

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT FOR BEGINNERS. By Roger Fisher. 231 pages. Harper & Row. 1969. \$5.95.

This study of "how-to" solve international conflicts, written by a Harvard law professor, is of considerable interest, indeed significance, to those interested in psychology and therapy. In addition to offering numerous specific suggestions on how to lead a conflict to a rapid and happy ending, the book reveals the tension between procedure and substance, tactic and strategy, and above all, between treatment of the symptoms of a conflict and that of its underlying structure. Psychodynamics sometimes explores the complex relationship between the manifestations and the "latent" structure of interpersonal conflict. Viewing the same issue in a macroscopic context—that of international relations — may provide the reader with new insights and deeper understanding of the generic issues involved.

On the manifest level, Fisher's treatment is superb. He treats international relations largely as a conflict between governments, each government trying to influence the other, like a lawyer presenting a brief or representing a client in an out-of-court settlement. Fisher asks: Who shall decide what steps are to be taken? What steps are most likely to lead to a resolution of the con-

Threats usually backfire; "yesable" propositions are more productive. A national leader should try to see the conflict—and his proposals—as the adversary will see them. New commitments should be unambiguous, and so on. A beginner in the field—to whom this book is explicitly addressed—could hardly do better than start here. Even the experienced diplomat will find it useful to review his tactics in view of the sound procedures Fisher outlines.

At the same time, a curious naiveté prevails throughout the book, primarily because Fisher, a man of reason, speaks chiefly to other men of reason. He has little interest in—and would reject—"tougher" bargaining techniques, such as deliberate intransigence or irrationality contrived to elicit concessions from the more "reasonable" adversaries. He would equally reject stubborn adherence to one's position—repetition of undiluted demands—as a bargaining tactic. Of course, these "tougher" approaches to conflict resolution are not necessarily better; it is the essence of Fisher's position that he knows they are not. On the contrary, Fisher holds threats and other such tactics to be counter-productive, if not outright dangerous. However, he does not explore these other approaches, nor does he ask if there are any conditions under which they might be the most effective ones.

The deeper question is not which is the most

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depend on the tactics of each side and to what extent on the structure of the situation? If the sides have diametrically opposed interests, what differences will clear signals and "yesable" propositions make? Will clear communications merely hasten the realization that there is nothing to bargain about?

There is, however, a more general issue at stake than the positions a beginning lawyer takes as he moves into his first "conflict situation." Of crucial importance is the power of communicative acts and the significance of manners, tactics, and procedures when faced with deep differences in structures, personalities or societies. There are major schools of social sciences, represented by such distinguished men as Charles Osgood, Morton Deutsch, and Jerome Frank, who see great potency in communicative efforts (this is, of course, a central assumption of psychiatry). At the same time, other social scientists have

there is the matter of their involved interests. Most situations contain a mixture of complementary and conflicting interests, and Fisher's tactics are helpful in distinguishing these and in negotiating the issues that will result in benefits to all concerned. They are much less valuable in dealing with matters on which there is a sharp conflict of interests. Moreover, as these are often intertwined with the "cooperative" issues, the applicability of Fisher's manual is somewhat limited.

The excessive "rationality" of the Fisher approach, the world view it implies, leads him to neglect the role of nonrational ties *among* the contestants, ties which often constitute the most important bases for conflict resolution and whose absence may prevent Fisher's own tactics from being effective, even when objective interests are complimentary. Thus, for example, the success of the Congress of Vienna was not so much the result of skillful diplomacy practiced by the participants. Of greater consequence was the fact that they subscribed to a shared set of values, beliefs, and viewpoints (by and large conservative ones) and that the sides were bound to each other by an elaborate set of interpersonal ties which run throughout the European aristocracy. Similarly, the purpose of asserting that the U.S. Senate is a "club" whose members must deal with each other like gen-

The more hostile people (or groups) are—the more they need to communicate—the less effective is increased and improved communication per se.

both would have benefited from a rapid termination of the war and American disengagement.

Fisher's treatment suggests one interesting difference between interpersonal and international conflict. Psychotherapy often proceeds by helping a person recognize that he can deny the validity of a normative tenet subscribed to by

society but in conflict with his own drive, e.g., acting out his homosexuality. His problem can at least be handled, if not solved, by legitimating, by "accepting," his "deviant" act. This is justified as a treatment because societal prescriptions are viewed as excessively "tight." On the international level, however, where morality and legality are extremely thin and fragile, most doctors of conflicts aim to resolve a conflict by tightening—rather than loosening—the normative fabric. Fisher asks those facing the conflict to worry not merely about resolving it but also to seek a resolution that will build up interna-



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tional law and morality. This approach will seem more relevant to intrasocietal conflict when we recognize that in many cases the intrasocietal fabric may have weakened to a point where reinforcement of strictures is needed more than "untightening."

In the final analysis, the book provides an interesting manual for a beginning psychotherapist or teacher, especially if they face patients or students who are not too hard to reach. It is

also valuable for beginners in the study of international conflict especially if they deal with a friendly government such as Britain. It has less to say about the reasons conflicts occur—beyond the lack of manners or sense—or how conflict may be reducible—beyond the use of constructive expressions and careful tactics on both sides. The reader may have encountered this fascination with "method" before; rarely will he have seen it more effectively spelled out in the international context. The book, with drawings by Robert C. Osborn, foreword by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, and Fisher's clear style is rather charming, reasonable, useful for congenial settings, and naive, if not hazardous, when the going is tough. ☹

