Escalation and Deescalation

AN ISRAELI army jeep patrols the streets of Hebron in occupied Palestine. It has been doing this for months, without incident. But today things go differently. Suddenly, a crowd of young Palestinians starts throwing rocks at the jeep. The Israeli soldiers respond with gunfire. Several youths are wounded. And an upward spiral of violence is begun. Why?

Answers to this question cannot be found in the writings of classical theoreticians. Although they spent considerable effort on the fundamental causes of conflict, they were, by and large, uninterested in its dynamics.[1] Much more relevant for us are modern writers such as Coleman (1957), Deutsch (1973), Pruitt and Rubin (1986), and Kriesberg (1998). Their writings suggest that certain fundamental – and controversial – aspects of escalation need to be considered first.

Main Ingredients of Escalation

We may begin by asking a deceptively simple question. What makes conflict escalation different from processes considered so far? And the answer is again seemingly simple: the fact that there are two (or more) contestants – the "Party" and the "Opponent" – who *interact* with each other. This fact is of crucial theoretical importance, because it suggests that Party's escalation is driven by *two* separate forces: one that originates within the Party itself, the other that originates in its Opponent.

The first force may be called "unilateral" escalation (or deescalation), the other "reciprocated" escalation (or deescalation). Let us begin by considering how these two forces contribute to the intensification of the conflict.

Unilateral Escalation

A Party may wish to escalate *unilaterally* for any of the reasons we discussed in Chapter 3. It may escalate because it has been deprived, relatively or absolutely, by its Opponent; because it has a belligerent culture or personality; because it plays a role that is incompatible with that of the Opponent; or because its values are different from the Opponent's (see Figure 3.2). Unilateral escalation can also occur for reasons discussed in Chapter 5, such as past and present grievances, high level of frustration, or conflict-promoting interaction (see Figure 5.2).

But Party can also escalate because, under certain circumstances, escalation is *rational*. For example, when Party has *overwhelming* power over its opponent, it makes sense to use it to overcome Opponent's resistance. In some cases, overwhelming power is used at the very beginning of the struggle. For example, when the Germans attacked Poland in 1939, they used every destructive means at their disposal, including devastating bombing of civilian targets. In other cases, power is applied mercilessly to subdue lasting resistance. And, sad to say, such ruthlessness often pays – perhaps because Opponent, thinking rationally, concludes that resistance is useless. For example, when the Nazis annihilated the village of Lidice following the assassination by Czech patriots of Heindrich, the Nazi governor of Czechoslovakia, the Czechs were frightened by this savagery and concluded that extreme acts of violence against the Germans were not in their best interests.

But extreme force, though effective in the short run, might ultimately backfire. Particularly when it takes an unacceptable form, it may anger the opponents, thereby increasing their solidarity and, ultimately, their power. Familiar with this principle, savvy politicians often try to provoke their more powerful opponents. For example, Fidel Castro advanced his revolution against the Batista regime by attacking small army units and provoking the government into harsh reprisals. This strategy was successful, increasing Castro's following and resulting

in his victory. On the other hand, rational parties can refuse to be provoked. For example, when Che Guevara tried Castro's approach in Venezuela, the government used only specific and limited countermeasures. The insurrection failed (Kriesberg [1973] 1982, 203).

Reciprocated Escalation

Retaliation is a special case of reciprocation: it contributes to escalation (whereas reciprocation may drive deescalation as well), and it often involves greater violence than used by Opponent (whereas reciprocation usually matches Opponent's violence). In spite of these differences, retaliation is driven by the same forces as reciprocation.

Retaliation (and, more broadly, reciprocation) often occurs for the same reasons as unilateral escalation. It may be due to the distant past, such as an injustice inflicted on one's ancestors; it may be based on Opponent's recent actions, such as his latest atrocity; it may occur because the actor is rational, such as when he or she has overwhelming power over his or her adversary; or it may be due to his or her belligerent ideology or personality.

Although identifying the main causes of retaliation is relatively easy, specifying its *consequences* is much more difficult. Does it invite further retaliation? Or does it promote submission? Results of empirical studies are inconclusive. Some research suggests that escalation invites retaliation. For example, when in the 1960s college administrators responded to students' antiwar demonstrations by applying severe sanctions, the conflicts tended to escalate (Morgan 1977). Other research suggests quite the opposite. For example, highly coercive regimes tend to have lower levels of internal conflict than regimes that are only moderately coercive (Walton 1970).

In order to explain these seemingly inconsistent findings, let us make two observations. First, retaliation seems to be a "normal" and automatic reaction. As Coleman (1957, 13) puts it, "If you fail to smile, but scowl instead, I may say a harsh word; you respond in kind, and another chain of mutual reinforcement builds up – this time toward antagonism. . . . The admonition to 'turn the other cheek' is not easily obeyed." The tendency to retaliate becomes even more entrenched when it is culturally sanctioned. Thus the Old Testament demands "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" – and the Israeli government

often uses this rule as a guide for its national policy. Many cultures, including mainstream U.S. culture, emphasize and sanction the positive side of reciprocation: when somebody does me a favor, I should return it.

Second, reciprocation (and sometimes retaliation) seems eminently *rational* under certain circumstances. For example, the so-called tit-for-tat strategy, recommended by some versions of the so-called theory of games (see Luce and Raiffa 1967; Axelrod 1984), relies heavily on reciprocation: when Opponent escalates, Party should escalate; when he or she deescalates, Party should deescalate as well. But this version of the tit-for-tat strategy does not stop there: it also specifies that, occasionally, *Party* should *deescalate unilaterally*. As the Sicilian vendetta illustrates, reciprocation locks the adversaries into a never-ending conflict that cannot be terminated unless somebody takes the first step toward reconciliation. Nonetheless, reciprocation is both natural and, under most circumstances, rational.

Hence we propose the following view of retaliation. Most fundamentally, retaliation should be viewed as a *natural*, spontaneous, and often irrational response to coercion. This natural human tendency, however, coexists with another, *rational* deliberation. In some instances, the two forces are in harmony, but in other cases they are in opposition. And in some cases, such as when facing overwhelming power, rationality wins. These cases should be viewed as evidence that, when the pressure is on, reason often overwhelms – but never extinguishes – nature.

Thus use of force can have two different consequences: when it is relatively *weak*, it tends to provoke retaliation; when it is *overpowering*, it tends to induce submission. But we must always remember that the use of extreme force may backfire in the long run.

Let us take a moment to consider a related issue – the controversy about the so-called realistic perspective on foreign affairs (Morgenthau 1960). According to that perspective, a state should be viewed as a rational actor that uses force to maximize its power. And the best way for a state to prevent war with its neighbors is to become much more powerful than they are. This theory has been opposed on many grounds. One of them is that when a state attempts to increase its power, its neighbors are likely to reciprocate by increasing theirs, thus creating an arms race that precipitates a war. In practice, the realists often

advocate creating a superpower that keeps peace, while their opponents advocate a balance of power among equals (Kriesberg 1998, 137, 171).

Our theory may shed some light on the controversy. It suggests that, as the realists argue, nations with overwhelming power indeed can maintain peace. After all, the Romans did it and the United States seems to be doing it. But there are at least two difficulties. First, attempts to achieve such supremacy usually proceed in *small* increments – and that provokes reciprocation, an arms race, and ultimately threatens peace. Second, when the superpower is forced to actually *use* extreme force, it provokes hostility, empowers the opposition, and ultimately endangers peace. Thus we may conclude that, when unusual circumstances have already thrust a nation into the position of an unchallenged superpower, that superpower may help to keep peace – for a while. But when a nation disturbs an existing balance of power by trying to *achieve* superpower status, it endangers – rather than promotes – peace.

Hostility-Driven Escalation

As you just saw, the fact that a conflict involves two (or more) interacting participants compelled us to distinguish between two aspects of a Party's escalation, unilateral and reciprocated. Equally compelling is another distinction, between conflicts driven by goal incompatibility and those driven by hostility. Because hostility gives conflicts a unique flavor, it merits special consideration.

To begin with, hostility-driven escalation tends to occur for totally trivial reasons, such as a harsh word or unfriendly look. It also tends to be unnecessarily violent, as exemplified when Israelis use live ammunition to disperse a crowd of rock-throwing teenagers, and when Palestinians retaliate by exploding bombs on crowded streets of Israeli towns. Finally, escalation and deescalation may occur with surprising suddenness, such as when riot police quickly disperse demonstrators with water cannons and tear gas.

Moreover, hostility springs from different sources than goal incompatibility: whereas goal incompatibility stems from contests over resources or incompatible roles or values (Figure 3.2), hostility is caused primarily by grievances and frustration (Figure 5.2). Some grievances

might be very old, such as when a Serb hates all Muslims because of the fifteenth-century Turkish victory over Serbs.

A Model of Escalation

You may agree with the main point made so far, that Party's escalation is driven by three forces: its own interests, acts of its Opponent, and its hostility. You may also readily agree to the next point, that escalation will slow down, stop, and eventually turn into deescalation if these forces undergo certain changes: if Party starts deescalating, if Opponent starts deescalating, if hatred is replaced by friendship.

Yet for certain important questions our discussion does not provide a ready answer. Can escalation stop even when these three basic forces do not change? What will happen if Party continues escalating even though Opponent is ready to deescalate? Can lasting peace be obtained without establishing a friendly relationship between former foes? A formal model of conflict can provide the answers.

Basic Equations

The model consists of the following two equations:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathrm{dP/dt} &= r\mathrm{O} - u\mathrm{P} + h \\ & \qquad\qquad r, u > 0 \\ \mathrm{dO/dt} &= r\mathrm{P} - u\mathrm{O} + h \end{aligned} \tag{7.1}$$

To a mathematician, these equations are simple. Although they may send you into shock, there is a simple cure for that: read each equation as if it stated *the very same ideas as we just expressed in plain English* – that is, correlate English expressions with the symbols in the equation. Observe that, to make this easier, we use symbols that correspond to the *first* letter of the English expression: P is used for *P*arty, O for *O*pponent, and so on. Some of the important "translations" follow:

1. Instead of speaking of "escalation," the equation "says" dP/dt.
2. Instead of speaking about "unilateral deescalation," the equation uses $-uP$.[2]
3. Instead of speaking about "reciprocated escalation," it uses rO.[3]
4. Instead of "hostility," it uses h.

With these interpretations in mind, you can see that the first equation in equations 7.1 says that *Party's escalation (d*P*/t) depends on its readiness to reciprocate Opponent's escalation (r*O*), on its readiness to de-escalate unilaterally (−u*P*), and on its hostility toward its opponent (h)*. The second equation says the very same thing about the other side, the Opponent.

You gain further insights when you realize that the equations' right-hand side refers to certain "inner" tendencies, what the actors *contemplate* doing, and the left-hand side to what the actors *actually do.* The actors are portrayed as influenced by three distinct impulses: to retaliate, to escalate, and to express hostility. What they actually do – how much they actually escalate – is a compromise between these three impulses. Technically, the compromise is reached by *adding* the three impulses together. If you keep this point in mind, you will see that it is perfectly possible for Party to wish to escalate and yet act in a deescalatory manner.

Still, several puzzles remain. One of these concerns the symbols "inside" the expressions such as *r*O: do *r* and O have meaning of their own? They do. The following list – again, for simplicity's sake, focusing on the Party – might provide some answers:

P: coerciveness of Party's action.

O: coerciveness of Opponent's action.

dP/dt: escalation in Party's coerciveness.[4]

r: extent to which Party wishes to reciprocate.[5]

u: extent to which Party wishes to act *unilaterally.*

h: extent to which Party wishes to express hostility.[6]

*r*O: Party's reciprocation.

*u*P: Party's unilateral escalation.

This list suggests that there *is* a conceptual distinction between terms such as *r* and O. The term *r* corresponds to the extent to which Party reciprocates throughout the conflict, O corresponds to Opponent's coerciveness. You may think of *r* as an "internal" *tendency* or *disposition* that "normally" does not change because it is "ingrained" in the actor's personality or culture.[7] Such terms are called "parameters." Term O refers to actual *behavior,* to the level of coerciveness used

by the Opponent. Because Opponent's coerciveness can – and usually does – change, it is called a "variable."

You may also wonder why the three terms on the right-hand side are *added* together. Why are they not multiplied? The answer is that these equations are nearly identical to those used by Richardson (1960) to determine the conditions under which an arms race could be contained. Being familiar with various models of physical systems with feedbacks,[8] he chose one of the simplest – the equations 7.1.[9] We might add that, to make our discussion of the model as simple as possible, a very special case is considered here: the adversaries are assumed to have the *same* parameters r, u, and h.

Finally, you may wonder why we use $-u$P instead of $+u$P. The reason is purely technical.[10] Unfortunately, the term, $-u$P can be confusing. But this confusion can be relieved if you remember two points. (1) In general, the parameter u stands for the extent to which Party acts unilaterally. (2) When we assume that u is a positive number, the expression $-u$P signifies that Party contemplates *de*escalation; when we assume that u is a negative number, the expression $-u$P specifies that Party contemplates escalation.

Contributions of the Model

Remember that we promised earlier that a formal model would help us answer three important questions. Can escalation stop even when the "inner" predispositions (r, u, and h) do *not* change? What will happen if only *one* opponent stops escalating? Can lasting peace be obtained without establishing a *friendly* relationship between former foes?

To answer the first question, we must for a moment go back to Richardson's analysis. By examining the implications of the equations 7.1, Richardson showed that the complex give-and-take of escalation has a fairly simple endpoint: usually, Party's coercivenes *converges toward an equilibrium.*[11] More precisely, if (and only if) it is true that

$$h > 0 \text{ and } u > r, \tag{7.2}$$

then the process will approach an equilibrium state given by Party's coerciveness P* and Opponent's coerciveness O* as:

$$\mathrm{P}^* = \mathrm{O}^* = \frac{h}{u - r} \tag{7.3}$$

In plain English: if two similar[12] adversaries are hostile toward each other but are more intent on curbing escalation than on retaliating (the equations 7.2), then their coerciveness will approach the level given by equation 7.3, and, once reaching it, will stay at that level.

Furthermore, it can be shown that *Party will escalate if its first conflict action falls below its equilibrium point.* For example, suppose that two boys have been competing in a schoolyard, getting increasingly irritated with each other. Finally, open fighting breaks out as one of the boys yells that the other is cheating. Considering how hostile the boy feels and how much he wants to win, this action is fairly mild, much less than what it is bound to become. (Translation: the first conflict action is below the equilibrium point.) The other boy responds by calling the first boy a "creep"; the first boy responds by hitting him; the second boy hits back even harder; and so on. Ultimately, they are fighting steadily, exchanging blows whose severity is determined by their anger and will to win the contest. It stays at that level for a while. (Translation: they reached the equilibrium point and are remaining at it.) Of course, they will not fight indefinitely: either they become exhausted, one of them gives up, or the teacher breaks up the fight. (These are deescalation processes, to be considered shortly.)

We are now ready to answer the first question: even when Party's "inner" tendencies (specified by parameters r, u, and h) remain unchanged, its overt behavior can change dramatically, going from escalation to a steady – equilibrium – level of coerciveness. This will happen if (1) Party is hostile toward Opponent (if h is positive), if (2) it is more intent on curbing escalation than on retaliating (if $u > r$),[13] and if (3) Party starts *below* the equilibrium level of coerciveness (see equation 7.3).

A visual illustration might be helpful at this point. Suppose that the two adversaries' parameters (r, u, and h) are identical and that, although they are hostile to each other ($h > 0$), they prefer deescalation to retaliation ($u > r$) – thus satisfying condition 7.2. We chose parameters that meet these assumptions and, although somewhat arbitrary, are fairly realistic:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathrm{dP/dt} &= .3\mathrm{Y} - .8\mathrm{P} + 5 \\ \mathrm{dY/dt} &= .3\mathrm{P} - .8\mathrm{Y} + 5 \end{aligned} \tag{7.4}$$

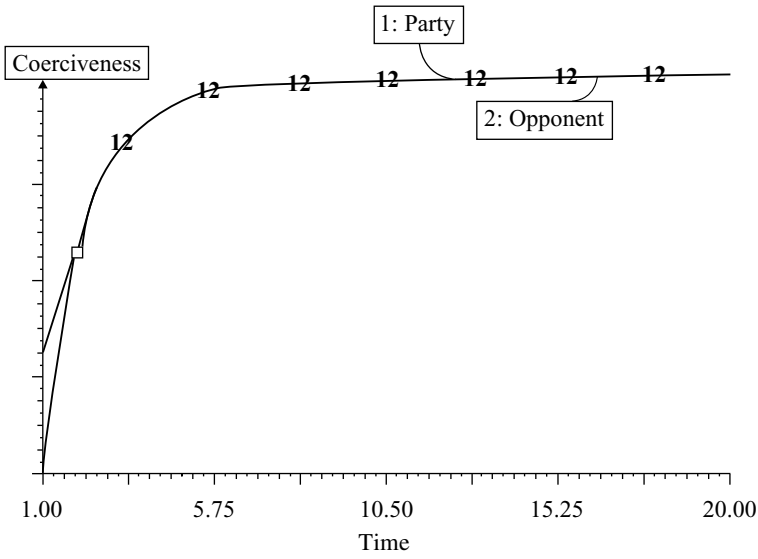

Figure 7.1. Escalating toward an Equilibrium

Moreover, to make our illustration more informative, we assumed that Party starts being more aggressive than Opponent.

Using these equations in a computer simulation, we obtained a picture shown in Figure 7.1. Note that, because the inequalities in (7.2) are satisfied, both actors' coerciveness converges toward equilibrium; because both start below the equilibrium, their coerciveness escalates until the equilibrium level is reached; because they have the same parameters, they reach the same equilibrium. Note that *the fact that they start at a different level of coerciveness does not matter* – the equilibrium level depends only on the three parameters.

The second question was, What will happen if Party continues escalation even though Opponent is ready to deescalate? To answer this question, we ran another computer simulation. We again used equations 7.4 but with one modification: we made Party quarrelsome by setting its unilateral deescalation parameter to $u = -1$. The results are shown in Figure 7.2: as expected, Party continues its nonstop escalation; but – and this may come as a surprise – Opponent engages in nonstop escalation as well, in spite of his conciliatory intentions!

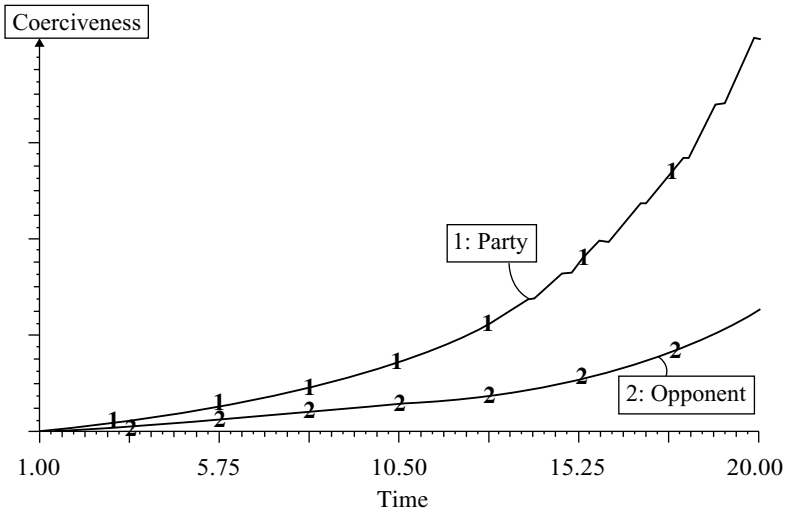

Figure 7.2. Party's Strong Tendency to Escalate Causes Opponent to Escalate As Well

We now can answer the second question: as long as Party is on the path of ever increasing escalation, Opponent will follow suit even when he does not want to. This discrepancy between his intentions and his actual behavior occurs because, once Party is locked in an uncompromising stance, once its parameters guarantee never-ending escalation, Opponent's tendency to reciprocate (rP) is sufficient to pull him into what he does not wish to do, resulting in a runaway escalation.

The third question our model was supposed to answer was, Can stable peace be obtained without establishing a friendly relationship between former foes? If we understand by "stable peace" a condition of zero coerciveness,[14] then the answer is, No, lasting peace can be obtained only when all hostilities disappear. This is because the only way of achieving an equilibrium of $P^* = O^* = 0$ is when $h = 0$.[15]

The Model and the Real World

Rapoport ([1960] 1961, 37) shows that the equations 7.1 do a fairly good job of predicting what Richardson intended them to predict – an arms race. But when they are used to do what they were *not* designed

to do – to describe *general* conflict behavior – do they perform equally well? The answer seems to be that they do, provided we change some of the assumptions we made in equations 7.1.

We may start by considering the assumption about the first parameter, the reciprocation parameter r. Were we justified assuming that the actors will always try to reciprocate ($r > 0$)? Recall that we argued that, although the tendency to retaliate (and, more generally, to reciprocate) can be "outvoted" by rational considerations, it can never be *extinguished*. This means that our original assumption was correct, that actors will always reciprocate (that r will always be a positive number).

But the assumption that actors will always try to *de*escalate the conflict (that $u > 0$) is a different story. We have argued that under certain conditions actors may in fact *escalate* so heavily that their tendency to act unilaterally must be escalatory (that parameter u must be negative). This can happen when an aggressor, wanting to win quickly, uses all the force he or she can muster; when a nation has overwhelming power; or when an actor has a belligerent personality or culture. Thus we must allow that the unilateral action parameter u be not only positive but negative as well.

But we must recognize that if the conflict lasts long enough, actors with a tendency to escalate unilaterally ($u < 0$) are bound to reverse themselves. Sooner or later, a feedback will occur that forces them to halt escalation and, ultimately, to start unilateral *de*escalation ($u > 0$) – if for no other reason than because they have reached the end of their resources. (See the discussion of feedbacks given later in this chapter.)

Escalation Due to "Original" Conditions

Because much of the early escalation in a conflict is due to the same main conditions that led to the start of open conflict actions, the theory of Chapter 5 helps us to understand not only why conflicts become open but also why they escalate. In particular, high conflict solidarity and abundant conflict resources – the main reasons for the start of open conflicts (see Figure 5.2) – determine how much Party will escalate unilaterally, how strongly it will reciprocate Opponent's conflict actions, and how hostile it will feel toward him. For example, the warlike culture of the Apaches – an important component of their conflict solidarity – would not only cause them to attack another tribe; it would

also induce them to escalate violence once a conflict was on its way: they might kill those who opposed them as well as those who did not, and they might burn the entire village.

Escalation Due to Changing Conditions

Some conflicts last for a long time. For example, Israel and Syria have maintained a sporadic conflict for decades. Syria did it by proxy, by supporting radical movements that made sporadic attacks on Israel; Israel did it more directly, by attacking suspected enemy bases with retaliatory air strikes. But many conflicts, after remaining in an equilibrium for a while, begin either to escalate or to deescalate. Technically, this means that in these conflicts some of the model's parameters (r, u, or h) have changed.

To see what happens when even one of the parameters is changed, let us rerun the simulation that yielded Figure 7.2. As in that figure, Opponent favors deescalation while Party is bent on escalation ($u = -.1$). But the situation soon changes: at time t = 10 Party starts favoring strong unilateral *de*escalation ($u = +.9$). True, this is a drastic change, but such changes can occur in the real world. For example, Party might have suffered a crushing defeat that destroyed its resources and demoralized its troops. In any case, as Figure 7.3 shows, the consequences of

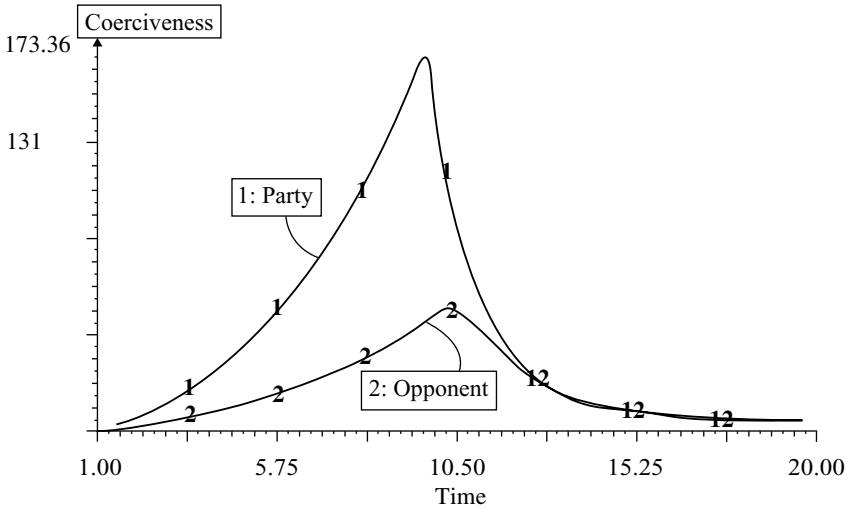

Figure 7.3. When Party Starts Deescalating, Opponent Follows

this parameter shift are startling: at t = 10, Party (whose behavior is represented by line 1) begins deescalating rapidly, continuing to do so until it reaches an equilibrium of low coerciveness. Because we chose the final parameters of the two sides to be the same, Opponent and Party ultimately reach the same equilibrium.

Why then do adversaries ever go above the equilibrium levels of coerciveness, becoming more willing to escalate unilaterally, more bent on revenge, or more hostile? Some of the causes are external to the conflict itself. For example, one of the conflict groups may gain new allies and thus become more powerful. But by far the most common reason is that the feedbacks from the conflict transform the adversaries themselves.

Feedbacks That Increase Escalation

As the conflict progresses, it unleashes certain processes that magnify the propensities that govern escalation: the propensity to escalate unilaterally, to retaliate, or to be hostile. Some of these changes occur because of events that strengthen Party's solidarity.

Increase in Conflict Solidarity. Some theories and research suggest that conflict solidarity can increase because *individual perceptions* have changed. As Kriesberg (1998, 152–154) notes, this happens when individual members strive to resolve their "cognitive dissonance" by justifying the violence of their actions; when they start to "perceive selectively," ignoring their own excesses and exaggerating those of the opponents; and when, being "entrapped" by having invested heavily in the conflict, they begin to protect their investments. Because making these changes is not easy, they seek advice and reinforcement from fellow members of the group, so free interaction increases. This interaction ultimately results in a new, more radical ideology and greater conflict solidarity. As an example of how these processes can change individual perceptions, recall that, in the not-so-distant past, some presumably law-abiding Americans took part in lynching – an action that was not only illegal but normally morally repugnant.

Opponent's coercive behavior also tends to strengthen conflict solidarity. This is particularly true when the Opponent commits brutal

acts, as when police beat up demonstrators or when the military executes innocent civilians. Such acts cause the members of the aggrieved group to see the opponents as subhuman and evil and create a desire for revenge.

A long-lasting conflict can also increase conflict solidarity by making the goals of the conflict groups more *incompatible*. This may occur when radical groups – such as minorities or special interest groups – join in the conflict, and their goals are added to the agenda. For example, an early conflict between the timber industry and the U.S. Forest Service was about areas in which trees might be cut. When environmentalists joined the fight, the industry's right to cut any trees at all was questioned. Another possibility is that, as conflict proceeds, minor issues may gain symbolic importance (Kriesberg 1998, 158–159). For example, the proposed regulation of hand guns may come to symbolize a threat to a constitutional right to bear arms.

As conflict progresses, certain *structural* changes may occur. The original leaders may become more radical; radical leaders may emerge as marginal groups join the struggle; specialists in violence, such as police and the military, may be brought in to direct conflict behavior. All this tends to promote further escalation.

Increase in Conflict Resources. So far, we have been discussing feedbacks that affect conflict solidarity and some processes related to it. But Party's changes in conflict resources can play an equally important role: if they increase, unilateral escalation often results. Thus a wife who has been unhappy with her marriage may decide to file for divorce when she becomes financially independent; nations at war may capture weapons or territory that increase its capacity to escalate the conflict.

Strategic Escalation. We need to account for a seemingly paradoxical fact: Party often escalates when it is in danger of becoming *weaker*. For example, a husband who has been fighting with his wife discovers that she is contemplating a divorce. To avoid heavy payments in case a divorce occurs, he starts divesting himself of many of his funds (an escalatory action). A general, on learning that the opposing army is planning an attack, may forestall it by launching an attack of his own. To account for this paradox, we need a new concept, one that takes into

account the fact that adversaries engage in *strategic* deliberations – the concept of "strategic escalation." Thus, when threatened, Party may make a preemptive strike because to do so is to its strategic advantage (because to do so is "rational").

There are other situations that make strategic escalation advisable. Some of them are "internal." For example, when members grow dissatisfied with the conflict, leaders may escalate in hopes that Opponent's response will infuriate their (Party's) members and thus increase their conflict solidarity.

Deescalation Due to Changing Conditions

After a conflict has been in an equilibrium for a long time, it tends to deescalate. Again, some of the reasons may be external to the conflict itself. For example, when NATO forces entered the Kosovo conflict, Serbian forces began to withdraw. But there are internal reasons as well, mainly the feedbacks from the conflict itself. Let us consider how a change in action propensities may start a chain of deescalation.

Process of Deescalation

Our model suggests that a stalemated conflict will start deescalating only if the equilibrium level of coerciveness (P^* and O^*) becomes *lower*. And the equilibrium equation 7.3,

$$P^* = O^* = \frac{h}{u - r},$$

suggests that this can occur for three main reasons: hostility (h) can decrease, the tendency to deescalate (u) can increase, or the tendency to retaliate (r) can become smaller.

Thus the stalemated conflict between the United States and Iraq can start deescalating when the adversaries begin to be less *hostile* toward each other (when their h decreases). For example, the media in both countries may start depicting the opponent in less negative terms. Deescalation can also start when both sides start deescalating *unilaterally* more vigorously (when their u increases). For example, the United States can start diminishing its flights over Iraqi territory. Or deescalation can start when the adversaries become less eager to

retaliate (when *r* becomes smaller). For example, the United States may decide not to tighten its embargo against Iraq when the latter refuses to admit weapons inspectors to its military facilities.

The equations 7.1 suggest that, in order for deescalation to continue, some of the three propensities (*h*, *u*, and *r*) *must continue to change* in a manner that promotes deescalation. Thus the United States and Iraq must become increasingly less hostile, or more intent on curbing escalation, or less retaliatory. This approach makes sense intuitively: if all three propensities remained the same while coerciveness was decreasing, deescalation would soon stop at the level appropriate to those propensities. But it is possible to prove this conclusion more rigorously.[16]

Finally, the model suggests that deescalation will eliminate *all* coerciveness (that P* and O* will become zero) only if all hostile feelings stop (only if *h* becomes zero).[17] Thus for the United States and Iraq to stop all coercive interactions, their media may have to stop attacking the other side altogether.

Feedbacks That Lead to Deescalation

As a struggle continues for a long time, forces may be unleashed that lead to deescalation. Not suprisingly, they affect the main bases of conflict action: conflict solidarity and conflict resources.

Decrease in Conflict Solidarity. As a war drags on, many individuals become impoverished, possibly losing members of their families. At the same time, the wealthy and the powerful may profit from the conflict, thus increasing social *inequality* and popular dissatisfaction with the conflict. Military desertions and public demonstrations opposing the conflict may occur with increasing frequency (Kriesberg 1998, 185).

Dissatisfaction and disillusionment that lower conflict solidarity may bring about *organizational* changes. New leaders may emerge, opposing the policies of the hard-liners, and advocating accommodation with the enemy. The hard-liners may try to suppress the opposition, but, as we saw earlier, this creates hostility toward them and ultimately strengthens the opposition. For example, when, in the 1990s, the moderate South African government freed Nelson Mandela, the leader of the African National Congress (ANC), conservative white opposition

to the government grew, and in 1993 members of that opposition assassinated a major figure in the ANC. This murder galvanized the moderates into action: the ANC organized protest demonstrations and the government arrested a member of the Conservative Party in connection with the murder (Kriesberg 1998, 208).

Depletion of Conflict Resources. A long conflict also depletes adversaries' conflict resources. The most obvious reason is that there are *natural limits* on most conflict resources. For example, a labor union has only limited funds to support the strikers; a nation has only a limited supply of manpower and strategic materials such as oil; boys have only limited strength they can apply against each other.

Another reason is that the conflict actions of the adversaries usually *destroy or disable* each other's "assets": in a war, soldiers are killed, ships are sunk, airplanes are shot down; during a strike, some of the strikers may be arrested and put in jail; during a schoolyard fight, the boys may hurt each other. Wartime destruction not only hampers the efforts of the fighting forces but also causes shortages of food and disruption of services, thus weakening conflict solidarity. But even nonmilitary conflicts can lead to frustrating deprivations. When a union goes on strike, the workers lose their pay and the company loses profits; when husband and wife fight, they deprive each other of needed love and support.

Strategic Deescalation. Depletion of conflict resources may do more than hinder aggressive action, it may suggest that a fundamental reassessment of conflict strategy is in order. After careful deliberation, Party may decide that, even though it has sufficient resources to continue the struggle, the future looks bleak, and it may therefore decide to sue for peace. Results may range from a total surrender that gives the Opponent all or most of his goals to an accommodation in which both sides reach some of their goals.

Ending the Conflict. Our earlier discussion notwithstanding,[18] in the real world the adversaries need *not* have the same levels of equilibrium coerciveness. The adversary with more resources and greater conflict solidarity will be able to sustain a higher level of coerciveness, thus gradually wearing its opponent down. For example, when NATO became

involved in the Kosovo conflict, the Serbs, being the weaker party, were more eager to curb their coerciveness and less willing (and able) to retaliate than were the NATO forces. Consequently, when that conflict reached a stalemate, with NATO maintaining constant bombing of Serb targets, the Serb position was gradually eroded. Finally, the Serbs agreed to pull out of Kosovo, thus handing NATO what appeared to be nearly complete victory, albeit at considerable human and economic cost. Although the role of that bombing remains controversial,[19] our theory suggests that this show of overwhelming force made it rational for Serbs to deescalate.

Of course, one can prevail by means other than wearing down the opponent. In many cases, it suffices for one of the adversaries suddenly to become much stronger. This was the case when the United States developed an atomic bomb and dropped it on Japan. Although Japan's forces were depleted by then and an end of war was in sight, Japan probably capitulated earlier than it would have otherwise.[20]

But however the conflict ends, what matters most is what happens *afterward*. Are the surrender terms so harsh that the defeated adversary cannot live with them? When the Versailles treaty imposed humiliating terms on Germany, the "victors" created conditions for a new, more deadly conflict – World War II.

Ancient warriors were quite aware of this problem and had a cruel "solution": they often killed most of the defeated adversaries and burned their towns to the ground. Fortunately, this strategy is impossible today, so another approach is needed: the victors must be generous, making it possible for the vanquished to live well. It is not coincidental that victors in a sporting event heap praises on the defeated opponent. Nor was it accidental that, some time after the Germans were defeated in World War II, the United States offered them economic help through the Marshall Plan. Although some scholars question U.S. motivation, pointing out that this plan was very profitable for American business, it is clear that it helped Germany reach prosperity.

Accommodation. The second – and usually the best – way to end a conflict is through an accommodation, an agreement that is acceptable to both sides. The effectiveness of processes such as negotiation, mediation, and arbitration has been well established (see Chapter 9).

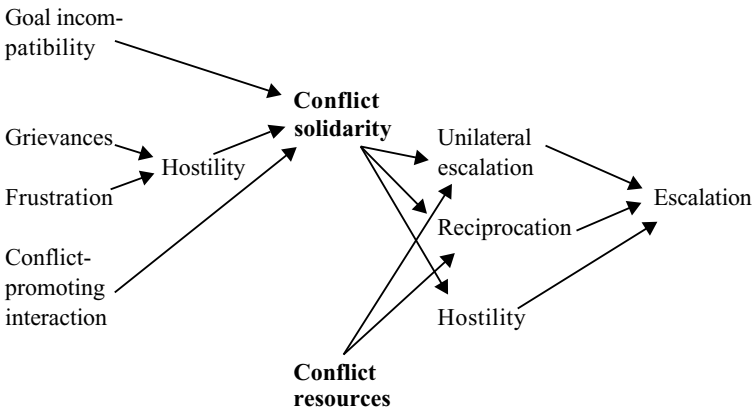

Figure 7.4. Original Causes That Contribute to Escalation

Conclusions

One of the fundamental insights into escalation (and deescalation) is that it may be driven by the very same causes that led to the outbreak of hostilities in the first place. Figure 7.4 expresses this insight graphically. Note that this diagram is essentially the same as that given in Figure 5.2: conflict solidarity and conflict resources again play a crucial role. The main difference is that Figure 7.4 adds the three "forces" that drive escalation: unilateral action ($-$ uP), reciprocation (rO), and hostility (h).

Although Figure 7.4 is largely self-explanatory, a clarification may be helpful. Note that "hostility" appears twice, once as a cause of conflict solidarity (original hostility), and once as a *consequence* of solidarity (subsequent hostility). This is meant to suggest that the process that increases conflict solidarity also tends to increase hostility toward Opponent.

Although escalation can occur even when the original conditions do not change, typically they *do* change. Theoretically most interesting are the changes caused by the conflict itself, by its "feedbacks." Figure 7.5 shows the most important escalatory feedbacks. It shows that some feedbacks increase conflict *solidarity*. As reports of the opponents' brutality come in, members of the conflict group become increasingly angry; as radical groups begin to participate in the conflict, and as

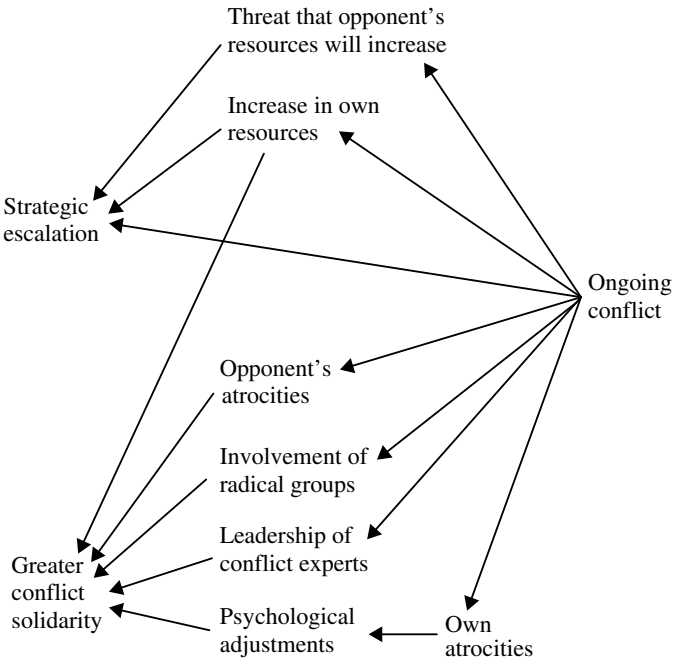

Figure 7.5. Feedbacks Leading to Escalation

coerciveness experts move into leadership positions, the group's ideology becomes more radical; as it becomes obvious that "our side" is committing brutal acts as well, members undergo psychological changes that justify their actions and increase their participation. Other feedbacks, such as their side's victory, may increase their *resources.*

Ongoing conflict may also create conditions that call for *strategic* escalation: if Party is threatened with an increase in Opponent's resources, it may be wise for it to make a preemptive strike; if its resources are significantly increased, then it may escalate in hopes of prevailing. Note that one arrow in Figure 7.5 leads directly from "ongoing conflict" to "strategic escalation": this indicates that there may be other feedbacks (not considered here) that invite strategic reassessment.

But a conflict can also create feedbacks that lead to deescalation. As Figure 7.6 shows, when the conflict has lasted for a long time, it generates feedbacks that decrease both conflict solidarity and conflict

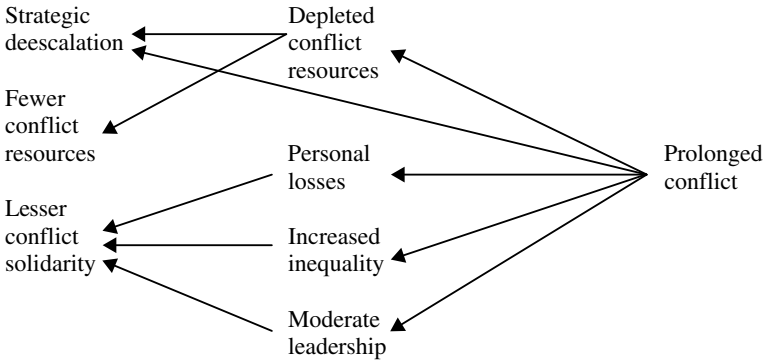

Figure 7.6. Feedbacks Leading to Deescalation

resources. Conflict *solidarity* may decrease because many are losing wealth or family members; because profiteering increases economic inequality; because, as fatigue spreads, moderate leaders gain power. Moreover, as conflict continues, conflict *resources* get depleted. This affects Party's coerciveness in two ways: it decreases Party's ability to engage in coercive action and thus forces unilateral deescalation;[21] and it calls for strategic reassessment that might suggest even more drastic deescalation.

Not all conflicts end through gradual deescalation; some end in sudden one-sided defeat. The old wisdom that one can win the war but lose the peace is very pertinent here. Unless the "victors" are generous and allow the defeated adversary to live well and with dignity, they will have created conditions favoring a new conflict – one that they may not win.

In the next chapter we shall apply our escalation theory to the Bosnian civil war. But first, it may be helpful to revisit the civil rights conflict to see how our theory could account for its escalation.

The Civil Rights Struggle Revisited

If we review the historical path of the sit-ins in the civil rights struggle, we can see clearly how the "root" causes, working through intermediate causes, moved the activists and their opponents toward escalation. Of course, not all the conditions need be present to the same degree

for escalation to occur. The ideological tenets of racial equality and nonviolent resistance to evil led the civil rights advocates to some acts of unilateral escalation. Ideology also gave them a long-term perspective requiring that they stand firm, even if that firmness was perceived by their segregationist opponents as retaliation. Clear value incompatibility between protesters and southern white society produced high levels of black resentment, or what one may call restrained hostility. The frustration over the slow pace of integration and an increased sense of the injustice caused by unequal treatment combined to raise protester hostility levels. A mood of challenge, readiness to push further, and increasingly hostile feelings combined to move the sit-in protesters to escalate the conflict.

It would be difficult to imagine less compatible sets of values than those that confronted one another in the South during the sit-ins. Racial integration and racial segregation were diametrically opposed concepts and practices. A majority of southern whites believed in racial inequality and separation. That such a deeply rooted belief and practice, indeed an entire way of life, was being called into question was deeply disturbing to most whites. A high level of frustration and anxiety was thereby produced among them.

Then there were the injustices and grievances perceived by the defenders of segregation. For a century, as they saw it, during the Civil War and after, the Union side had imposed its power and prejudice upon the South. The resentment of the loser was still very much present. With the racial integration the North was imposing its culture and racial etiquette as well. These factors combined to produce high levels of hostility, belligerence, and readiness to retaliate among southern whites. Thus the potential for escalation was high, and it did indeed occur over long periods and in many racial settings during the 1960s.

Escalation was also fueled by increasing solidarity. In the sit-in movement, the African American students had many northern supporters and a high level of solidarity to give them substantial if not overwhelming power. The conviction of moral rightness was an additional source of their strength.[22] These conditions raised their readiness to be coercive through physical intervention in the places that denied them service by custom and law. Their confidence also grew that they could successfully retaliate against their opponents' resistance.

Their opponents, the white segregationists, were likewise persuaded toward escalation. Like the protesters, they felt that moral authority ("separate is right"), backed by southern law and custom, was on their side. Racial solidarity (despite obvious class differences) among whites empowered them. They had most of the wealth, all of the police power, and a major part of the organizational know-how to serve their resistance to this challenge by blacks. And they certainly had a belligerent ideology – combining southern military tradition, vigilante violence, and racial hatred. These factors heightened their readiness to escalate and to suppress the open challenge to Southern racial power distribution that civil rights activism represented.