



Herman Kahn's escalation ladder

Description



FIGURE 3
AN ESCALATION LADDER
 A Generalized (or Abstract) Scenario

AFTERMATHS

CIVILIAN CENTRAL WARS	{	44. Spasm or Insensate War
		43. Some Other Kinds of Controlled General War
		42. Civilian Devastation Attack
		41. Augmented Disarming Attack
		40. Countervalue Salvo
MILITARY CENTRAL WARS	{	39. Slow-Motion Countercity War
		(CITY TARGETING THRESHOLD)
		38. Unmodified Counterforce Attack
		37. Counterforce-with-Avoidance Attack
		36. Constrained Disarming Attack
EXEMPLARY CENTRAL ATTACKS	{	35. Constrained Force-Reduction Salvo
		34. Slow-Motion Counterforce War
		33. Slow-Motion Counter-"Property" War
		32. Formal Declaration of "General" War
		(CENTRAL WAR THRESHOLD)
BIZARRE CRISES	{	31. Reciprocal Reprisals
		30. Complete Evacuation (Approximately 95 per cent)
		29. Exemplary Attacks on Population
		28. Exemplary Attacks Against Property
		27. Exemplary Attack on Military
INTENSE CRISES	{	26. Demonstration Attack on Zone of Interior
		(CENTRAL SANCTUARY THRESHOLD)
		25. Evacuation (Approximately 70 per cent)
		24. Unusual, Provocative, and Significant Countermeasures
		23. Local Nuclear War—Military
TRADITIONAL CRISES	{	22. Declaration of Limited Nuclear War
		21. Local Nuclear War—Exemplary
		(NO NUCLEAR USE THRESHOLD)
		20. "Peaceful" World-Wide Embargo or Blockade
		19. "Justifiable" Counterforce Attack
TRADITIONAL CRISES	{	18. Spectacular Show or Demonstration of Force
		17. Limited Evacuation (Approximately 20 per cent)
		16. Nuclear "Ultimatums"
		15. Barely Nuclear War
		14. Declaration of Limited Conventional War
TRADITIONAL CRISES	{	13. Large Compound Escalation
		12. Large Conventional War (or Actions)
		11. Super-Ready Status
		10. Provocative Breaking Off of Diplomatic Relations
		(NUCLEAR WAR IS UNTHINKABLE THRESHOLD)
TRADITIONAL CRISES	{	9. Dramatic Military Confrontations
		8. Harassing Acts of Violence
		7. "Legal" Harassment—Retortions
		6. Significant Mobilization
		5. Show of Force
TRADITIONAL CRISES	{	4. Hardening of Positions—Confrontation of Wills
		3. Subliminal Escalation
		2. Subliminal Escalation
		1. Subliminal Escalation
		0. Subliminal Escalation



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Summary

Chapter 5 analyzes the thinking of Herman Kahn, who dared to think the unthinkable. It describes his "America," which again was that of the golden age of the middle class, but which also overlapped with the sense of malaise that plagued the 1970s. Like the limited war theorists, Kahn agreed military instincts needed to be curbed, and he attempted to counter uncertainty by arguing, largely in vain, that escalation itself was also a bargaining process with systematic waystations or steps embedded along its path. This chapter discusses his model of war's nature, which, like those of Brodie, Osgood, and Schelling, privileged war's political dimension, though he gave policy more agency than did they.

www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/wars-logic/herman-kahn-and-escalation/19C080FABFE3FCD66358C5AF1366486A



Outside physics and statistics, works written by Kahn include:

- 1960. [*On Thermonuclear War*](#). Princeton University Press. [ISBN 0-313-20060-2](#)
- 1962. *Thinking about the unthinkable*. Horizon Press.
- 1965. *On escalation: metaphors and scenarios*. Praeger. [ISBN 1-41283004-4](#)
- 1967. *The Year 2000: a framework for speculation on the next thirty-three years*. MacMillan. [ISBN 0-02-560440-6](#). With Anthony Wiener.
- 1968. *Can we win in Viet Nam?* Praeger. Kahn with four other authors: Gastil, Raymond D.; Pfaff, William; Stillman, Edmund; Armbruster, Frank E.
- 1970. *The emerging Japanese Superstate: challenge and response*. Prentice Hall. [ISBN 0-13-274670-0](#)
- 1971. *The Japanese challenge: The success and failure of economic success*. Morrow; Andre Deutsch. [ISBN 0-688-08710-8](#)
- 1972. *Things to come: thinking about the seventies and eighties*. MacMillan. [ISBN 0-02-560470-8](#). With B. Bruce-Briggs.
- 1973. *Herman Kahnsciousness: the megaton ideas of the one-man think tank*. New American Library. Selected and edited by Jerome Agel.
- 1974. *The future of the corporation*. Mason & Lipscomb. [ISBN 0-88405-009-2](#)
- 1976. *The next 200 years: a scenario for America and the world*. Morrow. [ISBN 0-688-08029-4](#)
- 1979. *World economic development: 1979 and beyond*. William Morrow; Croom Helm. [ISBN 0-688-03479-9](#). With Hollender, Jeffrey, and Hollender, John A.
- 1981. *Will she be right? The future of Australia*. University of Queensland Press. [ISBN 0-7022-1569-4](#). With Thomas Pepper.
- 1983. *The Coming Boom: economic, political, and social*. Simon & Schuster; Hutchinson. [ISBN 0-671-49265-9](#)



- 1984 *Thinking about the unthinkable in the 1980s*. New York: Simon and Schuster. [ISBN 0-671-47544-4](#)
- *The nature and feasibility of war, deterrence, and arms control* (Central nuclear war monograph series), (Hudson Institute)
- *A slightly optimistic world context for 1975–2000* (Hudson Institute)
- *Social limits to growth: “creeping stagnation” vs. “natural and inevitable”* (HPS paper)
- *A new kind of class struggle in the United States?* (Corporate Environment Program. Research memorandum)

Category

1. General

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