I Don't Have to Fight You

About six years ago, I boarded a small United Express airplane in Los Angeles. When I got to my row, a man was sitting in the aisle seat, and I asked him to move so that I could get to the window seat. He scowled at me but grudgingly got up to let me in. While getting to my seat, I accidentally stepped on his foot. I apologized immediately but as soon as I was seated, he turned to me and said, "I'm gonna beat the s**t out of you." I tried to ignore him, but he persisted. "Let's go out on the tarmac and get it on," he said. You've probably heard the saying "fight or flight." I think it's what we men are supposed to do when threatened. That is, we're supposed to either fight or get out of there. I certainly did think of both alternatives immediately. I sized him up and decided that I wasn't at all sure I could take him. (I'm a 5'5", 160-pound man with powerful legs but weak arms. He was at least 10 years younger, taller, and obviously full of some kind of upset that might make him very powerful physically.) More important, even if I could take him, I might not get out of it undamaged; also I was pretty sure that in the noise of the open plane, no one had heard his threat, and so I might have trouble flying in the future if it looked as if I had started a fight. And, more important than any of those reasons, I hate fighting. The times I've avoided fights have always worked out well for me; the one time as an adult that I didn't, I regretted.

I thought of running also, but figured he would just chase after me. Neither alternative seemed satisfactory. I thought of pushing the flight-attendant call button, but realized that he might beat me up by the time she got there and that even once she got there, it was his word versus mine. There was one other alternative; wait him out. So I focused on looking straight ahead, not confronting, not talking to him, and waiting to see if he escalated or calmed down. About half an hour later into the short flight to Monterey, the putative pugilist passenger seemed to have calmed down. We hadn't spoken a word since his threat. So I thought I'd try something. A week or two earlier I had been at a men's workshop run by two men I admired, Charlie Kreiner and Fred Jealous, who had talked about men's alternatives to violence. One of the exercises had gotten one of the men so worked up that he had started

swinging his fists at those around him, and various men had held him down. Either Fred or Charlie (I've forgotten who) had gotten down close to his ear and said something to calm him down. It had worked. Then Charlie used it as a teaching moment for all of us, talking about how men are conditioned to fight and that we need other ways of getting our rage out and ways to solve problems without fighting. Now I thought to myself, "Wow! Here's a chance to see if this works. This guy has just threatened me. But as long as he doesn't do it again, I'm fine. I don't need to beat him physically or in any other way. Wouldn't it be interesting to see if we can have a civilized conversation?"

I pulled a pack of gum out of my pocket, put a stick in my mouth, and held out the pack to him. He shook his head fiercely. I put the gum away. But that was the opening. A minute later he said, "I'm sorry about what happened back there. I just came in from the East and I've been flying for the last day. I don't mean the East like New York; I mean China. I'm having a bad day." His apology reminded me of how many politicians apologize, by talking about "what happened" as if they bear no responsibility for their poor choices. Nevertheless, it was an apology. I felt powerful for having handled things the way I had.

Does this story apply to foreign policy? Big-time, as Vice President Cheney likes to say. Last December, I attended a round-table academic conference in which we spent a fair amount of time discussing war and foreign policy. One participant mentioned that after the Japanese government (he actually said "the Japanese") bombed Pearl Harbor, it was obvious that the U.S. government (he said "we") had to go to war with Japan. I replied that that wasn't obvious to me at all. First of all, as my co-author, Charles Hooper, and I point out in our book, Making Great Decisions in Business and Life, and as philosopher David Kelley has so eloquently put it, there's almost nothing we have to do. And you don't think clearly by starting from falsehoods. So, although one might argue that the U.S. government should have made war on Japan, the U.S. government didn't have to: it had a choice.

Second, I said, it wasn't obvious to me that the U.S. government should have made war on Japan. While it's awful that more than 2,000 people were killed at Pearl Harbor, it was not a good bargain to lose 407,000-plus additional

American lives, not to mention 2.6 million Japanese lives, 700,000 of them civilian. Interestingly, no one argued with me, possibly because they didn't have a good argument or possibly because they wanted to discuss other things. One might argue that it was worth it because otherwise the Japanese government would have moved on and attacked the U.S. mainland. If that fact could have been established, then I would have favored attacking Japan. But, just as in my airplane story, the U.S. government had other options. There were two main differences. One was that the other passenger was angry at me because I had accidentally stepped on his foot, while the Japanese government was angry at the U.S. government because it had purposely tried to cut off Japan's supply of oil: funny how that upsets people. The other difference was that the guy hadn't laid a finger on me whereas Japan's government had attacked the United States. One obvious solution would have been for the U.S. government to back off on trying to strangle Japan's economy in return for, say, an apology from the Japanese government and, say, $1 billion (a lot of money in those days) in reparations. Of course, this wouldn't have accomplished the U.S. government's main goal, which was to get the Japanese government to withdraw from Indochina and China. But why should that have been a goal of the U.S. government? And notice that if the U.S. government's concern was to keep the Chinese people from being ruled by a bloodthirsty government, it didn't succeed: Chairman Mao saw to that. So what did "we" get from going to war with Japan and Germany? Four hundred thousand more deaths and a hostile, mass-murdering government in China. That doesn't sound like a bargain to me. Maybe that's why I didn't get any argument from the attendees, virtually all of whom were well informed about 20th-century history.

But here's the problem. Neither Roosevelt nor the leaders of Congress who pushed for war on Japan actually put themselves at risk by going to war themselves. And they made a quick decision, on Dec. 8, based on something that happened on Dec. 7. That's one of the problems with government solutions: the decision-makers often make quick, bad decisions because they rarely bear the costs of their decisions. But if Roosevelt had been willing to consider alternatives to war, 407,000 American lives and a few million Japanese lives might have been saved. That sounds like something worth thinking about.

After the session ended, various people came up to me and told me that I was the most radical antiwar person there. I think, but I'm not sure, that they meant it as a compliment. They said it made them look like moderates. Now don't get me wrong. I love compliments. But I don't see it their way. I think it's kind of radical to advocate an action that kills a few million people and kind of moderate to advocate thinking first and coming up with solutions that save those same lives. I guess I'm strange.