Preventing Armageddon

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Some conflicts—whether between spouses, labor and management, or nations—seem to escalate out of control. They follow a pernicious course toward outcomes that nobody wants. People who are caught up in such conflicts usually find ample justification for blaming the other party. It seldom occurs to the opponents to look hard at the conflict itself, including the conditions that intensify it or might de-escalate it.

Psychologists and other social scientists are well acquainted with such conflicts. Conflict research yields knowledge that can be productively applied to the conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, a conflict that seems to be stuck in the kind of escalating sequence that could lead to nuclear disaster—Armageddon. The findings of research on conflict do not replace the need for expert understanding of our antagonists or of the technical side of arms negotiations. But focusing on the typical characteristics of the conflict process itself, rather than exclusively on the characteristics and motives of our antagonists, may suggest a different approach for dealing with the Soviets. How we define the problem determines where we look for solutions.

What do we know about pernicious conflicts—ones that lead to bad results from everybody's standpoint?

A win-or-lose orientation tends to escalate conflicts. Under controlled laboratory conditions research has shown that when the participants define a conflict as a win or lose situation, several consequences are predictable: a) communication is impaired, reinforcing existing stereotypes and encouraging misinformation and error; b) the opponents become more suspicious of each other, more sensitive to differences and threats; and c) each party becomes convinced that a solution to the conflict can only be found through superior force or by outwitting the antagonist. Thus, disputes over specific issues that might be resolved to the satisfaction of both parties become struggles solely for superior power.

Pernicious conflicts encourage misperceptions and misjudgments that yield unwanted results. Research shows that during such conflicts, each party tends to perceive its own behavior more favorably than the other's, and to look at the conflict from a "blaming" rather than a "problem-solving" point of view. As the conflict escalates, the actions taken by each party commit each more deeply to policies that perpetuate the conflict; the opponents thus become locked into their positions of nationalistic self-interest rather than open to exploring mutually desirable policies and programs. Informal communications and contact, which might mitigate the conflict, are reduced. All parties become so focused on winning that they readily lose sight of their basic interests—which in the case of the U.S.-Soviet conflict include human survival.

Psychological experiments suggest that when one party in a conflict attempts to increase its security without regard for the security of the other party, the attempt readily becomes self-defeating, a situation that is potentially catastrophic when the stakes involve nuclear war. If military inferiority is dangerous, so is superiority. It is dangerous for either nation to feel tempted or frightened into military action, or to have grounds to believe that its antagonist might be so tempted or frightened. According to this analysis, our security and that of the Soviets and of the world can only be obtained through our mutual security.

Conflict research provides no easy answers to our international predicament. However, by focusing on factors involved in the dynamics of the conflict itself, rather than simply on the blameworthiness of our opponent, conflict research has highlighted the need for different strategies from those that follow from our own blind involvement in the conflict process. Such strategies ought to include initiatives aimed at opening communication and finding common objectives like human survival. Neither we nor the Soviets have a complete monopoly on good or evil. Neither party is insane. It is the conflict process that is crazy. With imagination, patience, and commitment, we can do something about that.