
Review Essay

What Can We Learn from Great Negotiations?

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Fredrik Stanton. *Great Negotiations: Agreements that Changed the Modern World.* Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2010. 304 pages. \$26.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 1594160996.

Adventures in Diplomacy

Suppose you decided to learn about a number of history-shaping negotiations, interactions that had changed thousands, if not millions, of lives and that had effects that reverberated to this day. Not only should these dramatic negotiations really matter, but the information you find should be enough to sketch the protagonists, to give a realistic flavor of the process, and to offer a reasonable account of what ultimately happened. And the outcomes of these negotiations should neither have been essentially predetermined by external factors nor preemptively resolved by one side's *diktat*.

If you were seized by the urge to learn about such events, you would do very well to pick up Fredrik Stanton's *Great Negotiations: Agreements that Changed the Modern World*. Stanton has researched and written lucid accounts of eight major diplomatic encounters that meet the above criteria. Drawing on contemporary accounts and some of the vast historical scholarship examining each of these negotiations, Stanton has credibly distilled each story into an engaging, self-contained twenty to forty page chapter accessible to general readers and specialists alike. This is no easy task and

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he deserves great credit for doing so in such an intelligent fashion, though quibbles (or worse) from diplomatic historians are always possible with potted accounts of such major events.

Readers of this book will be richly rewarded with windows on eight “conversations of silk and steel,” as Winston Churchill once characterized major negotiations:

1. how Benjamin Franklin and his colleagues in Paris persuaded a reluctant French government in 1778 to furnish vital supplies and war materiel that changed the course of the colonies’ Revolutionary War against Great Britain;
2. the 1803 negotiations leading to the Louisiana Purchase (the “greatest real estate deal in history”);
3. the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815 that restructured Europe after Napoleon was defeated;
4. how Theodore Roosevelt mediated an end to the brutal Russo-Japanese war via the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth;
5. the 1919 Paris Peace Conference that ended empires, redrew the global map after World War I, and planted the seeds of World War II;
6. Ralph Bunche laboriously mediating the 1949 Egyptian–Israeli Armistice;
7. the tense negotiations that resolved the 1962 Cuban missile crisis; and
8. the 1986 Reagan–Gorbachev summit in Reykjavik.

Seeking Prescriptions

This fine book will inform you *about* these eight fascinating negotiations, but what valid *lessons*, what descriptive or prescriptive generalizations about the negotiation process, can you legitimately take away? In jacket blurbs, Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary General, and Robert Mnookin, chair of the Harvard Program on Negotiation, both assert that much can be learned from Stanton’s case studies, and I concur. But as a reader, any such learning will be almost entirely up to you. Whether the insights you might draw have great power and generality or whether they are idiosyncratic to specific times, circumstances, and personalities is an issue that quietly looms over the accounts. Stanton self-consciously limits himself to telling the stories, neither systematically analyzing them nor drawing out their larger implications or limitations.

To his credit, Stanton avoids two mistakes common to nonspecialist accounts: describing “negotiations without negotiators” by focusing primarily on critical battlefield or marketplace maneuvers that potently influence the outcome, and exclusively highlighting the cut and thrust of the

argumentation and the psychological interplay of the key parties “at the table,” while ignoring the consequential actions “away from the table” that can decisively shape the outcome.

While he is laudably sensitive to the tactical and psychological interplay of the negotiators as well as to the larger strategic context within which the process occurs, Stanton makes no explicit use of the many possible frameworks available for analyzing negotiations. To take but a few examples, these range from the popular *Getting to Yes* (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991) world of interests and best alternative to a negotiated agreement, to more formal game-theoretic accounts of strategic interaction and asymmetric information (see Schelling 1960; Raiffa, Richardson, and Metcalfe 2002), to the behavioral lenses of cognitive and social psychologists (see Bazerman and Neale 1991; Thompson 2001), and to the “3-D” world of setup, deal design, and tactics intended to create and claim value on a sustainable basis (see Lax and Sebenius 2006).

These and other analytic frameworks suggest concepts, categories, and dynamics on which to focus when examining a specific case. They offer degrees of cumulative knowledge and established propositions against which particular examples can be compared and contrasted. By remaining consciously atheoretical, Stanton liberates himself from the shackles of preconceived frameworks. But this stance can lead him to overlook arguably critical factors and may reduce attempts at learning and generalizing to *ad hoc* status.

For example, sometimes the characters in Stanton’s cases explicitly state, or by their actions suggest, nuggets of apparent negotiating wisdom. No deal was ultimately struck at the dramatic Reykjavik summit involving U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Head of State Mikhail Gorbachev. Shortly afterward, however, referring to President Reagan’s hard line on strategic missile defense that proved to be a deal-breaker for the Soviet Union, Secretary of State (and former labor negotiator) George Shultz commented to Reagan: “at Reykjavik you smoked the Soviets out and [now] they are stuck with their concessions. So we have to move fast to lock them in” (p. 225). Are there implications of this episode for hanging tough? Prematurely revealing your hand? Following up on impasses?

To pick, almost at random, another of the many intriguing possible lessons raised by Stanton’s cases, consider the following question: (when) should a negotiating agent go beyond, or even defy, his or her principal’s instructions? U.S. envoys James Monroe and Robert Livingston had tightly limited authority from Washington to bargain with French officials when they went to Paris in 1803; their objective was to gain the port of New Orleans and commercial navigation rights on the Mississippi River. As the process unfolded, however, Emperor Napoleon unexpectedly offered the whole (undemarcated) Louisiana territory for a sum of money vastly beyond anything contemplated in Washington, more than five times the

then-operating budget of the U.S. government. On an *ad referendum* basis, Monroe and Livingston pursued this larger possibility through many tactical twists and turns. Though initially controversial in Washington, their freelance deal, which came to be known as the Louisiana Purchase, ultimately proved hugely beneficial to the United States.

More dramatically, in 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt sought to mediate a bloody war between Japan and Russia through talks conducted in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. When Tsar Nicholas II explicitly commanded his representative, Sergei Witte, to end negotiations with the Japanese, Witte defied the Tsar's instructions, continued the process, and offered an unauthorized proposal that became the basis for ultimate agreement. While the Russian government was shocked and angered by this insubordination, the Tsar later bestowed the title of count on Witte, who became his country's prime minister.

What, if anything, should or could one conclude from these two examples about the proper relationship between principals and their negotiating agents? Do these cases establish that "agents should disobey instructions when it seems advantageous to do so"? Not so fast! It is easy to come up with counterexamples such as, for instance, cases in which what looks good to an agent may miss issues of precedent or linkages that are vital to the principal. What "lessons" can reasonably be drawn from these case examples or case examples in general?

Even where Stanton himself hints at a generalization — "these examples provide timely evidence of how people have used reason and persuasion to avoid violence and prevail over adversaries and can do so again" (p. xiii) — several of his cases instead seem to suggest how military maneuvers and credible threats of violence were in fact vital to the protagonist's negotiating strategy. (This was certainly true for the Congress of Vienna and even of the Louisiana Purchase, negotiated in the shadow of forcible French restrictions on Mississippi River-borne commerce, angry rumblings of U.S. military action to annex New Orleans from the French, and British naval threats to do the same.) And, if by "reason and persuasion," Stanton means duplicitous coalition-splitting stratagems, often underpinned by military threats and/or actions, his "great negotiations" offer plenty of examples.

The Role of Case Studies

So, apart from general edification, what can one validly learn from case studies of negotiation? A full answer to this question reaches well beyond the scope of a short article, but a few quick observations seem appropriate. First, faithful description of actual negotiations can educate readers about the complex realities and subtleties that parsimonious analytic models may neglect. Second, case studies may suggest overlooked or nonobvious aspects of the process that merit deeper investigation. For example, while most game-theoretic and laboratory studies of negotiations presume a

process with fixed elements, Stanton's examples abound with consequential moves away from the table and efforts to change the perceived negotiation "game" itself.

Third, and happily for negotiation analysts, case studies may reinforce the findings of more systematic investigations, giving greater confidence in their validity. Fourth, when a case study appears to contradict received theory, the reality may spur further investigation, may point to limitations of the theory, and may open up new questions for study. For example, while standard negotiation theory suggests that combining issues may offer the potential for leverage or value-creating trade-offs, a case study may highlight the costs of added negotiation complexity. Categories like "principal" and "agent" may be analytically neat but give way in reality to more complex and nuanced roles.

I find that this kind of learning calls for a "Bayesian" mindset, in which a given case study, of the kind produced by Stanton, constitutes a multidimensional observation to be compared to and combined with substantial prior knowledge and reliable bodies of research. A number of studies illustrate this orientation. (See, e.g., Sebenius 1984; Evans, Jacobson, and Putnam 1993; Odell 2000; Watkins and Rosegrant 2001; Parson 2003). When encountered "cold" or on its own, however, any particular negotiation case study can admit endless interpretation and give rise to dubious lessons.

Over the past decade, for example, I have chaired the annual Great Negotiator Award program of the Harvard-MIT-Tufts Program on Negotiation, which has honored (and studied) figures such as former U.S. Senator George Mitchell, former U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky, U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke, Algerian diplomat Lakdhar Brahimi, and former president of Finland Martti Ahtisaari. While the resulting case studies themselves are fascinating, it takes additional intellectual work to cull reliable generalizations from what could rightly be seen as *sui generis* cases.¹ This is especially true for collections like Stanton's *Great Negotiations* as well as Harvard's "Great Negotiators," where, for analytic clarity, spectacular successes cannot easily be paired with comparable failures.

More broadly, carefully chosen and investigated case studies can yield empirically valid descriptive and prescriptive propositions. This calls for well-designed qualitative research approaches such as the "method of structured, focused comparisons" (George 1979). Indeed, researchers have come up with a variety of methods to identify, develop, compare, and contrast case studies to glean valid social scientific knowledge. (see, e.g., Odell 2001; George and Bennett 2005).

In fairness, Stanton did not set out to extract insights and generalizations but rather to describe several critical negotiations that have shaped modern history. He has done so admirably, especially when one considers the short compass allowed for each case. While I (and others) may wish he had gone further, he has provided valuable raw material for analysts to use

in generating unexpected hypotheses, novel insights, mid-level generalizations, and usable knowledge about how to overcome the most daunting situations that negotiators actually face.

NOTE

1. Efforts at culling such insights from the Great Negotiators awards program can be found in Curran and Sebenius (2003), Hulse and Sebenius (2003), and Curran, Sebenius, and Watkins (2004).

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