All Pain, No Gain
Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling's little-known role in the Vietnam War.
By Fred Kaplan
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Thomas C. Schelling won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences this week. Today's papers note his ingenious applications of "game theory" to labor negotiations, business transactions, and arms-control agreements. But what they don't note—what is little-known in general—is the crucial role he played in formulating the strategies of "controlled escalation" and "punitive bombing" that plunged our country into the war in Vietnam.

His "game theory" didn't work so well in the real world.

This dark side of Tom Schelling is also the dark side of social science—the brash assumption that neat theories not only reflect the real world but can change it as well, and in ways that can be precisely measured. And it's a legacy that can be detected all too clearly in our current imbroglio in Iraq.

Schelling made his mark in 1960 with a book called The Strategy of Conflict, in which he applied principles of bargaining to the practice of war. (He had been an international trade negotiator in the 1940s, and while he wrote his book he was a strategist at the RAND Corp., the Air Force think tank where nearly all the defense intellectuals cut their teeth in those halcyon days.)

He saw war as essentially a violent form of bargaining. There were, he wrote, "enlightening similarities between, say, maneuvering in limited war and jockeying in a traffic jam, deterring the Russians and deterring one's own children ... the modern balance of terror and the ancient institution of hostages."

The key dilemma among Cold Warriors of the day was the emerging nuclear parity between the United States and the Soviet Union. President Dwight Eisenhower was relying on a policy of "massive retaliation"—if the Soviets invaded Western Europe, we would pummel their country with nuclear weapons. But if the Soviets also had nukes, this policy would no longer be credible, because they could strike back against our country, too. So, what to do?

Schelling's answer was to retaliate "in a punitive sense" by "putting pressure on the Russians" through "limited or graduated reprisals," inflicting "civilian pain and the threat of more"—in short by sending signals with force, upping the ante in the bargaining round, intimidating them into backing down.

In his next book, Arms and Influence, published in 1966 but conceived a few years earlier, he went further. "The power to hurt," he wrote, "can be counted among the most impressive attributes of military power. ... To inflict suffering gains nothing and saves nothing directly; it can only make people behave to avoid it. ... War is always a bargaining process," and one must wage it in a way to...
maximize "the bargaining power that comes from the capacity to hurt," to cause "sheer pain and damage," because they are "the primary instruments of coercive warfare."

When, in the early months of 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara were looking for ways to step up military action against North Vietnam, they adopted Schelling's concept.

The link was direct. McNamara's closest adviser was an assistant secretary of defense named John McNaughton, who had been friends with Schelling since their days administering the Marshall Plan in Paris. They were both teaching at Harvard when Schelling got a call to come work at the Pentagon; he didn't want the job, but he recommended McNaughton. His friend objected that he didn't know anything about arms and strategy, but Schelling told him that it was easy, that he would teach him everything. And he did.

Schelling's lessons can be seen clearly in the classified memorandums reproduced in *The Pentagon Papers*, the top-secret history of the Vietnam War that Daniel Ellsberg leaked to the *New York Times*.

On May 22, 1964, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy sent a memo to President Johnson. "An integrated political-military plan for graduated action against North Vietnam is being prepared under John McNaughton at Defense," he wrote. "The theory of this plan is that we should strike to hurt but not to destroy, and strike for the purpose of changing the North Vietnamese decision on intervention in the south." Two days later, Bundy sent a follow-on note recommending that the United States "use selected and carefully graduated military force against North Vietnam," that troops be deployed "on a very large scale, from the beginning, so as to maximize their deterrent impact and their menace. A pound of threat is worth an ounce of action—as long as we are not bluffing."

In an interview 25 years ago for a book that I was writing about the nuclear strategists, Schelling told me what happened next. McNaughton came to see him. He outlined the administration's interest in escalating the conflict in order to intimidate the North Vietnamese. Air power seemed the logical instrument, but what sort of bombing campaign did Schelling think would best ensure that the North would pick up on the signals and respond accordingly? More broadly, what should the United States want the North to do or stop doing; how would bombing convince them to obey; how would we know that they had obeyed; and how could we ensure that they wouldn't simply resume after the bombing had ceased?

Schelling and McNaughton pondered the problem for more than an hour. In the end, they failed to come up with a single plausible answer to these most basic questions. So assured when writing about sending signals with force and inflicting pain to make an opponent behave, Tom Schelling, when faced with a real-life war, was stumped.

He did leave McNaughton with one piece of advice: Whatever kind of bombing campaign you end up launching, it shouldn't last more than three weeks. It will either succeed by then—or it will never succeed.

The bombing campaign—called Operation Rolling Thunder—commenced on March 2, 1965. It didn't alter the behavior of the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong in the slightest. Either they didn't read the signals—or the signals had no effect.

On March 24, almost three weeks to the day after Rolling Thunder began, McNaughton—again following Schelling's lesson—sent the first of several pessimistic memos to McNamara: "The situation in Vietnam is bad and deteriorating." Our aim at this point, he wrote, should be merely to "avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat." Keep up the pressure to affect the North's "will" and to provide the U.S. with "a bargaining counter" so that we "emerge as a 'good doctor.' We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloody and hurt the enemy very badly." But victory was not in the cards, and we should seek a way out.

The bombing escalated. When that didn't work, more troops were sent in, a half-million at their peak. The war continued for another decade, killing 50,000 Americans and untold numbers of Vietnamese. McNamara grew increasingly disillusioned but kept up the pretense of a light at the end of the tunnel. In the spring of 1967, John McNaughton died in a plane crash. In November of that year, McNamara, exhausted and in despair, resigned—or he was fired, it's never been clear which—and went to wring his bloodied hands in the World Bank's fountains.
Tom Schelling didn't write much about war after that. He'd learned the limitations of his craft. If Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz had studied history better, they, too, might have appreciated those limits before chasing their delusional dreams into the wilds of Mesopotamia.

**Correction, Oct. 12, 2005:** John McNaughton died in a plane crash, not a helicopter crash as this article originally and incorrectly stated.

Fred Kaplan is Slate's "War Stories" columnist and the author of The Wizards of Armageddon.

Photograph of Thomas Schelling by Tim Sloan/Agence France-Presse.

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