“This isn’t the book I intended to write,” says Stuart Kaufman, motioning toward his copy of *Modern Hatreds*. “I started out to write a book about the various causes of ethnic war, but found myself focusing instead on the power of myth and symbol to stir up ethnic hatreds.”

This was a significant shift, says Kaufman, a UK associate professor of political science who came to UK in 1990. “Basically instead of writing about how people think rationally about other ethnic groups, I began to look more at people’s ‘emotional beliefs.’”

The traditional way political scientists try to understand international conflicts, he says, starts with the premise that you can understand people’s behavior by assuming they rationally calculate what their options are and then act accordingly. But rational choice doesn’t adequately explain entrenched ethnic hatred and violence, Kaufman says.

What causes people to take part in some horrific war? How do leaders who want conflict convince ordinary citizens to join the army and risk their lives? To answer these questions, Kaufman says we need to look closely at the power of myth.

“In ethnic conflicts what’s unique is that there’s usually a specific outgroup that is already stereotyped. There’s already a mythology in place that says you have to assume this group is hostile. Therefore, political leaders find it easy to get people to believe them when they say, ‘They’re going after us again. So we’ve got to attack first,’” Kaufman explains.

The problem is, he says, so many of these oft-repeated “histories” are simply untrue.

In 1389, Ottoman Turks clashed with Serb warriors in a bloody battle outside Kosovo, a fight the Turks eventually won. When ethnic conflict broke out between Serbs and ethnic Albanian Muslims in the early 1990s, Serbs cited the Battle of Kosovo as the starting point of 600 years of Muslim brutality and persecution.

“Serbs tell the story that they sacrificed themselves to save the rest of Christendom from being overrun by the Muslims,” Kaufman says. “What they don’t talk about is that just a few years later, in response to that battle, the Pope organized a crusade against the Turks. The turning point of this battle was when the Turkish army got reinforcements from Serbian cavalry. So it was the Serbs who helped the Turks against the Christians—the opposite of Serbian mythology that says they sacrificed themselves to defend Christianity.”

If you look at a nation’s relative lengths of good and bad relations with their ethnic neighbors, Kaufman says, myth again overpowers reason. “Let’s say you have two ethnic groups that have shared a border for 400 years. Forty of those years involved terrible bloodshed between the two; 360 years were peaceful. What political leaders do is fasten on the 40-year period as ‘typical’ of the other group. The myth is so front-and-center in people’s imaginations that they come to understand everything that happened before and after those 40 years in terms of the period of hostility.”

So what can be done to lessen the power of these myths?

“First, you can change the acceptability of talking about the myths,” Kaufman says. “In our country, for example, it’s no longer acceptable to repeat stereotypical racist statements about blacks.

“The important thing is to try to make these attitudinal changes in different places simultaneously. Government leaders can promote more moderate attitudes at the same time school teachers do. It’s crucial to get people to understand the ‘other’ as human beings with real problems rather than just some faceless enemy easily stereotyped as evil.”

Kaufman’s book won the 2002 University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award For Ideas Improving World Order. He will receive a total prize of $200,000, some of which he will use, he says, to boost his 7-year-old son Sam’s college fund.

—Jeff Worley