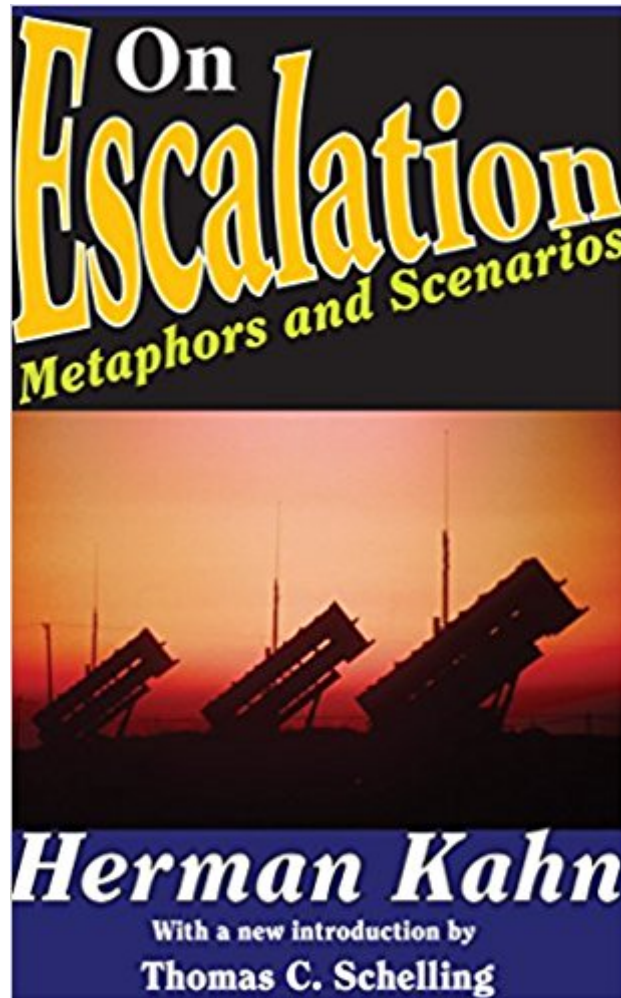




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On Escalation: Metaphors And Scenarios



Synopsis

In this widely discussed and influential book, Herman Kahn probes the dynamics of escalation and demonstrates how the intensification of conflict can be depicted by means of a definite escalation ladder, ascent of which brings opponents closer to all-out war. At each rung of the ladder, before the climb proceeds, decisions must be made based on numerous choices. Some are clear and obvious, others obscure, but the options are always there. Thermonuclear annihilation, says Kahn, is unlikely to come through accident; but nations may elect to climb the ladder to extinction. The basic material for the book was developed in briefings delivered by Kahn to military and civilian experts and revised in the light of his findings of a trip to Vietnam in the 1960s. In *On Escalation* he states the facts squarely. He asks the reader to face unemotionally the terrors of a world fully capable of suicide and to consider carefully the alternatives to such a path. In the never-never land of nuclear warfare, where nuclear incredulity is pervasive and paralyzing to the imagination even for the professional analyst, salient details of possible scenarios for the outbreak of war, and even more for war fighting, are largely unexplored or even unnoticed. For scenarios in which war is terminated, the issues and possibilities of which are almost completely unstudied, the situation is even worse. Kahn's discussion throws light on the terrain and gives the individual a sense of the range of possibilities and complexities involved and are useful.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

During The Cold War the Rand Corporation and the Hudson Institute were associated with work on nuclear warfare and the conduct of the Vietnam War. Herman Kahn produced a number of books on the subject in the 1960's including: "On Thermonuclear War", "Thinking About the Unthinkable" and "On Escalation". Kahn was also concerned to document the process of escalation of conflict and to establish common metaphors and language, which could be understood by both sides. Kahn stressed the essential role of communications between opposing sides. He pointed to the cultural problems which made it difficult for the US and North Vietnam to understand the way in which the other side would react to new developments during the Vietnam War. In "On Escalation" Kahn pointed out the problems that arose between the British and the Germans in World War II because German propaganda failed to clearly communicate German intentions. The same problem currently bedevils the relationship between Israel and the Arabs. At worst we have a "dialogue of the deaf". Normally even during War there will be a dialogue based on mutually agreed rules, for example the rights of civilians will be honored. Where one side fails to honor the implicit agreement not to behave in a particular manner then the other side will normally feel free to retaliate in ways that it has previously forsworn. The reaction to September 11th is a classic example. Where communication breaks down, as appears to have occurred in Israel, this can result in action and reaction, leading to a spiral of violence and alienation, which can only be resolved by the total collapse of one side, or an understanding by both sides that the mutual interest requires a stepping-back from such actions. In the US the public protests effectively ended US involvement in the Vietnam War. In short Kahn deals with important issues that are if anything more relevant today than they were in the 1960's. Not the easiest of reads, pick something lighter for your next flight, but if you are interested in the process of negotiation, rather than the headline news then you should look at Kahn's ideas.

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