

STRATEGY AND SELF-COMMAND

Thomas C. Schelling

November 1985



P-7200-RGI

The Rand Paper Series

Papers are issued by The Rand Corporation as a service to its professional staff. Their purpose is to facilitate the exchange of ideas among those who share the author's research interests; Papers are not reports prepared in fulfillment of Rand's contracts or grants. Views expressed in a Paper are the author's own and are not necessarily shared by Rand or its research sponsors.

The Rand Corporation, 1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90406-2138

STRATEGY AND SELF-COMMAND

Commencement Address by Thomas C. Schelling

I did my graduate work at Rand more than twenty-five years ago, when Charlie Hitch was my Dean. How I felt about that experience is recorded in the preface to a book I published a year later:

During the year before this book went to press I was uniquely located to receive stimulation, provocation, advice, comment, disagreement, encouragement, and education. I spent the year with The Rand Corporation in Santa Monica. As a collection of people, Rand is superb, and I have mentioned above only the few whose intellectual impact on me was powerful and persistent; many others, truly too numerous to list here, have as individuals affected the final shape of this book. But Rand is more than a collection of people; it is a social organism characterized by intellect, imagination, and good humor.

Not a bad place to establish a graduate institute. So when your president surprised me with an invitation to speak at your commencement I did not hesitate.

I should have. That was one of those weeks when Garry Trudeau, creator of Doonesbury, ran out of material and, as he had done before, took a few days' time out making fun of commencement speakers. It was plain that the commencement address was an art form better suited to cartoonists than to aging academics. As if that were not enough discouragement, I came across six rules to govern advice to people a generation younger than oneself. The first was, "Don't." Intimidated,

I decided the best I could do was to talk about something that interests me in the hope that it interests you.

Some of you may have heard that I direct an Institute for the Study of Smoking Behavior, and wonder how somebody can jump from nuclear command and control to self command and control in twenty-five years. Actually it is not much of a jump. Even when I was writing, at Rand, parts of the book from which I read you a bit of the preface, I noticed that if I were designing safeguards against firing a weapon in panic or falling asleep on watch it wouldn't matter much whether it was I or somebody else who might fire a weapon or fall asleep.

Arranging not to lose one's temper, not to drive after too many drinks, or not to scratch an infected wound while asleep calls for the same kinds of tactics whether we do it for ourselves or for somebody else. And often in strategic interaction with another person we try to commit ourselves to an action--carrying out a threat or fulfilling a promise; and the ways that I can commit my behavior for strategic advantage are not altogether different from the ways that I may commit my behavior for self-discipline.

There is a cocaine addiction clinic in Denver that uses self-blackmail as therapy. The patient is offered an opportunity to write a self-incriminating letter that will be delivered if and only if the patient, who is tested on a random schedule, is found to have used cocaine. A physician, for example, writes to the State Board of Medical Examiners confessing that he has violated state law and professional ethics in administering cocaine to himself and deserves to lose his license. That is a powerful deterrent. But notice that if I worked for that physician and had evidence of his cocaine abuse, and wanted to help him, I could write such a letter and threaten to mail it unless the physician stayed clean. Alternatively, I could threaten to mail it unless the physician doubled my salary. So it is the same tactic whether I use it selfishly to extort tribute, paternalistically to coerce someone for his own good, or sympathetically to allow someone to incur voluntarily a drastic change in his own incentives.

An increasingly familiar occurrence for obstetricians is being asked by patients to withhold anesthesia. The physician often proposes that a face mask be put beside the patient, who may inhale nitrous oxide

as she needs it, but some determined patients ask that no such opportunity be provided. If gas is available they will use it, and they want not to be able to. This example nicely illustrates that there are ethical, legal, and policy issues in the practice of self-denial, self-restraint, and self-command. The Constitution of the United States does not permit me to be voluntarily incarcerated in a sanitarium that will not let me out until I have lost thirty pounds or gone thirty days without smoking. No matter what the contract says and how badly I wanted it enforced when I entered, when my appetite for food or cigarettes overwhelms me and I ask to be let out, the law requires they let me out.

When self-command is discussed at all, it is usually in relation to appetites and temptations--food, sex, tobacco, gambling, alcohol, and addictive drugs. But the subject includes one's own behavior during rage, panic, and pain. Here is the first paragraph of the first chapter of my favorite book on baseball:

"Fear."

That's the paragraph.

The second paragraph says, "Fear is the fundamental factor in hitting, and hitting the ball with the bat is the fundamental act of baseball. This fact," the author says, "is the starting point for the game of baseball, and yet it is the fact least often mentioned by those who write about baseball."¹

A book on military tactics might well begin with the same first paragraph. "Fear," it might say, "is the fundamental factor in exposing oneself to enemy fire, and exposing oneself to enemy fire is the fundamental act of combat." I believe we could also add that next statement: this fact is the starting point for military combat, and yet it is the fact least often mentioned by those who write about combat.² General Rommel understood this. He advised his panzer divisions always to open fire before they were within range of the enemy: if the enemy

¹Leonard Koppett, *A Thinking Man's Guide to Baseball*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1967, p. 13.

²An exception that makes the point stunningly is John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, New York: The Viking Press, 1976.

could be frightened enough before Rommel's tanks came within range, they would be hiding, and just as ineffectual as if dead.

Fear can be a collective as well as individual problem in self-command, and in Caesar's army any advancing legionnaire who held back was to be instantly killed by the comrades on either side of him, who, if they failed to kill the soldier who held back, were themselves to be instantly killed by the legionnaires next to them. New legionnaires quickly learned, of course, that the rule actually enhanced their security, especially when the enemy learned that advancing legionnaires could never be intimidated.

The need for anticipatory self-command arises not only for the individual or the squad but for government itself. The statutory debt ceiling, the proposed balanced budget amendment, and statutory efforts to make budget balancing automatic are well understood by families whose own efforts to live within their means leave behind a trail of good intentions and broken resolutions. Parents need, as the founding fathers needed, inhibition on cruel and unusual punishment when they lose their tempers; and the entire Bill of Rights was an effort of legislators to put some restraints on legislation beyond the reach of ordinary majority vote.

Albert Hirschman observed some years ago that technically backward countries are better at maintaining airlines than roadbeds. It is a matter of incentives: you can patch the road surface cheaply and over the years let the roadbed invisibly go to ruin, but airplanes don't go to ruin invisibly! Had he been observing advanced countries he might have made the same point about fire engines and sewers. Individuals display similar behavior: In a hurry, I shave rather than brush my teeth.

Rand people used to jog at noon and in the evening--probably still do--and many have discovered the buddy system: four people jogging together three times a week at the lunch hour may go on for years as a team, but jogging separately on different days they may all be early dropouts. S.L.A. Marshall observed that in all armies in World War II most soldiers never fired their rifles--no matter how brave they were, how long a battle lasted, or what targets presented themselves; but weapons that required joint action by two or three soldiers, like feeding a belt of ammunition, were regularly fired as intended.³

³S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, Washington: Combat Forces Press, 1947, pp. 50-84, especially pp. 75-76.

I mentioned that blackmail scheme. As long ago as 1957, in a classic work on game theory, Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa pointed out that a person who wants to go on a diet but does not trust himself "announces his intention, or accepts a wager that he will not break his diet, so that later he will *not* be free to change his mind and to optimize his actions according to his tastes at *that* time."⁴ The same thing is accomplished by maneuver rather than by commitment when one deliberately embarks on a vacation deep in the wilds without cigarettes, or throws his car keys onto the lawn in the dark where he cannot find them till next morning in order not to be able, later when he loses control, to drive away in search of cigarettes, sex, liquor, or a gun.

We all know how to put the alarm clock across the room so that we cannot turn it off without getting out of bed; and executives in a corporation I have heard of may join a voluntary arrangement in the corporate dining room: they will be served at lunch only what they ordered by phone at 9:30 that morning. And I have often wished that hotels would, for a small extra fee, disable the television in my room before I arrived.

Sometimes the problem is action, not abstention. I have often wondered whether I would enjoy skydiving as a hobby and have wondered even more whether I would ever be able to initiate it. I recently saw Ambassador Rowney, the President's disarmament adviser, and recalled that the last time I had seen him he was getting ready to go command airborne troops. I had asked him whether he would have to jump, and he said yes; I asked whether he anticipated any difficulty in actually leaping out of an airplane, and he said he understood that the Army had a man who took care of that.

I do not know how they do it at civilian skydiving resorts. I am told that our constitutionally inalienable rights get in the way here, too, of any voluntary contract that will permit the skydiving crew to propel me out when I grab the door jamb and scream that I've changed my mind. Technology would probably help: a trap door and no communication

⁴R. Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa, *Games and Decisions*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1957, p. 75.

between pilot and passenger might be legal, but would probably not pass safety inspection. A trap door that I could operate with my eyes shut might be easier to manage than diving head first with eyes open. Not only children but even adults find that they can better command their response to a four inch needle inserted in the knee to draw out fluid if they turn their heads so they can't see the needle. Acrophobes are advised not to look down if they climb and, if they do not have to perform any actions that require eyesight, can achieve control with a blindfold. Before flying became so common, many people found they could survive takeoff more comfortably if they had their two drinks before they got on the plane rather than after the plane reached cruise altitude. In many armies soldiers have been provided alcohol prior to combat.

There is some potential for high technology in helping us get ourselves under control. There is currently a device by which a prisoner, who might not otherwise be paroled, can submit to a curfew that is cheaply and remotely monitored. It is a transmitter that emits an encrypted signal that is picked up by a device attached to his telephone that can be interrogated at random from the local police station. The signal will be picked up only if he is within 100 feet of his telephone. It is attached to his ankle; he cannot remove it and leave it by his phone because removing it makes it inoperable; and he cannot buy a copy to leave by his telephone because he doesn't have the code. (The device is being miniaturized for comfort.) Wearing the device could be a *condition* of parole; but if he didn't altogether trust himself, and badly wanted not to violate parole and be sent back to prison, he might assume it *voluntarily*, just as a person might someday implant a measure of blood alcohol that would emit a signal, render a painful shock, or even electronically disable his auto ignition.

Policy issues arise from the likelihood that certain voluntary self-restraints or submissions to surveillance may be coerced. The polygraph is currently a controversial example.

The most controversial technology of all I think will ultimately be a diagnostic device implanted in the brain to measure the extent of damage caused by a nonfatal stroke; the device is programmed, above a certain threshold of damage, to make it fatal. This would be the

technological embodiment of the "living will." It would also be a technological alternative to the suicide that one might have hoped to commit in such circumstances but be unable to perform.

Technology can also be used to discipline speakers when the program must continue on schedule. It can even be used by a speaker to discipline himself. Some of you probably noticed that I set a timer and placed it on the podium in full view when I began this talk.

Twenty-five years ago I attended an annual meeting of the Institute for Strategic Studies at Oxford, where the subject of discussion was nuclear deterrence. The chairman of the first morning's session grandly announced that he would hold all speakers to three minutes; and, just in case some speakers might think they could intimidate the chairman into relaxing the limit, he had brought to the occasion what he called "The Great Deterrent." This was a timer that would show a red light at two minutes and sound a harsh noise at three. He demonstrated the noise-- it was indeed a noise to deflate any speaker's dignity, truly a Great Deterrent. It worked, for a while. The first dozen speakers stayed well within the limit, hastening to conclude when they saw the red light. But eventually a most distinguished member of Parliament, a former cabinet minister, rose to take the floor, walked to the front of the hall near the chairman's table (which was raised on a dais) and began an unhurried disquisition that could not possibly fit within the three minutes. When he saw the red light he strolled to where the Great Deterrent rested about shoulder high on the raised table, disdainfully rested his elbow on the table and turned his back on both chairman and timer, continuing his talk uninterrupted. The chairman was seen to squirm even more nervously as the minute went by. Then, perfectly visible to most of the audience, the chairman's hand snaked out over the table top and turned off the timer.

Most of us learned more about the credibility of deterrent threats from that one talk than from all the rest of the conference. And that is why, when I set my timer 19 minutes ago, I made myself place it where you could see it.

THEORY OF THE FIRM: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

THEORY OF THE FIRM: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE