

Michigan Law Review

Volume 68 | Issue 7

1970

Fisher: International Conflict for Beginners

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Recommended Citation

Stanley D. Metzger, *Fisher: International Conflict for Beginners*, 68 MICH. L. REV. 1471 (1970).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol68/iss7/9>

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INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT FOR BEGINNERS. By *Roger Fisher*. Illustrations by *Robert C. Osborn*. N.Y.: Harper & Row. 1969 Pp. xvii, 231. \$5.95.

This is a peculiar book. Its message is normal enough; the tactics of dealing successfully among nations—getting a foreign country to go along with most of what you want—do not differ in kind from those employed among smaller groups, corporations, or individuals. By and large, these tactics consist of putting oneself mentally in the other fellow's shoes, and then fashioning proposals which do not utterly disregard his interests, while packaging them as attractively as possible. If he does not agree with your proposals because the substance of what he is asked to give is greater than what he will get in return, you have at least gotten a bit ahead in public opinion, which in long- or short-run terms will be a net advantage at the next round. Not a profound message, no doubt, but nonetheless common-sense, normal behavior on the whole.

What makes the book peculiar is that its author embroiders this message—which, as indicated, most diplomats and other negotiators have for a long time known very well and acted upon when they could—with breathless examples which indicate that he thinks that he is purveying something original or provocative. To compound the peculiarity, he provides a concrete application of the desired technique to a current international crisis, but his application demonstrates that he does not have the foggiest notion how to work his own “system.”

Picking the Arab-Israeli dispute as a vehicle [“I devoted a couple of days to thinking about Middle East” (p. 203)], Professor Fisher drafted a variety of documents designed to demonstrate how to use his approach. Piecemeal progress toward an Arab-Israeli settlement was in his view desirable, since he was convinced that an over-all settlement was not a real possibility. Positioning himself as an advisor to Nasser (not an unnatural position for one who had staked out a pro-Arab, anti-Israeli position since at least prior to the June 1967 war), the author suggests that it would be wise to strive at the outset for a “partial withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Sinai combined with an opening of the Suez Canal” (p. 208). He suggests that Nasser open the discussion on this basis by sending a letter to U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations. This letter, lest we forget, is supposed to present Israel with a “yessable” proposition by taking due account of her interests and by being palatably packaged.

Nasser states, in the author's draft letter, that he “accepts” the fact that there is a “new state in the Middle East,” and that “it is called Israel” (p. 212-13). He further “accepts the fact” that Israel's international boundaries are no more restrictive than those provided

in the 1949 Armistice Agreement, "and no more extensive than those of the territory occupied by Israeli forces as of June 4, 1967" (p. 213). Israel is thus asked to forgo that portion of the November 1967 Security Council resolution calling for recognized and secure boundaries—a portion which to her, to the United States, and to the other non-Arab, non-Soviet-bloc countries, envisaged negotiated territorial adjustments in Israel's favor (with respect to the Golan Heights area, for example), so that she would not be placed once again in her precarious pre-June 6, 1967, situation.

On the basis of this little blockbuster—or perhaps Israel is not supposed to be able to read and understand the words—"as a demonstration of our earnest desire to move forward even before Israeli troops have been fully withdrawn from our territory" (p. 213), Israel is to withdraw forty kilometers from the Suez Canal, so that the canal can be opened (for Egypt's revenue and benefit, it may be added). Then cargo to and from Israel, but not Israeli ships, will be permitted to transit the canal, as before June 1967.

In short, this "yessable proposition" would restore the pre-June 6, 1967, situation in all particulars; and in exchange Israel gets what? She gets Arab acceptance "as a physical fact [of] the geographical existence of the State of Israel and, when it gets back within the borders it was respecting [that is, the pre-June 6, 1967, borders], we will not use force against it" (p. 214). Nasser, however, would still not be "prepared to recognize politically the present Government of Israel as a legitimate government, whether judged by its domestic or its international behavior" (p. 214), because Israel discriminates against Arabs in a manner "just as immoral" as did "pre-war Germany against Jews," and hence is today a Frankenstein creature, unwilling to abide by international law or the unanimous decisions of the Security Council" (p. 215).

Need more be said about the author's ability to see the other fellow's position and fashion proposals attractive to him? Can anyone really think that Israeli rejection out of hand of such a proposition would secure it anything but applause from a world public opinion with any common sense at all? But no matter; it is clear that what we have here must be one large put-on—a huge tongue-in-cheek. The author must be making an ironic plea for the kind of wisdom and judgment which alone can deal meaningfully with deep-seated conflicts. What he must be trying to tell us, in an unusual display of self-abnegation, is that cute tactical ploys, even when they are well-fashioned, cannot begin to cope with real world problems.

The illustrations by Osborn are comical.

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