



HOW MUCH FOR THE PEN? SCHELLING (GREAT STRATEGISTS)

By Tami Davis Biddle and Ron Granieri January 26, 2021
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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm Ron Granieri, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Today we are recording the latest in our occasional series of great strategists and great thinkers at the U.S. Army War College. We're going to discuss the work of Thomas Crombie Schelling, Nobel Laureate and a giant in the field of Strategic Studies. Our guest today, Dr. Tammy Davis Biddle, who will help us understand Schelling's place in the history of strategic thought as well as in the curriculum of national security here at the U.S. Army War College, is a professor in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College. Dr. Biddle is a graduate of Lehigh with a doctorate from Yale. She is the author of, among other things, "Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing," as well as numerous essays, including most recently, "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners," in the Spring 2020 issue of the Texas National Security Review, an essay that will be particularly important for our discussion today. As both a renowned scholar of Strategic Studies and a celebrated teacher of the subject here at the U.S. Army War College, I can think of few people who are better equipped to come to talk to us about the work of Thomas Schelling and his role in the study of strategy. So, welcome to A Better Peace, Dr. Tami Biddle.

Tami Biddle: Thank you, Ron. I'm delighted to be here.

RG: So Tami, I want to start at the very beginning. So, who was Thomas Schelling, and what are his important works?

TB: Sure. Thomas Schelling is an economist. He was born in 1921, so he would have turned 100 years old today. He is a bright young guy who has lots of interests. He's seen The Depression. He wants to understand it, so he turns to economics, studies economics at Berkeley and then goes on and does a doctorate at Harvard. He works administering the Marshall Plan for a couple of years, but then gets his doctorate at Harvard in 1951, goes on to Yale in 1953. Spends a few years there, and then in 1958, goes back to Harvard as a full professor of economics where he then spends 32

years studying really a wide variety of things. But of course, the issue that he was pulled into in the 1950s and 60s was the key issue of the day for lots of smart people, which was how to deal with the nuclear dilemma, and the Cold War, and how do we think about it and how do we make decisions about the use of nuclear weapons or warfighting with nuclear weapons? So, he sets his mind to that. He will later study many other things, white flight out of urban areas. He'll study addictive behavior. He'll study decision-making of all kinds like many economists. But in this early period in his career, he was really interested in this central issue of the use of violence. And he becomes a powerful, insightful thinker with regard to the use of state-sanctioned violence for the achieving of political ends and he makes a huge contribution on that front that has been picked up by other scholars and has been developed further and used for research and research design and further study. He really was a giant in the field and he wrote a book, "Strategy of Conflict" early, and then he kept thinking about issues of conflict and war, and wrote, I think an even more important book in 1966 called "Arms and Influence," and the title is important because he's really writing about the way that weapons systems and the potential for violence give you influence, and he created this system of thinking about the use of force, which I think is so helpful to us and helps us understand the logic of basically how we utilized force, how we think about it. And this is of course why it's so important to national security professionals and military professionals. But basically, he said, look if you're going to use force, there are going to be two ways or power, military power. There are two ways you can go about it. One is brute force which was a term that he used to basically say strength on strength. You will match your strength against your opponent's strength and at the end of the day, you're not giving your opponent an opportunity to cooperate, you're just imposing your own power. The other option that you have is coercion. And with coercion, you're using threats. The threat of force, the threat of punishment, the threat of violence to structure the enemies' incentives. So the enemy, at the end of the day, has to cooperate with you. It's not happy cooperation. It's the sort of cooperation that comes after lots of arm twisting. But what you're doing is you're structuring that enemies' incentives by saying, if I do this, or if I threaten this, I will either compel you or deter you—deter you from doing something or compel you to do something. So to deter is to issue a threat to prevent an enemy from doing something that you don't want him to do. And to compel is to use threats to force an enemy to do something that they probably don't want to do, or to cause them to see something they've already started. So, there are two subsets under this heading of coercion, and we all know about deterrence. That word has been around for a long time. It's in our lexicon and it was such a prominent word during the Cold War and during the nuclear era because we thought constantly in terms of nuclear deterrence. But that was just one category. This category of compellence is quite important too, and of course it's one that we use all the time. The very existence of military organizations is quite an explicit threat. Military organizations don't always think of themselves this way, but the fact that they're there makes any potential adversary that we have, have to consider the consequences of their actions in very serious ways. You don't want to get up the nose of the United States too much or you might find

American airpower in your neighborhood, or the Marines landing on a beach, or the Navy making life difficult for you.

RG: As our listeners should know that in our core curriculum course for students at the War College, War Policy and National security, we have put coercion theory very high up on the things that we want people to learn and to understand. And there's an element of this, especially the distinction between coercion and brute force and that is communication. I can't deter you unless you know what I'm trying to deter you from doing.

TB: Yes.

RG: And I can't coerce you unless you know what I want to coerce you to do. But that means I have to be in communication with my enemy. And not to put too fine a point on it, right? That's work. When you actually have to communicate with your enemy as opposed to merely standing in the back with a big club and hoping he'll get the message.

TB: Exactly.

RG: When you teach this subject, how do you impress upon students this communicative element of coercion?

TB: Sure. Well it's the very center and it's the reason, I mean one of the themes in "Arms and Influence" that runs throughout is that both brute force and coercion are very difficult for their own reasons, but they're very difficult. And the central reason that coercion is difficult is, as you said, Ron, it's all about communication. We're trying to communicate with an enemy, but we're doing it with fairly blunt instruments. Schelling calls this the "diplomacy of violence," but trying to communicate via violence is quite difficult, and it's more difficult than just sitting down in a room and talking to someone in detail. So there are many elements, many reasons why this is difficult, and I'll walk through a few of them, but one of the things that I do with students to help them understand this is I do a little exercise, and actually my husband Steve Little invented this because he's a big fan of Schelling and utilizer of Schelling's thought as well. And he came up with something called "the battle of the pen," which he will often use with students where he'll hold up or he'll point to the pen in the hand of one of the students and he says, that looks like a great pen and I would really love to have it. So what are the ways that I could get it? And the students sort of pause for a moment and think, well, you could make an offer, you could try to pay for it. And yeah, sure, economics, brilliant way to exchange things, but what about if this person doesn't want to sell it, and I really, really want it? Well, you could just grab it. And then, of course, that's brute force. You just grab it, but the downside is, well, what if the person holding the pen is stronger than you are? What if it turns into a big, long wrestling match that's very bloody and unpleasant? Are you willing? How much do you really want that pen? And then

we turn to, are there other ways that might not be so risky or so long or maybe so bloody as brute force? And they said, well, you could make threats. And so then either Steve or I if I'm teaching will say well, what kinds of threats? And this is where you really get to the communication aspect because you need to know the adversary. What can you threaten that will be meaningful, that is a fear in the mind of the adversary, but is also credible, that you could actually threaten credibly? This is hugely important, and since we spend a lot of time talking about credibility as an issue in international security and international affairs. But here, the rubber really hits the road, because if you're issuing threats and they're not credible, you're not going to get anywhere and you're not going to achieve your political aim, so you have to think hard. You have to know yourself. How strong am I? What kind of will do I have? Do I really want this pen badly? If I threaten something? Am I willing, am I prepared to carry that threat through? Am I prepared to signal something and then partially act upon to signal my intentionality, to signal that I'm serious about this? So you have to think very hard about not only your adversary but about yourself about the stakes for you, about how valuable the political stake is at the end of the day. And that requires a great deal of intelligence about the adversary and it requires a great deal of self-knowledge as well. So this is where I see a marvelous overlap with both Clausewitz who talks about, understand the stake, understand how the enemy values the stake, understand how you value the stake, and make your violent action, your violent choices proportional to the value of the stake.

RG: So in other words, don't threaten to go all out for something that you are not that committed to.

TB: Exactly, don't threaten to go all out for something you're not that committed to and also, don't write checks that you can't cover. If you don't have the money in the bank, don't write the check. It's on multiple issues. You have to be very astute. And of course, this is what Sun Tzu is telling us as well. So in lots of ways, although probably not thinking about it explicitly, I doubt very much that Schelling thought a great deal about Sun Tzu, but Sun Tzu is telling us in his ancient writings, know yourself, know the enemy, understand what you want, understand what you're capable of, understand what you're willing to risk, what the enemy is willing to risk. And so there's a wonderful tie back to these theorists that we're studying really all at the same time when we're doing war policy and national security, we are talking about all these folks really in the same first few weeks of the course. And so, it's very exciting to be able to have these ideas overlap and reinforce one another and help students understand the nature of both brute force and coercion, and for them to really understand this language.

TG: Related to this, you mentioned how Schelling gets into thinking about how strategy is drawn into the discussions about nuclear strategy, because that was the first thing that was on people's minds.

TB: Sure.

RG: For better or for worse, while nuclear deterrence has gone on for a long time, no one's had to fight a nuclear war. In fact, I was thinking of the quote and I can't remember if it was Allen Eindhoven or another one of the Wizkids was in an argument with a general from the Strategic Air Command, and Eindhoven said, "General, you and I have both fought exactly the same number of nuclear wars."

TB: It's very true.

RG: Right? So, you don't have a lot of experience, but in the 60s, when Schelling was at his, let's say at his height as a strategic thinker and as a policy intellectual, he was involved in discussing how the use of force could signal, coerce, deter an enemy and that was related to the air campaign in Vietnam. And I am curious based on your research and our understanding of Schelling, how well did his theories help to shape American strategy in Vietnam and did his experience in dealing with that campaign change his ways of thinking about strategy at all?

TB: You know, I think in lots of ways what Schelling found was that he was right when he argued that this kind of communication in wartime is very difficult. Now I think Schelling wanted to have some target sets that were going to be sort of held in reserve and to signal that those would be struck if the enemy did not cooperate. First of all, it's very hard to send a signal like that really clearly to an enemy for a whole variety of reasons, not just because the enemy isn't thinking the way that you think and so may not see the point you're trying to make, but also, any strategy is going to get filtered through a variety of other things: what the president wants, what the military forces can do, how precise you can be in your targeting, all the noise of the media. So it becomes exceptionally difficult to sort of layout in theory, the way that you might in an academic book. To say, this is exactly what you should be thinking about and then to actually pull it off. And this is always going to be a problem. So even if we understand the theoretical aspects of something really well, and the reason we use theory is to help us think through what we're trying to do and what we're trying to achieve. It sharpens our thinking. It sharpens our analytical skills, but I think Schelling found, to the extent that he would argue his strategy was even employed, I think he would say, by the time it makes it all the way into the stages of employment, it's pretty adulterated. So I wonder if he would even agree that it was utilized fully. But I think he would agree, certainly, that being able to signal fairly precise things about an escalatory chain, or about the direction in which strategy is going to go to an adversary that is thinking quite differently and has a set of its own goals and its own things that it's attached to, ideas it's attached to, and is thinking quite distinctly about the problem, or to end it differently than we are, it can be exceedingly difficult to convey that. And I think we found that in Vietnam. And one of the things that we really did, and I think this was everyone amongst the sort of youthful best and brightest who were serving under both Kennedy and Johnson was that they just

sort of overestimated American capability and underestimated the will of the enemy. And again, this is something that Schelling and Sun Tzu and Clausewitz would say don't do. But for reasons of our own self-perception, and our own strength, and our own sense of ourselves in the aftermath of the Second World War and our capability, and of course owning SAC and thinking, we are such a powerful state, we've got a million coercive tools, Vietnam is a tiny little... and of course Lyndon Johnson said this, Vietnam is a tiny little state. How could they possibly not succumb to our coercive threats? Well, in fact, they really ended up turning the tables on us and by stretching out the war and raising the pain threshold very high, they coerced us rather than the other way around at the end of the day. So even a little state if it's determined to own a stake. And we had plenty of evidence that this might be the case. If we had paid a little bit more attention to the Vietnamese war with France, I think we had lots of evidence that these folks are really determined and really committed, and they want to see Vietnam unified and they want all of what they would call, the colonial intruders, out. And we were just the latest in that list. Of course, we saw ourselves so differently.

RG: Right, I mean, isn't it great that we learned that lesson in Vietnam and we have not made that mistake again?

TB: Oh, we've never made that mistake again, no. You know the other thing right about Schelling's influence, not a lot of people know this, but he writes a book review of a book called "Red Alert," and it's in the early 1960s, and it's a book by RAF Officer Peter George. And it becomes Dr. Strangelove because Stanley Kubrick reads the review, is so taken by this book, "Red Alert" that he thinks he can make it into a film. But they find that the material is so strange and so surreal at the end of the day that they're better off trying to do it as a black comedy than as a straight up drama.

RG: So, Schelling wrote a review of "Red Alert"?

TB: Yes, he did. He wrote a review of "Red Alert" and Stanley Kubrick read it and said, I think I've got to make a film. And then Schelling was an advisor to Dr. Strangelove.

RG: I did not know that. So I knew that Kubrick famously did all this research on everything and so read all these things. There's a famous passage in the "Strategy of Conflict" where Schelling talks about surprise attack and I'm glad you brought up Dr. Strangelove because I was thinking of this. He has a line here where he says, "a modest temptation on either side to sneak in the first blow might become compounded through a process of interacting expectations with additional motive for attack being produced by successive cycles of, he thinks, we think, he thinks, we think, he thinks, we think he'll attack."

TB: Exactly.

RG: So he thinks we shall, so he will. So we must. And you read that right? That's both powerful and crazy.

TB: Yes.

RG: But very accurate, right? And so that's what I think about. When we try to teach these subjects, it's one thing to say, with all the things you mentioned about knowing yourself, knowing your enemy, knowing the stakes, knowing what you're willing to spend, what you're willing to endure, it's hard to imagine a conflict where using nuclear weapons makes sense. But at the same time, you have to spend all your time preparing for the possibility that it might.

TB: Exactly.

RG: How did Schelling resolve this? He was aware of the surreality and even of the absurdity, but it didn't stop him from trying to understand it. So how did he resolve this? And how do you in your study of air power and coercion, how do you think about these gigantic questions?

TB: Sure. Well, I'm fascinated by this and I think this is probably what pulled me into the field. Not only, I was a child in the early Cold War and watched this adult world around me that I could not fathom. Not only was I watching the Vietnam War on TV and assassinations throughout 1968, I was aware of this nuclear dilemma. I guess I was an odd child, a child at a young age was aware of all these things, but I was, and I wanted to make sense of it. I desperately wanted to and when I got to college and I walked into a class taught by my first mentor, Professor Carrie Joint at Lehigh, who is marvelous. I was just captured, and I thought wow, finally I've got a chance to understand this and I wrote my dissertation on deterrence theory—not dissertation, but my senior thesis. It wasn't a dissertation, yet. Later I would write a dissertation. But I was captured by it and I've said this so often to our colleague, Ed Kaplan, who writes, who is really serious about this material and knows it inside and out, but if you look at nuclear theory just from a theoretical perspective and sort of look at it from the inside, it makes great sense. There is a logic to it. There's a way of understanding it and of course, you see all of that and you see that the way that we structured SAC, Strategic Air Command, and the way that we set up our forces and the triad to create redundancy and to make sure there was no ability for the Soviets to gain a first strike capability because we needed to have basically mutually assured destruction. And yet, if you step even a millimeter outside of that, it looks crazy. And this is why Dr. Strangelove is so powerful because it's operating on both levels, it's operating on the professional, we have to work inside this world because this is the world we've created and we have to have military responsibility for it, and then the folks who are just like a millimeter outside of it and trying to comprehend it, like the poor Group Captain, one of Peter Sellers many roles, and even the president, when the president gets involved in trying to understand all of this, he's realizing just how crazy it is. So it's simultaneous. For nuclear weapons, we've got this

operating on two levels. But the thing is, we created this world. We created nuclear weapons and so you couldn't then uncreate them, you couldn't put the genie back in the bottle. You had to then have a military structure that would deter, and in order to deter, you have to be capable of warfighting. So you have to build plans, you have to build structures, you have to have Strategic Air Command that's on high alert, you have to have a National Airborne Command system in case there is a war. You have to be able to get the president up into the air so he can be safe and make calls about what to do next. Even though it's hard to fathom what any human being would be thinking once nuclear bombs started dropping on his or her country, but nonetheless, you still have to go through this kabuki dance. You still have to have this, and you still have to drill yourself so that you can carry it out. This is what we were teaching our bomber pilots and our missileers for so many years and our submariners. This is the drill you will follow. This is the pattern you will follow in the event that we have to fight this kind of a war. But it is hard to fathom. If you think to yourself, what would the president, any president have done if at 2:00 in the morning he was awakened or she was awakened by a call from the Secretary of Defense saying, Mr. President, we've got satellite tracings of a launch, what would you like to do?

RG: And by the way, you have 7 ½ minutes to make a decision.

TB: Exactly.

RG: And this is where I think about with a person like Schelling—all the time we were talking I was also thinking of General Turgidson in *Dr. Strangelove*, “Mr. President, I'm not saying we won't get our hair mussed, but I think we can get by with no more than ten to twenty million killed.” That people have to think that way, that they're in a situation where they have to think that way, and that for somebody like Thomas Schelling, an economist—this is we're getting near the end and I wanted to bring this back around—I'm a historian, you're a historian, Schelling was an economist, and there were a lot of economists involved in the development of strategic theory and development of nuclear deterrence in a lot of the think tanks. How well do you think strategic thought and the teaching in the study of strategic thought bridges the gap between the cold rationality of numbers and these human questions that you raised about, how do we understand what a president would feel? How do we understand the human element of decision-making? Do you think we understand that well enough? Or do you think that's something that we still have to struggle with to bridge the gap between cold rationality and humanity?

TB: Oh, I think it's terribly important to understand human behavior from an economics perspective, the perspective of an economist, but also from the perspective of a psychologist, of a sociologist, of a political scientist. All of these are important and fortunately, we've had so many contributions to the field since Schelling that we've got a much more nuanced and better understanding of how to think through coercion theory. So, people like Bob Jervis at Columbia have made huge contributions, Robert Jervis, in helping us understand misperception and

miscommunication and what an immense role that plays often in war, and that helps us really realize that we have to kind of figure that into our strategy and have backup mechanisms and ways to get ourselves back on track if we find that we are miscommunicating, if our strategy goes awry. And of course, as I said, with Schelling, learning that bureaucracy can impede the pure implementation of strategy, which of course it can. Misperception does as well. And then of course there's human psychology and I begin teaching my students always because I'm a great devotee and student of Jervis' work, that you have to think in terms of human psychology. You have to understand that we see what we expect to see. We see what we want to see. We have filters on all the time. We're not objective observers of our surroundings and you have to start with that assumption with respect to human beings as you look at yourself and as you look at your enemy and realize that that is always going to be the case. That is a constant. So, I think the work that has come after Schelling has added nuance, has been really important. And of course, Schelling wasn't working alone. He was resting ideas on the ideas of David Singer, Glenn Snyder, William Kaufman. I think in this period of great intellectual ferment there was a lot of activity, intellectual activity going on and they were sharing ideas with one another. Schelling is the one who wrote "Arms and Influence," and kind of is the one that we now remember, but all of these folks were playing important roles and so there is a lot of influence of other fields now in what was originally Schelling's oeuvre but is now widely shared body of work in national security studies. So many scholars working on the civilian side of things, work on a foundational basis which is really Schelling and then build up from there to better understand when does deterrence work? When does compellence work? When does it fail? Why does it fail? How do we understand escalation dominance, which is terribly important? Being able to match an enemy as you're climbing that escalatory ladder in terms of threats, one side threatening and the other counter threatening. How do you move up that ladder? And of course, as I point out in the essay that I wrote, it's terribly important to have land power because at the sub nuclear level, land power is at the very top of that escalation ladder. You want to have land power to issue those major threats, which are basically, if you don't cooperate with me, I will land on your shores, takeover, remove you as the government, and replace the government with something that is far more congenial to me. That is a supreme threat, and any power that wants to consider itself a great power has to be able to have some of that. So that's one of the reasons that we understand land power to be actually quite important, although sometimes it's been hard for folks to articulate why land power is important. I think if you turn to Schelling, you see very quickly, in fact, why it's very important to have land power. But to come back to your original point, Ron, yes, I think human psychology is so important. You can't simply do this in some sort of cold, isolated theoretical way that doesn't speak at the same time to human nature, and to tie in Thucydides which I love to do, we study Thucydides at the beginning of the course and we're studying human nature that has stayed consistent for thousands of years. I love our students seeing how familiar Thucydides is to them as they understand that terrible war in the Greek world and understand why it followed the tragic course that it followed. But so much of it, so much of the emotional side, the human side is immediately familiar to them. And they learn right

from the beginning that there are things that remain constant and that constant stuff is really about human beings and how we think and how we behave and how we are captured by fear, honor and interest and humiliation, which is kind of the combination of fear, honor, interest and humiliation is a very powerful motive for people wanting to turn to violence. So, all these things tie together, and as faculty members, I think we do the very best job we can to bring them all to the students, to the students' plates and say look, here's this incredible feast, have at it.

RG: Dig in. Well, and Tami, as someone who has been so good at this for so long here at the War College, I know that your students especially know how powerful experience it can be to learn these important insights from someone who cares as much as you do, who knows as much as you do, and who does as much as you do, and so on behalf of the War College, and on behalf of A Better Peace, I want to thank you for being with us today. Unfortunately, we are at the end of this conversation. But thanks so much for your insights on Schelling and strategy and your own work.

TB: Thank you so much, Ron. I've been delighted to be here and to have a chance to talk about Schelling.

RG: You bet. And thanks all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us your suggestions for future programs. We're always happy to hear from you. Please subscribe to A Better Peace if you have not already done so on the podcatcher of your choice, and after you have subscribed, please rate and review this podcast so that others may find it as well so that we can continue to grow this community for conversations like the one you've just heard today. This conversation is over, but the conversations continue and until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.