to view the risks of decommissioning as exceeding the benefits. The task for both sides would be to find a price that can support a satisfactory agreement. The virtue of economic solutions is that money can be bargained over to the last pound: a little more spent for good purposes can help move people in the right direction.

Economists, some say, know the price of everything and the value of nothing. They can monetize all sorts of things — life, love, honor — with little concern for moral judgments. But in this case, price and moral value move together. Paying for decommissioning arms by putting money into a development fund may help dissolve the impasse. Offering the parties in Northern Ireland a way to link the turning over of weapons to tangible benefits for the communities could be just the extra push that will salvage the Good Friday agreement.