No matter how repugnant it may be, this timely book argues we always need to talk

**Talking to Terrorists**

*How to End Armed Conflicts*

by Jonathan Powell

Bodley Head £20/ebook £11.98 pp408

Talking to terrorists is as morally repugnant as it is politically necessary. This is the paradox that Jonathan Powell explores in his absorbing and authoritative study of deals done with terrorists around the world, from Powell’s own negotiations to end the Troubles in Northern Ireland to FW de Klerk’s reluctant engagement with that terrorist turned statesman, Nelson Mandela.

What is repugnant is obvious: giving in to blackmail, rewarding killers with concessions and according them respect. Terrorists hate being called terrorists: they crave the dignity of “freedom fighter”. This is often their core demand and meeting it is bound to stick in the craw of a democratic politician. One president of Colombia remarked that negotiating with Farc, the country’s long-standing insurgency, was like “swallowing toads”.

Powell is blunt about what makes it necessary to swallow the toads: “In democracies we cannot kill all the terrorists, so we will have to talk to them at some stage.” While a government’s army and intelligence agencies will always press for a military solution, fighting violence with violence rarely wins in the end. Time and again, states and their terrorist opponents battle each other to “a mutually hurting stalemate”. Only then do governments and terrorists start looking for a political way out.

Finding a way out depends on the bloodied and bruised antagonists reaching the same conclusion at approximately the same time. Powell’s book is an inventory of moments seized and moments lost, of negotiations that were blown apart by a new terrorist bomb, a press leak, a loss of nerve by leaders or simple incompetence.

Negotiating a deal with terrorists, Powell candidly admits, requires politicians to lie to their voters. In 1993, John Major declared that talking to terrorists turned his stomach. At that very moment, he was corresponding secretly with Martin McGuinness. Terrorists also have to lie, concealing peace negotiations from their own hard men.

Besides deception and lying, the other common ingredients for success, Powell shows, are patient negotiators capable of paying incredible attention to detail.

The Norwegian negotiators of the Oslo peace accords between Israel and the Palestinians took care, for example, to ensure that each side’s hotel rooms were exactly the same size. When Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams finally sat down together for a photo op, negotiators thought to order a diamond-shaped table, so that they could sit side by side, but as Paisley wished, to do so actually sitting opposite each other.

Talking to terrorists takes courage. It requires leaders who dare to trust their enemy before they can be certain they won’t be betrayed. Powell earned trust himself by daring to venture onto the terrorists’ terrain on his own. In 1997, on Tony Blair’s instructions, he flew to Northern Ireland incognito, left his security detail behind and met McGuinness for tea and sandwiches in an IRA safe house. This paid dividends later on. When Adams gave a speech in 2003 committing Irish Republicanism to give up the gun in favour of the ballot, he actually asked Powell to write the speech, then delivered it word for word.

This level of trust is all the more remarkable, at least on Powell’s side, once we learn that Powell’s own father had been injured by an IRA attack and his brother was on an IRA hit list for eight years, when he worked in Downing Street for Margaret Thatcher. Negotiating with terrorists requires neither forgiving nor forgetting, just a relentless belief that a bloody past need not sabotage the future. What hangs over all negotiations between terrorists and governments is the threat of the resumption of violence. Basque terrorists in 2006 threatened to “pile the negotiating table with bodies” unless the Spanish government met their demands, and several times new Basque bomb blasts derailed deals in the making. In South Africa, the de Klerk government insisted on a cessation of armed struggle before talks could begin, while the ANC argued, in Thabo Mbeki’s words: “We don’t need to have peace to talk about peace.” Temporary truces test good will, create the conditions for durable ceasefires and these eventually can become permanent peace deals. At every step, this process can unravel.

Personalities matter. Without de Klerk and Mandela, there might have been no deal in South Africa. Without Blair’s Messiah complex — Mo Mowlam once exclaimed, “Tony thinks he is **** Jesus” — the Good Friday deal, ending the Troubles, might never have succeeded.
Try as he might, Powell cannot really identify the secret sauce that makes for success when negotiating with terrorists. What is striking is how much each deal he surveys — Northern Ireland, South Africa, Aceh, Colombia — depended on personal chemistry, uncommon leadership and blind good luck. Any politician looking for future guidance will come away from this book understanding that when you negotiate with terrorists, you take your political life, and sometimes your actual life, in your hands.

After he left Downing Street, Powell set up his own negotiating NGO — Inter Mediate — to open up contacts between governments and armed groups around the world. He’s even on record declaring that democratic governments should talk to the Taliban, Hamas and even al-Qaeda. “The mechanics of engaging with them are more difficult,” he writes, “but that is not a reason for thinking it’s impossible to talk to them or even to find an agreement.”

While Powell is trying to make the important point that even repugnant groups such as Isis have political goals that eventually must be engaged, it’s unlikely that any western politician will think of doing so, even through the most deniable intermediary, until Isis has been bludgeoned from the air. It is true that terrorism is a political phenomenon and equally true that democracies have to negotiate with terrorists. But it is also the case — and sometimes Powell appears to forget this — that there are some demands (for a terrorist caliphate in the Middle East, for example) that are never going to be negotiable. In the controversial and fascinating argument of this book, it’s not always clear where that non-negotiable line must be drawn.

Michael Ignatieff teaches at Harvard’s Kennedy School.

Wise monkey
Jonathan Powell is on the record declaring that democratic governments should talk to al-Qaeda.