CHAPTER 1

Overview

- It is not easy to become an air traffic controller; one doesn't simply walk into an airport control tower, look down at the field, and begin ordering aircraft to take off and land. The job requires extensive training and experience, and most of the nation's controllers belong—or used to belong—to a single union, Patco. Therefore, when Patco demanded a handsome package of wage and fringe benefit increases during the summer of 1981, its members had every reason to believe that they would get what they wanted. When they didn't, a strike was called, and Patco seemed to have the feds over a barrel. To the union members' great surprise and consternation, President Reagan responded to the Patco demands not by agreeing to them but by firing every one of the striking union members (on the basis that the strike was illegal). Simultaneously the President declared that the amount of air traffic in the country would be reduced immediately and that air traffic controllers would be brought over from the military to keep the planes flying in and out of the nation's busy airports.
- Sales and Production are in the throes of an intense exchange regarding the delivery date for their company's new product. Sales argues that, unless a delivery date can be scheduled no more than *three* months from now, potential new customers will be lost to the competition, visiting a minor disaster upon Sales and the company as a whole. Production argues in return that it has a carefully organized and sequenced production schedule that must be maintained. To break out of that schedule, by making the new product available for distribution earlier than Production intends, would be to incur costs in time and money that would be detrimental to Production and its parent company. No, insists Production, the new product is scheduled for appearance *nine* months hence, and that's when it will appear! After days of acrimony, an agreement is reached in which each department settles for less than it originally wanted: a production schedule of *six* months.
- When Egypt and Israel sat down to negotiate at Camp David in October 1978, it appeared that they had before them an intractable conflict. Egypt demanded the immediate return of the entire Sinai Peninsula; Israel, which had occupied the Sinai since the 1967 Middle East war, refused to return an inch of this land. Efforts to reach agreement, including the proposal of a compromise in which each nation would retain half of the Sinai, proved completely unacceptable to both sides. As the Camp David negotiations proceeded, however, it emerged that the seemingly irreconcilable positions of Israel and Egypt reflected underlying interests that were not at all incompatible. Israel's underlying interest was security; the Israelis wanted to be certain that their borders were safe against Egyptian land or air attack. For its part, Egypt was primarily interested in sovereignty—regaining rule over a piece of land that had been part of Egypt as far back as biblical times. After many days of hard work by the parties and the American mediators, an agreement was eventually

reached that satisfied both of these underlying interests. Israel agreed to return the Sinai in exchange for assurances of a demilitarized zone and new Israeli air bases. This agreement was put into effect in April of 1982.

- Two small children are arguing over the use of a bright red tricycle. Each wants the trike, and each wants it first. Unable or unwilling to work out some sort of rule for turn taking, they stand on either side of the little vehicle, grab it in their hands, and yank it back and forth in an effort to seize control. Eventually the smaller child begins to cry and walks away from this torrid scene, leaving the tricycle in the sole possession of the other.

TOWARD A THEORY OF CONFLICT

Though strikingly different in scale and significance, the four incidents just cited have a great deal in common. They all describe a conflict between two sides, a situation in which each party aspires to an outcome that the other is apparently unwilling to provide. The outcome may involve money, time, ease of scheduling, land, security, an item of personal property—or any of a myriad other possibilities. Note, moreover, that each example of conflict involves a distinctive set of moves, or ways of pursuing the conflict in an effort to settle it. Are these moves similar? Not superficially. But they can be sorted into five main classes or strategies that reveal some continuity from case to case. Indeed, one of the major objectives of this book is to describe in detail the different sorts of strategies used by parties experiencing conflict and to examine the causes and consequences of the use of these strategies.

One basic strategy is *contending*—trying to impose one's preferred solution on the other party. President Reagan employed contentious behavior when he unilaterally fired the striking union members. Similarly, both Sales and Production tried at first to argue the other into submission, as did Israel and Egypt in the early stages of the Camp David negotiations. In the dispute between the children, contending took a physical form: wrestling for the tricycle.

A second strategy is *yielding*—lowering one's own aspirations and settling for less than one would have liked. This is the way Sales and Production resolved their dispute over timing. Each side settled for less than it aspired to, and in so doing, they managed to carve out a compromise agreement. Is the agreement a good one? That is, is it likely to be mutually satisfactory? We cannot be sure, but there is reason to wonder whether a "worst of both worlds" solution may not have evolved. A delay of three months may have been sufficient to erode the profits that Sales hoped for, and moving up the production schedule by three months may have seriously disrupted the efficiency of Production's plan. Yielding created a solution, to be sure, but not necessarily a solution of high quality.

A third fundamental strategy is *problem solving*—pursuing an alternative that satisfies the aspirations on both sides. With the assistance of President Carter and his aides, Egypt and Israel engaged in just such a process when they moved toward an agreement to disengage in the Sinai Peninsula.

A fourth strategy for addressing conflict involves *withdrawing*—choosing

to leave the scene of the conflict, either physically or psychologically. The retreat of the smaller child, which ended the great trike squabble, exemplifies a very different approach to conflict from problem solving, yielding, and contending. Withdrawing involves abandonment of the controversy, whereas the other three strategies entail different sorts of efforts to cope.

A fifth strategy involves *inaction*—doing nothing. Though the Camp David negotiations ended in a blaze of problem solving, inaction dominated much of the proceedings. This was not because the principals were slow-witted, fumbling decision makers, but by design. Each party waited endlessly for the other's next move. Indeed, in an effort to resolve the deadlock produced by this mutual inaction, President Carter finally imposed a deadline beyond which he indicated he would withdraw from the negotiations. This galvanized the parties into action.

Although it is conceptually useful to distinguish among these five fundamental strategies for addressing conflict, we hasten to add several explanatory and cautionary notes. First, most conflict situations—be they armed exchanges, labor strikes, international negotiations, or the tacit exchanges that occur when two cars jockey for position at an unmarked intersection—call forth a *combination* of the preceding strategies. Rarely is one strategy used to the utter exclusion of the others.

Second, as will be evident in subsequent chapters of this book, each of the five strategies—particularly contending and problem solving—may be implemented through a wide variety of tactics. The terms "strategy" and "tactics" differ in scope. A strategy constitutes a set of (macroscopic) objectives or ends, and tactics are the (relatively microscopic) means to these ends. As will be apparent in our discussion of contending (Chapter 4) and in our analysis of problem solving (Chapter 9), achieving a strategic objective requires individual tactical maneuvers. In this book we will look primarily at strategic considerations, but we will keep a careful eye on the tactics that help transform strategic objectives into reality.

Third, contending, yielding, and problem solving can be thought of as *coping* strategies in the sense that each involves some relatively consistent, coherent effort to settle conflict. By contrast, withdrawing and inaction are strategies not of coping but of pause or abandonment.

Fourth, the meaning of withdrawing and inaction (unlike that of the three other strategies) depends heavily on the context in which they occur. Thus, whereas contending almost invariably reflects a competitive motivation, yielding a wish to surrender, and problem solving a wish to collaborate, the meaning of withdrawing and inaction is less obvious. Withdrawing may denote surrender, as in the strike example. But in the context of President Reagan's decision to stop negotiating with Patco, withdrawing had a far more contentious connotation. Similarly, inaction in the early stages of the Camp David negotiations implied stubborn unwillingness to budge from an extreme opening posture. Later in these discussions, when tentative agreement had almost been reached, inaction denoted an unwillingness to rock the boat and disturb the status quo.

Finally, note that yielding, like withdrawing and inaction, is fundamentally

a unilateral strategy. Your consent is not required for me to withdraw or deliberately pursue a strategy of inaction. Similarly, my decision to yield to you is a unilateral one; you may not want or accept what I am prepared to yield, but I can do so anyway. By contrast, contending and problem solving work as intended only when they are accompanied by effective social influence. As we will see in Chapter 4, one person can prevail in a contentious exchange only if the other allows it. Similarly, the successful problem-solving pursuit of a satisfactory solution requires joint effort and the acceptance of social influence that this implies. In short, because they are strategies that can be effected only through social influence, problem solving and contending are far more interesting than the other three. They will therefore receive the preponderance of our attention throughout this book.

As the four opening illustrations were designed to make clear, conflicts differ in their complexity and importance, in the strategies to which they give rise, and in the solutions to which they lead. Despite these differences, we believe that—regardless of the level at which they occur—conflicts have much in common. Conflicts at the interpersonal, intergroup, community, and international level are clearly not one and the same. Nevertheless, we believe it is possible to develop generalizations that cut across, and shed light on, most or all conflicts. Our aim in this book is to organize and report existing contributions to an emerging theory of social conflict and to add a few new ideas of our own. Although we wish to improve the practice of dispute settlement, and therefore will occasionally introduce prescriptive advice for doing so (see Chapter 9), our aim is primarily *descriptive:* to account, as best we can, for the many interesting ways in which people go about addressing social conflict.

WHAT IS CONFLICT?

According to Webster (1966), the term "conflict" originally meant a "fight, battle, or struggle"—that is, a physical confrontation between parties. But its meaning has grown to include a "sharp disagreement or opposition, as of interests, ideas, etc." In other words, the term now embraces the psychological under-pinnings of physical confrontation as well as physical confrontation itself. In short, the term "conflict" has come to be so broadly applied that it is in danger of losing its status as a singular concept.

Our solution to this problem has been to adopt a restrictive meaning that builds on Webster's second definition. For us *conflict* means *perceived divergence of interest,* or *a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.* We have chosen this meaning because it seems to be the best place to begin building theory. We find that we are able to construct a simple yet powerful theory (presented in Chapters 2 and 3) by trying to explain the origins of perceived divergence of interest and the impact of this perception on strategic choice and outcome. Undoubtedly our decision in this matter was influenced by the fact that we are both social psychologists and hence are accustomed to thinking in terms of the impact of mental states

on social behavior. Nevertheless, we believe that this approach will be of value to scholars and practitioners from many other disciplines.

Note that implicit in our definition of conflict is the deliberate exclusion of certain topics from further analysis. We will have little to say about differences of opinion concerning facts, arguments of interpretation over objective reality, blame for prior failure, or grudges provoked by some earlier betrayal. Nor, for that matter, will we have much to say about overt conflict in the form of physical violence, armed insurrection, or war.

Clearly, each of the foregoing topics is important and worthy of attention in its own right, but we cannot cover everything. Instead we wish to examine closely the psychological realm of perceived divergence of interest and to emphasize conflict as it occurs in the present—with its attendant implications for the future. What will be the disposition of the Sinai? How long will Production take to fill the order? Who will end up with the tricycle, and why? Without ignoring the past altogether (past frustrations can make people concerned about precedents for the future and breed hostility that encourages the future use of heavy contentious tactics), these are the sorts of questions we wish to address.

Furthermore, though our analysis of conflict has been informed, whenever possible, by our awareness that conflict is waged in diverse settings and at multiple levels of complexity, we have deliberately focused primarily on conflicts between two parties. This is not because we feel that multiple-party conflicts are unimportant but because we find ourselves best able to construct plausible theory about the dyad. One has to begin theory construction somewhere, and as social psychologists we are most comfortable doing so in the realm that we know best: the interface between two individuals, two groups, or two organizations. Moreover, although we have tried to make use of the limited field research available on social conflict, most of the relevant conflict research has in fact been conducted in laboratory settings, and it has typically involved the dyad. These are the primary reasons for the book's largely dyadic focus.

Sometimes our analysis will consider the dyad as a social system, waging or addressing conflict as a dynamic duo. On other occasions, we will find it useful or necessary to present our conflict analysis from the vantage point of one person (referred to as Party) doing things to or with a second person (referred to as Other).

SOME GOOD NEWS AND SOME BAD NEWS ABOUT CONFLICT

Although people have been interested in the study of conflict at least since biblical times, the nineteenth century provided the dramatic, energetic thrust whose impact is still felt today. Charles Darwin was interested in the struggle within species for "survival of the fittest." Sigmund Freud studied the internal combat of various psychodynamic forces for control over the ego. And Karl

Marx, reflecting the dialectical philosophy that preceded him, developed a political and economic analysis based on the assumption that conflict is an inevitable part of society.

To conclude, on the basis of the work of these three profound nineteenth-century thinkers, that conflict is necessarily destructive is to miss the point of their work. For Darwin, the productive outcome of the struggle for survival was the emergence of a mutant/misfit who happens to have a genetic anomaly that fosters survival; hence the species as a whole is more likely to survive through the genetic adjustments that the struggle to survive occasions. Freud similarly envisioned individual growth and insight as a result of the struggle to understand and address the conflicts within. And Marx, in his dialectical materialism, also grasped the fact that conflict promotes further conflict; that change is inevitable; and that, at least in his judgment, this change is inexorably moving in the direction of an improved human condition. All three of these men were keenly aware of the virtues and necessity of conflict, and they all saw both the costly and the beneficial consequences that conflict can engender.

The Good News

Although conflict is found in almost every realm of human interaction—as Darwin, Freud, and Marx made abundantly clear—and although episodes of conflict are among the most significant and newsworthy events of human life, it would surely be a mistake to assume that interaction necessarily involves conflict. People manage to get along remarkably well with other individuals, groups, and organizations; they do so with consideration, helpfulness, and skill, and with little evidence of conflict along the way. When conflict *does* arise, more often than not it is settled, even resolved, with little acrimony and to the mutual satisfaction of the parties involved. Although it is tempting to detail only the negative consequences that are associated with conflict and conflict management, let us not lose sight of conflict's several positive functions—in addition to those already suggested by Darwin, Freud, and Marx.

First, conflict is the seedbed that nourishes social change. People who regard their situation as unjust or see the foolishness of current policies must usually do battle with the old order before they can be successful. Almost every new piece of legislation in the Congress of the United States is enacted after a period of debate and cross-pressures from opposing interest groups. Where would we be if, in the interest of avoiding conflict, reformers were routinely stifled, or if they stifled themselves?

A second positive function of social conflict is that it facilitates the reconciliation of people's legitimate interests. Most conflicts do not end with one party winning and the other losing. Rather, some synthesis of the two parties' positions—some integrative agreement—often emerges that fosters the parties' mutual benefit and the benefit of larger collectives of which they are members. If union and management, Egypt and Israel, Sales and Production, or two children fighting over a tricycle can manage to reconcile their interests,

they will contribute to their own individual outcomes and, indirectly, to the well being of the larger organization, world community, or neighborhood of which they are members. If, in an effort to avoid conflict, they are not allowed to make claims against one another, such deep-seated reconciliation will seldom be possible. In this sense, conflict can be considered a creative force.

Third, by virtue of the first two functions, conflict fosters group unity. Without the capacity for social change or the reconciliation of individual interests, group solidarity is likely to decline—and with it group effectiveness and enjoyment of the group experience (Coser, 1956). The eventual result is often group disintegration. Without conflict, groups are like the married couple in Ingmar Bergman's film *Couples*, who fail to recognize and confront the issues in their marriage and eventually split up because neither is getting anything out of their relationship.

And Some Less Wonderful News

We have seen that much social exchange does not give rise to conflict. Moreover, when conflict does arise, it is often settled without pain and rancor, while serving a number of positive functions. When all is said and done, however, the fact remains that conflict is fully capable of wreaking havoc on society. Marriages succumb to conflict at an alarming rate. Our daily newspapers are replete with accounts of controversies that—if not especially common—are certainly compelling in their terrible intensity and consequences. And with the Damoclean sword of nuclear annihilation looming over our collective heads, it would be hard to deny that conflict is the major problem of our times.

Although it may seem paradoxical that conflict can have both harmful and beneficial consequences, this paradox is more apparent than real. What often happens is that the positive functions of conflict are swamped by the harmful consequences that derive from the use of heavy contentious tactics. In the throes of insult, threat, and even physical assault, it is difficult to savor the positive functions of conflict.

When people deal with conflict by contending, each trying to do well at the other's expense, a set of moves and countermoves tends to result that drives conflict to increase in intensity. We refer to this increase in intensity as *escalation*. The escalation of conflict is accompanied by a number of transformations, each of which is difficult—though not impossible—to reverse. First, relatively light, friendly, and inoffensive contentious tactics tend to give way to heavier moves; in the Patco case, President Reagan's early promises were later replaced by threats and finally by the unilateral imposition of costs. Second, the number of issues in conflict tends to increase; Patco wage demands were just the tip of the iceberg. Third, a focus on specifics gives way to more global, all-encompassing concerns; first it's only possession of the trike that's called into question but then it's the viability of the two children's entire relationship. Fourth, motivation in escalating conflict shifts from an initial interest in doing well for oneself to beating the other side and (eventually) to

making sure that the other is hurt more than oneself. Finally, the number of parties to the conflict tends to increase; first it's just you and me, then our families, and sooner or later the entire clan. Once conflict begins to escalate, the preceding transformations make it increasingly difficult for de-escalation to occur.

In summary, although conflict need not be destructive in its consequences, when it is bad, it may well be horrid. And because destructive conflict—although far less prevalent than its more constructive cousin—is capable of doing so much damage to the people who are caught in its machinery, we want to take a particularly close and careful look in this book at the circumstances that lead conflict along a destructive, escalatory pathway.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Not surprisingly, the book's organization reflects the set of guiding assumptions and interests that have characterized our introductory remarks. Chapter 2 elaborates on our definition of conflict, introduces simple graphic analysis to clarify the definition, and summarizes the causes of conflict as well as the conditions that make conflict less likely to erupt.

Chapter 3 deals with the topic of strategic choice. We describe in more detail the five strategic approaches to conflict introduced in this chapter. Then we turn to the set of considerations that lead people to choose one strategy over another. This chapter is the theoretical heart of the book, inasmuch as it presents concepts that are used in most of the later chapters.

The next four chapters focus, in one way or another, on the important topic of escalation. Chapter 4 explores the set of contentious tactics that people typically use in an effort to prevail at someone else's expense. Conflict escalation is most likely to occur when such contentious tactics are used. Chapter 5 details the transformations that occur during escalation. It also examines the set of stabilizing constraints that ordinarily prevent conflict from escalating. It is when these constraints are relatively weak, and/or the forces toward conflict intensification are particularly acute, that escalation occurs. Chapter 6 probes the psychological and collective (group and organizational) processes that are responsible for, and that accompany, conflict escalation. Chapter 7 presents the several reasons why conflicts tend to escalate and why such escalation tends to persist. Here we explore the dynamics that help explain why it is easier for conflict to escalate than to de-escalate.

The focus of Chapter 8 is stalemate, the point at which the parties to an escalating conflict are either no longer capable or no longer willing to continue expending the effort necessary to sustain a contentious exchange. Stalemate represents the point of transition in a conflict-intensified exchange between the trajectory of escalation and the pathway of de-escalation and eventual problem solving.

Chapter 9 addresses the extremely important, constructive, and often creative strategy of problem solving. Problem solving, a pervasive and often

highly effective solution to conflict, need not occur only in the wake of conflict escalation and stalemate. This chapter describes the several methods of moving toward an integrative solution that satisfies the aspirations of all concerned.

Third-party intervention in conflict (by mediators, arbitrators, or fact-finders) is the subject of Chapter 10. Although third parties can involve themselves in disputes at any point along the way, we are particularly interested here in exploring the several things that third parties can do to ease disputants away from contentious behavior and in the direction of problem solving.

Chapter 11 briefly summarizes the major implications of the preceding analysis for the theory and practice of dispute settlement. In that final chapter, we leave you with a few reminders of the book's most important themes and emphases and indicate the direction that further productive work in this field may take.