

fighters by those who would like to be free. Freedom-fighters are seen as terrorists by those who are terrorized.

Based on our perspective, we also selectively view additional information. We tend to collect evidence that supports our prior views and to dismiss or ignore nonconforming data. This screening process has at least three levels: We selectively remember what we want to; we selectively recall what we remember; and we revise our memories to fit our preferences. The more we become convinced of our views, the more we filter out information that would lead us to question them. In reading a newspaper, each of us is likely to skim many stories while noting one in particular that confirms a prior view: "See that? Just what I expected."

To the extent that our current perceptions are distorted, our future perceptions are likely to become even more so. The more entrenched our partisan perceptions become, the more obvious it is to us that we are right and others are wrong.

While working in South Africa, we had some white officials participate in an exercise that highlights the role of partisan perceptions. They looked at a line-drawing which had embedded in it two equally distinct pictures: an old woman looking down, and a young woman looking away into the distance. Beforehand, we had predisposed half the group to see the old woman and half to see the young woman. This predisposition was effected by showing half of them a distorted line-drawing emphasizing the old woman, while the other half of the group was shown a correspondingly distorted drawing emphasizing the young woman.

When shown the genuinely ambiguous drawing where both pictures are equally plausible, the two dozen officials (with one exception) saw only the version of the picture they had been predisposed to see. Without understanding the other's perceptions, two officials tried to persuade each other that the woman

in the picture was old or young — eighty or eighteen. Neither had any success. When the "trick" was explained, one official was simply stunned. "If I could be predisposed in thirty seconds to see an ambiguous picture only one way," he said, "just think what thirty years of seeing the world one way has done to me."

We asked the official who had been trying to persuade his colleague that the woman was eighty, not eighteen, whether it would have been different if he had been negotiating with a black. "Oh," he said, "that would have been much easier. I would simply have dismissed without difficulty anything he said, assuming he was lying or trying to hoodwink me in some way. Here I was talking with a trusted colleague. I was genuinely puzzled as to how he could be so wrong."

The real trick of this exercise is that there is no trick. Thirty seconds of seeing things one way can cause us to see things only that way. A lifetime of seeing things one way predisposes us to see only what we expect to see. This is particularly true for those caught up in a conflict, whether a Catholic student in Northern Ireland, or a Tamil separatist in Sri Lanka, or an Israeli settler in the West Bank.

Coping with conflict means coping with the way people think and feel. In any conflict people think and feel differently from one another, and the issue is not whose perceptions are "true" and whose are "false." To provide us with a foundation for dealing with a conflict, we would like to disaggregate the perceptions on all sides — our own as well as those of others — understand them, and be fully in touch with them. The better we understand the way people see things, the better we will be able to change them. There is no magic formula for acquiring understanding. It takes a little time and effort. The tools and techniques suggested here have tended to make the task easier.

In a conflict situation, particularly if it has involved violence,

# BEYOND MACHIAVELLI

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Tools for Coping with Conflict



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Harvard University Press  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
London, England  
1994

*To our students,  
from whom we have learned so much*

JX4473  
.F57  
1994

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Printed in the United States of America

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Fisher, Roger, 1922–

Beyond Machiavelli : tools for coping with conflict /  
by Roger Fisher, Elizabeth Kopelman, Andrea Kupfer Schneider  
p. cm.

ISBN 0-674-06916-1

1. Pacific settlement of international disputes.
2. International relations. 3. Conflict management.
- I. Kopelman, Elizabeth. II. Schneider, Andrea Kupfer. III. Title.

JX4473.F57 1994

327.1'6—dc20

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JUN 8 1994

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93-18698

## Preface

The three authors of this book have been working together on these ideas, at Harvard University and in the real world, for some time. Much of the stimulus for writing them down was an undergraduate course at Harvard entitled Coping with International Conflict (CWIC). Roger, a member of the Law School faculty, taught that course first alone and then with Bruce Patton, who over fifteen years has moved from studying as an undergraduate to teaching as the Thaddeus R. Beal Lecturer on Law. Bruce also serves as the deputy director of the Harvard Negotiation Project, a research activity devoted to improving both ideas about negotiation and their implementation in the world at large.

Liz and Andrea, while students at the Law School, were teaching fellows and section leaders for CWIC, and then each, in turn, served as Head Teaching Fellow for the course. Both before and after obtaining a degree from the Law School, each was active in the Negotiation Project. All three of us have also been involved in the work of the Conflict Management Group, a nonprofit consulting firm set up by some of Roger's former students with his