

This Week's Citation Classic®

Schelling T C. *The strategy of conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (1960 1963) 1980. 309 p. [Center for international Affairs. Harvard University. Cambridge. MA]

The book covers non-zero-sum games involved in wars and threats of war, strikes, negotiations, criminal deterrence, price wars, and blackmail; maneuvering in a bureaucracy or in a traffic jam; military discipline, child discipline, and self-discipline; threats, promises, warnings; agreement, armistice, and limitation of conflict. [The *SSCI*[®] and the *SCI*[®] indicate that this book has been cited in more than 1,350 publications.]

Bargaining as Binding Oneself

Thomas C. Schelling
Department of Economics and
School of Public Affairs
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

In graduate school, reading reviews of *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*¹ (not the book itself), I hit on the idea that (to quote chapter 2) "the power to constrain an adversary may depend on the power to bind oneself; that, in bargaining, weakness is often strength, freedom may be freedom to capitulate, and to burn bridges behind one may suffice to undo an opponent." (p. 22) I thought of this as the idea of *commitment*.

Before I could do anything with this idea, I joined the Marshall Plan abroad and spent five years in Europe and Washington in foreign-aid and military negotiations, seeing my ideas evidenced continually in practice. When I moved to Yale in 1953, it was time to organize these ideas and get them on paper; two years later, "An Essay on Bargaining" (chapter 2) was published.² It had been refereed by Kenneth Boulding, whose enthusiasm encouraged me to go on. One year later, "Bargaining, Communication, and Limited War" (chapter 3) was published in Boulding's *Journal of Conflict Resolution*,³ and I became a sociologist as well as political scientist. (I'm actually an economist.)

I perceived the relevance of my ideas to nuclear strategy and diffidently began to think about deterrence and arms control. No need for diffidence: I was welcomed into the company of Brodie, Kahn, Kaufmann, and the rest, and took up arms control as a

professional subject (chapters 7, 8, 9, 10, and appendix A). From this work, I became a regular lecturer on war, deterrence, and arms control at the National War College. As chapter 1 explains, senior military officers in those days had no training or experience, nor any opportunity for it, in military strategy, especially nuclear; they depended on civilian strategists to do their thinking (or to provide their arguments). That situation has been transformed over the last 30 years.

The book was unquestionably a success by my standards, and I've wondered why. Partly, I'm sure, the reason was style. I labored meticulously to be lucid and succinct. I tried to find, for each concept, one "large" important illustration and one small "toy" illustration: denying supplies to a besieged army or turning off the utilities to evict a delinquent tenant. As I mentioned in the preface, the essays were a mixture of "pure" and "applied" research; the two were never separate. Motivation for the purer theory came almost exclusively from my preoccupation with (and fascination with) "applied" problems; and the clarification of theoretical ideas was absolutely dependent on an identification of live examples.

I tried to be simultaneously rigorous and elementary. But, the subject has universal appeal: it is not economics, politics, sociology, law, military strategy, criminology, domestic or industrial relations, or diplomacy. It is mostly bilateral relationships that show up everywhere. That feature broadened its appeal, but also added flavor because it is fun to find the same principle in family relations, Soviet-American relations, criminal deterrence, and disciplining of household pets. As I mentioned (p. 20), ancient enemies exchanged hostages, drank wine from the same glass, met publicly to inhibit the massacre of each other, married their sons and daughters, and exchanged spies to facilitate transmittal of authentic information. Deterrence, stabilization, confidence-building measures, and the hotline have ancient forebears.

In recent years I have been systematically applying the strategy of self-commitment to problems of self-management.⁴

1. Von Neumann J & Morgenstern O. *Theory of games and economic behavior*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1944. (Cited 580 times since 1945.)

2. Schelling T C. An essay on bargaining. *Amer. Econ. Rev.* 46:281-306. 1956. (Cited 50 times.)

3. ----- . Bargaining, communication, and limited war. *J. Conflict Resolut.* 1:19-36, 1957. (Cited 30 times. 1

4. ----- . Self command in practice, in policy, and in a theory of rational choice. *Amer. Econ. Rev.* 74:1-11. 1984.

Received December 11, 1992