# OVERCOMING

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This book is dedicated to the pillars of South Africa's truth and reconciliation process, Charles Villa-Vicencio, Alec Boraine, and Desmond Tutu, who accomplished far more for South Africa than even they dreamed possible.

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# About the Author

**James L. Gibson** is Sidney W. Souers Professor of Government at Washington University in St. Louis, fellow at the Centre for International and Comparative Politics and Professor Extraordinary in Political Science at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and Distinguished Visiting Research Scholar at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, South Africa.

# Preface and Acknowledgments

While this book was being written, a low-scale civil war was taking place in American political science. Dubbed the "perestroika" movement, some academic political scientists were voicing a number of complaints against "scientific" political science. Many of these protestations were foolish and ill informed; some, however, were not.

Supporters of the perestroika movement argue that contemporary political science in the United States is too little concerned with politics. By this the critics mean that political scientists are too focused on methods and theory and have devoted too little attention to studying and analyzing the important political issues and controversies of our time. My own view is that it is impossible to expend too much effort on method and theory, given the range of unresolved methodological and theoretical problems characterizing our field. But at the same time, the complaint that politics is too often ignored has some validity. Consequently, this study is motivated in part by my desire to take important theories of political psychology and intergroup relations and advanced methodological techniques and marry them to what I judge to be one of the most important questions facing transitional polities: does truth lead to reconciliation?

This book therefore purports to contribute to both policy analysis and theory building and scientific hypothesis testing. The policy question is obvious: I seek to assess whether South Africa's truth and reconciliation process in fact achieved the goals it set for itself. In particular, I examine the degree to which South Africans are "reconciled," and then ask whether evidence exists to suggest that the truth and reconciliation process contributed to this reconciliation. Mine is not a strong research design from the point of view of policy analysis, since I am forced to rely on cross-sectional empirical evidence collected near the end of the truth and reconciliation process. But certainly one objective of this book is to draw

some conclusions about whether the South African experiment ought to be attempted in other deeply divided societies. Generally, with some important caveats, I conclude that the process did indeed contribute to reconciliation and therefore that others may wish to borrow from the South African experience in trying to come to terms with their own repressive pasts.

In addressing the hypothesis that truth leads to reconciliation, I mobilize a body of social scientific theories in an attempt to give a full accounting of why some South Africans are reconciled and others are not. For instance, an important contribution of this book lies in its test of the so-called contact hypothesis. Social psychologists have long put forth the hypothesis that positive interracial attitudes emerge from interpersonal interactions between people of different races. This hypothesis has rarely been tested outside Western developed democracies; adding evidence from a multiracial political system like South Africa can contribute significantly to expanding the generalizability of the theory. This is just one example of the multiple ways in which theory is mobilized and tested in my attempt to understand individual-level reconciliation in South Africa.

My dual purposes—scientific hypothesis testing and policy evaluation—are not incompatible. The perestroika complaint that science ignores politics is a statement only about contemporary trends and says nothing about the inevitability of such a disjuncture. A central assumption of my research is that science must inform policy and that only through rigorous scientific inquiry can we begin to draw conclusions about a question as broad (and as profound) as that of whether truth is associated with reconciliation. Thus, my goal is to add something to our understanding of the policy issues surrounding reconciliation and transitional justice, while also making a contribution to several specific bodies of social scientific theory.

No research project of this scale is solely the product of the efforts of an individual scholar, and this one is no exception. Without the support of the Law and Social Sciences Program of the National Science Foundation (grant SES 9906576), this project could not possibly have been conducted.[1] I am especially indebted to program director Marie Provine for supporting this research. As

I have noted in other contexts, I admire no institution or agency more than I admire NSF. Its commitment to truth is as pure as any of which I am aware.

This project is a collaborative effort with Amanda Gouws of the Department of Political Science at Stellenbosch University. Since the day I first set foot in South Africa, Amanda has been an invaluable colleague and a dear friend. We do not see eye to eye on all issues of South African politics—what two strong-minded scholars would ever fulfill that condition?—but I have learned immeasurably from my association with Amanda, and for that I am deeply thankful. I also acknowledge my appreciation to the Department of Political Science at Stellenbosch University for naming me a "Professor Extraordinary in Political Science" while this research was being undertaken.

I also acknowledge my great debt to Chris Willemse. In addition to being a dear friend, Chris has given me a second set of eyes and ears when it comes to South African political history and contemporary affairs. Countless conversations with Chris have begun with the query "Chris, why is it that . . . ?" I have rarely encountered nonacademics with such keen insights. This project has profited immeasurably from his wisdom.

This project soon found its natural home at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in Cape Town (where I am Distinguished Visiting Research Scholar). My association with the IJR is somewhat curious in that the institute has a policy-oriented action mission, while I consider myself nothing more or less than a scientist. Perhaps because we are so different, our collaboration has been so fruitful. I deeply admire the director of the institute, Charles Villa-Vicencio, whose strength of commitment and intensity of effort in building a multiracial and democratic South Africa has never failed to amaze me. I have learned profusely from my association with the institute. As a white person from outside South Africa, it is not always possible to understand the tragedy of apartheid from books, from statistics, or even from historical cinema and the arts. From my long and intense discussions with Charles and the institute staff, including Helen Macdonald, Paul Haupt, Nyameka Goniwe, Fanie du Toit, Erik Doxtader, and Zola Sonkosi, I have filled in at

least some of the many gaps in my knowledge. For that, I am deeply appreciative.[2]

Most of the writing of this book took place while I was a visiting scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York. I am first indebted to my university, and especially to executive vice chancellor Ed Macias for allowing me the opportunity to spend a year at the Foundation. Just as Manhattan is a special and unique place, so too is the Russell Sage Foundation. I have rarely encountered such a strong commitment to scholarship and such noble and well-meaning people.

Throughout my year at Sage I profited immensely from my discussions (not always or even usually on South Africa) with Jim Sidanius, John Hagan, Bob Hauser, Kay Deaux, Peter Katzenstein, and my many lunch companions over the year. I am especially indebted to Eric Wanner, president of the Russell Sage Foundation, for allowing me the chance to complete this book while in residence in one of the most wonderful cities in the world.

Portions of chapters 3 and 4 were presented in several different colloquia, including as a talk at Columbia University, Rutgers University, Fordham University, Indiana University, Rice University, City University of New York, the New York Law School, the University of Texas, the University of Colorado, and State University of New York at Stony Brook. Versions of this talk were also given at the New York Political Psychology Association (2002) and at the Sixth National Political Science Congress of the Chilean Political Science Association, held May 8–9, 2002, in Santiago. My paper "Does Truth Lead to Reconciliation? Testing the Causal Assumptions of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Process" is the recipient of the Sage Paper Award for the best paper in the field of comparative politics, presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in 2001 by the Comparative Politics Organized Section. A version of chapter 5 was presented to the sixtieth annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, held April 25–28, 2002, in Chicago, as "Truth, Reconciliation, and the Creation of a Human Rights Culture in South Africa: An Investigation of the Effectiveness of the Truth and Reconciliation Process," and it is published as "Truth, Reconciliation, and the Cre-

ation of a Human Rights Culture in South Africa" in the 2003 issue of the *Law and Society Review* (vol. 38, no. 1). Chapter 7 of this book is drawn from Gibson (2002b). That paper is the 2003 recipient of the McGraw-Hill Award, awarded by the Law and Politics Organized Section of the American Political Science Association in recognition of the best journal article on law and courts written by a political scientist and published during the previous calendar year. In the original article, I acknowledged the contributions of a number of people, including those members of the IJR staff mentioned earlier and Eric Lomazoff, Marc Hendershot, and Christine Lamberson, who provided valuable research assistance on this project. I am also thankful to James Alt, Ronald Slye, and John T. Scott for comments on an earlier version of that article. Finally, I very much appreciate the advice and assistance provided by Kathleen McGraw on many aspects of that piece.

I also acknowledge and appreciate the comments of Steven Ellmann, New York Law School, and Anthony Marx, Columbia University, on the material presented in chapter 3.

Four people read the entire manuscript and offered copious suggestions for changes: Walter Murphy, Princeton University; Gunnar Theissen, Free University of Berlin; Alfred L. Brophy, University of Alabama; and Monika Nalepa, Columbia University. The care with which these friends read the manuscript improved it immeasurably. I have not always accepted the advice of my critics, but I nonetheless appreciate deeply every comment I received.

I am under no illusion that this book, even with its overall conclusion that truth does contribute to reconciliation, will change the politics of transitional societies. Much of the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa is perhaps unique to the conditions created by apartheid and to the specific individuals who directed the transition process. But if this book makes any contribution at all toward creating a world in which those who were formerly bitter political enemies become more reconciled with each other, I will be deeply gratified. Thus, the ultimate argument of this book is that truth is powerful and democracy will profit if we only (to paraphrase John Lennon) "give truth a chance."

James L. Gibson
Washington University in St. Louis