

Tidwell, Alan C. *Conflict Resolved? A Critical Assessment of Conflict Resolution*. London: Pinter, 1998.

David Last

Volume 19, numéro 2, fall 1999

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs19_02br01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Last, D. (1999). Compte rendu de [Tidwell, Alan C. *Conflict Resolved? A Critical Assessment of Conflict Resolution*. London: Pinter, 1998.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 19(2), 196–198.

Tidwell, Alan C. *Conflict Resolved? A Critical Assessment of Conflict Resolution*. London: Pinter, 1998.

If you are looking for guidance to go forth and resolve conflict, this book is not for you. If you are wondering why so much vaunted conflict resolution expertise does not succeed in resolving conflict, this is an excellent place to start. Tidwell has not researched the first-hand business of work with people who want to kill each other. His field is in the murkier labyrinths and bookshelves of second-hand thinking about conflict resolution. It is work that needed to be done to bring the long history and recent flood of literature and research into focus. Although scholars and teachers will be the main beneficiaries, thoughtful practitioners may thank Tidwell too.

Tidwell claims to both introduce the essential ideas of conflict resolution, and put the subject into its proper context. He succeeds admirably, by beginning with popular understandings, and building up through succinct summaries of theorists and theories to the complex ideas of communication, history, enemies and a critique of the conflict resolution process. At the end, the processes of mediation and problem solving are seen in the more subtle light of power and language, and the limited control that parties have over their capacity and opportunity for resolution.

Everyone is familiar with *Getting to Yes* and the host of helpful books on management, settlement and resolution of conflict. These popular texts are optimistic and simplistic. They may even make matters worse, by suggesting that all conflicts can be resolved easily. There are assumptions and meanings embedded in these popular approaches to conflict. Deutsch, Galtung, Kriesberg and Burton (among others) have given us an understanding of functional and situational conflict, conflict over time, societal, structural and deep-rooted conflict. The sources of conflict may be inherent in a situation, contingent upon particular circumstances, or the result of interaction between these two dynamics. The definition of conflict and use of conflict theory act as intellectual maps for our efforts at resolution. Perhaps the best part of the book is the chapter on theorists and theories. Tidwell makes sense of Simmel, Coser, Lewin, Deutsche and game theorists in a mere 20 pages. These were the fathers of the action research that gave us today's approaches to conflict resolution. The succeeding chapters on communication, history and enemies are not such clean reading, because Tidwell has a lot of ideas to weave together. The ubiquity of communications and the power of language and propaganda in manipulating opinion in conflict are themes that resurface to explain the limitations of resolution. They are intimately linked to the histories that groups use to create boundaries separating them from other groups. Indeed, no conflict is possible without contending histories, at the personal or group level. Tidwell cites Montville's view that resolution demands a joint analysis of past events and mutual recognition of injustices, but does not say much about the growing body of work on reconciliation. Humans may actually need enemies, if social psychologist Vamik Volkan's research is to be believed. Burton's work suggests enmification follows conflict, while Volkan's suggests that it lies at the root of conflict. Enmification is not unlikely within a group, either, which explains the phenomenon of extremists slaying moderates in their own camp, as a prelude to inter-group violence. Tidwell concludes that searching for the roots of conflict will be fruitless,

unless would-be conflict resolvers are able to deal with the insidious and inter-generational process of creating enemies from neighbours.

The drive for conflict resolution really originated with democratic liberalism, and Tidwell makes it clear that processes like mediation and problem solving workshops are not value-neutral. Direct communication between hostile parties for the purpose of resolving conflict often only occurs when communication has been controlled and regulated by a third party. But the pervasive influence of power and the language of communication on the conflict itself cannot be controlled or curtailed. Different processes for regulating interaction have different objectives. Burton's prescriptions for dealing with deep-rooted conflict aim at long-term planning, while Volkan's suggest long-term healing. Neither is as simple and direct as the win-win outcomes sought by popular Western conflict resolution culture.

Tidwell's conclusion, "Where to from Here?", is disappointingly abrupt. He summarizes the factors that impinge on conflict resolution: capacity, opportunity and will. Most conflict resolution prescriptions focus on improving capacity through training and education, building up individual skills and tackling prejudices. Tidwell emphasizes opportunity and will, and the role of history and social psychology in conditioning these:

Metaphorically, it is as if people are permeated by a spider's web, or connected by countless invisible webs that link one another's past and present, and which influence the course of their behaviour. Accounting for these webs is the task of any who wish to resolve conflict, for without an understanding of how they pull and tug at those in conflict, resolution is condemned to failure. Simplistic models of human behaviour, of social organisation or of conflict will doom any process of resolution. (p. 174)
His final word is one of optimism. "All of this can be done." (p. 176). But if you want to know how it is attempted in the hurly-burly real world of UN missions, NGOs in the field, multi-track diplomacy, post-conflict trauma counselling, problem-solving workshops, labour-management negotiations or other attempts to resolve conflict, look elsewhere.

David Last
Royal Military College of Canada