The politics of terror

By Eric Larrabee

ARMS AND INFLUENCE. By Thomas C. Schelling. Yale University Press. 293 pp. $7.50.

It is a great comfort to know that a man can put in years of service as a full-fledged "military intellectual," enmeshed in policy and argument at a high governmental altitude, and still emerge from it as wise and witty as Thomas C. Schelling. An economist by trade, he has: worked in the White House; acted as consultant to the State and Defense Departments, to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and to RAND; and lectured at a formidable number of U.S. and NATO war colleges. He has previously written *Strategy and Conflict* and *Strategy and Arms Control*, and now—in *Arms and Influence*—has produced an exemplary text on the interplay of national purpose and military force.

Mr. Schelling's generalizations are of the kind that not only fit the facts, as in a specific conflict like the present one in Viet Nam, but further illuminate them—for example, on the troubled question of why bombing North Viet Nam, or what he might call "coercive terror," may obstruct the very purpose it is intended to achieve. This is no abstract exercise in logic, no bloodless "theory of games" played between automata who invariably act in rational and undistorted perception of their own self-interest. What the author has attempted to find are the common features which attend all contests of human will, especially those in which the threat of physical violence—to be more precise, of inflicting pain—is ever present as the instrument of last resort.

This approach has the merit, among many others, of discouraging the impression that our troubles would be over if we could only eliminate armaments, or at least atomic weapons, or if we could eliminate the Russians, or they, us. Schelling has an engaging way—just when he seems to be describing some particularly modern phenomenon—of finding an example of it in the *Anabasis*, or in Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War. It is an exaggeration, but only a slight one, to say that he also understands warfare because he understands his own children. His successful deterrence of one child, by threatening to lose his temper, has been nullified by another's remark—"Daddy's mad already"—a reaction not unknown among sovereign states.

It is the threat of bodily harm, in other words, rather than the harm itself, which has the power to influence behavior. Once we start bombing North Viet Nam, that is, we can no longer threaten to; we can only threaten more of the same. And the North Vietnamese, discovering to their astonishment that (though bloody) they have survived, may erroneously conclude that they could survive even more bombs, even at an accelerated pace. The fact that we could wipe them off the face of the earth becomes irrelevant, because they know we won't; we need them too badly, if only to negotiate with. Our object is not deterrence but what Schelling, for lack of a better word, calls "compellence." We want them to *do* something—and there is ample indication (American Air Force doctrine to the contrary) that bombing somebody is at best an ineffective method for making him *do* something he is otherwise determined not to do. You may, quite the opposite, harden his resolve.

Schelling's kind of theory (it is a "kind," rather than *a* theory) emphasizes two elements which rarely receive such full and sympathetic treatment. One is reciprocity; the other is risk. Commonplace though it may sound, you cannot threaten bodily harm unless there is a body there to be harmed, and the body may threaten back, even if the disproportion of strength is so great that its only available threat is to endure harm stoically. Exchange, a tension of alternatives, bargaining, and maneuver—these are the inherent, inevitable components of human conflict. The vital essence, the central organizing force, is the element of risk. Schelling's simplest and most profound statement is that, in the game of international relations, it takes two *not* to play. No one can unilaterally decide not to risk being involved. If you are invited to play "chicken" and you decline, you have just played.

It may well happen, and here Schelling's discussion is replete with paradoxes, that one opponent will seek advantage by increasing the degree of risk to himself. It is one way of indicating that he means it, and there can be no language among nations—any more than there can be among persons—except on the basis of some kind of expectation, though not always an exact one, of how you intend to behave in a given set of circumstances. There are worse things to fight for than "saving face"; we fought in Korea to save the face of the United States and the United Nations, and Schelling believes (and so do I) that it was more than worth it. There are worse things to have than a reputation for being a little unreasonable now and then; it lets other people off the hook by making one's challenge to them less personal, more ambiguous, more "risky."

Schelling's obvious preference is for systems of military threat and counter-threat which do not get out of hand, and he therefore welcomes ambiguity and multiplicity as devices for defusing trains of otherwise "inevitable" events. Perhaps the Cuban missile crisis is his *type* case; Kennedy, by not being completely clear in what he demanded, allowed Khrushchev to be not completely clear in what he yielded. Schelling's greatest dislike is for systems which put a premium on speed, and the speed has nothing to do with the speed of the weapons involved. Hardened missile sites and Polaris submarines put no premium on speed; they can afford to wait. But the technique of military mobilization which prevailed in Europe before World War I did put a premium on speed; the nation which got its army to the border first had a distinct advantage, with the result that mobilization, once started, was impossible to stop.

Schelling somehow manages to stare war in the face without seeming to revel in it, or without having converted it beforehand into a mathematical toy by which X megatons are made to equal X million lives, yet nobody gets hurt, nobody bleeds. This is at times a very funny book, but it is never less than serious about the fact that people do get hurt. Indeed, a healthy respect for pain is partly what the author relies on to keep the discourse among nations open and responsible. The state of mind in which people perceive the possibility of being hurt is at least healthier than that sense of cocksure invulnerability which leads them to inflict harm without expecting to be harmed in return.

How badly Schelling's book is needed may be indicated by the furor over the downed American pilots. Suddenly the threat is personal, tangible, real; the illusion of invulnerability is shattered. The pilot inside the plane turns out to have been like the pulpy nerve inside the tooth; touch it and we jump. The Viet Cong have been inflicting bodily harm on thousands of American soldiers for months now, but all it takes is this threat to several dozen unarmed, unprotected American bodies, and all our doves turn into hawks—and our hawks into screaming eagles. The lesson will not be lost on our enemies; they have found a nerve. Nor would a reader of *Arms and Influence* be surprised if our indignation earned us little credit. It is asking a lot for a man's sense of fairness to extend beyond the reach of his own weapons. All our cries of "Foul!", all our talk about the Geneva convention, are not likely to make much impression on the millions of this earth who have no strategic air forces, but do have short, sharp knives.

Eric Larrabee is the well-known writer and social critic.