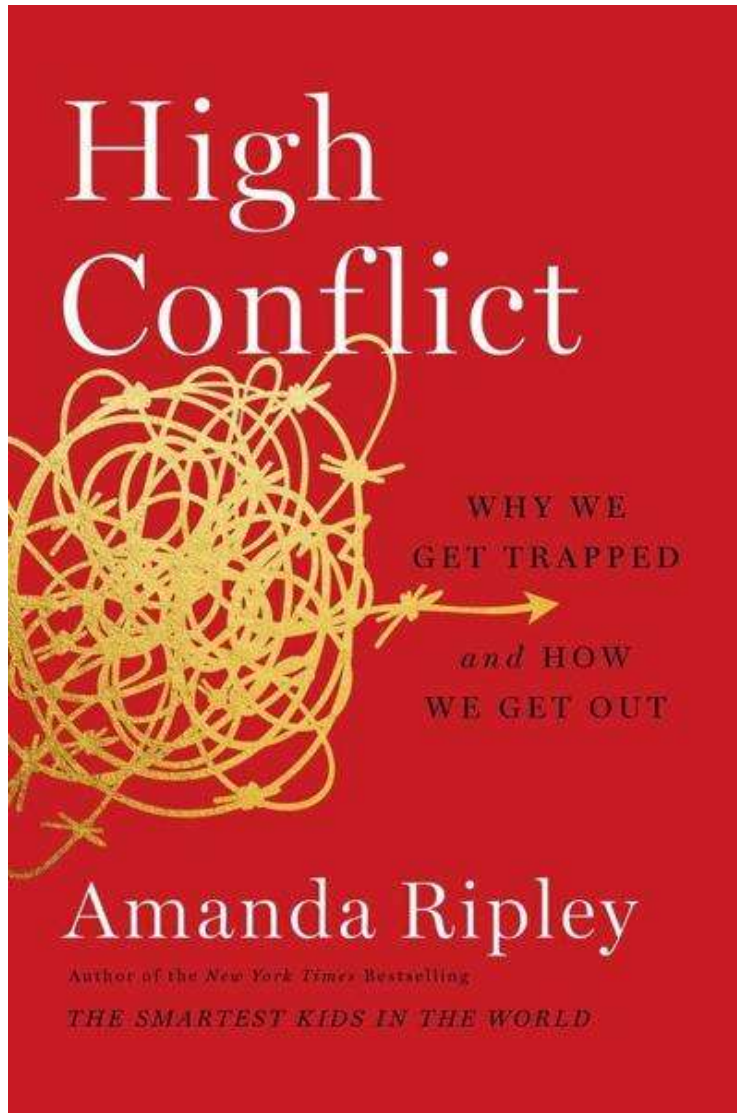


This one should be required reading

Posted: Sunday, December 5, 2021

“High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out” by Amanda Ripley. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021, 368 pages, \$28 (hardcover).



“In regular life, we put people in categories all the time,” Amanda Ripley explains in “High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out,” her new book on a subject all too familiar to most Americans. “Categories save us time and energy, by allowing us to treat individuals the same way, so we don’t have to look too closely or think too much. And categories also make us feel good about ourselves. The White woman who puts a Black Lives Matter sign on her front lawn feels like she is in the tribe of the woke. The French driver who puts a yellow vest on the dashboard of his car feels like he is in the tribe of the aggrieved workers, fighting the Establishment.”

“But categories blur out important details,” she continues. “They’re efficient yet slippery. Once we have a ‘them’ to contrast with ‘us,’ we change. We know this from decades of research, all over the world. Under the influence of categories, we are less likely to cooperate with the other group and more likely to become hostile. We subtly adjust how we think and act in order to better fit our category. The tendency is automatic, and it happens even when

people are divided in an arbitrary way. On the set of the 1968 film ‘Planet of the Apes,’ the actors playing chimps and the ones playing gorillas ate lunch in separate groups. They just felt more comfortable with people in their same costume category.”

If there is a more timely book, I’m not sure what it would be. Look around. Civil discourse is all but dead. I know co-workers who can barely manage to speak to each other. I know family members who can’t stand to share a meal together. I even know church-going “Christians” who refuse to acknowledge each other – during communion. I think it’s fair to say that even the title of this one is astonishingly appropriate. We have all experienced “high conflict,” the kind that paralyzes those in its grasp. Yes, the picture that Ripley meticulously paints is not pretty; in fact, it’s downright depressing. But stay with me. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. It just takes us a while to get there.

“High Conflict” is one of the more extensively-researched books I have had occasion to read in recent memory, with a 14-page selected bibliography and 21 pages of source notes at the conclusion

of the introduction and seven chapters that comprise the main narrative. As alluded to in the title, the manuscript is divided into two major sections, “Part I: Into Conflict,” which consists of the first three chapters, and “Part II: Out of Conflict,” which is made up of the last four chapters. I appreciated the inclusion of a glossary as well as a list of the principal characters that populate the book – the black and white photographs and other illustrations scattered liberally throughout the prose also add to its overall appeal.

One feature that I found particularly captivating about “High Conflict” relates to how the author moves seamlessly back and forth between the everyday and the universal; between the seemingly mundane and the utterly consequential. Consider the following from “The Fire Starters,” the third chapter and one of my personal favorites:

“The most vexing problem, particularly for democracies, seems to be a ‘complicit’ state, as foreign policy scholar Rachel Kleinfeld found,” Ripley observes. “In Pakistan, for example, the intelligence service has given money, and sometimes weaponry, to radical Islamist groups to use against various political opponents. The government does this while simultaneously pointing to the threat of radical Islamists to justify its own budget. The corruption metastasizes...”

“Regular people learn that they cannot rely on the government, and so they seek justice in other ways,” she continues. “Violence becomes normalized. Societies become decivilized. ‘Ordinary people become impulsive, quicker to anger, more ready to see violence as normal,’ Kleinfeld wrote. At that point, it becomes much harder for governments to restore order. The state creates a monster, and it takes over.”

Sound familiar?

A contributing writer at The Atlantic, Ripley’s articles have appeared in Time Magazine, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, Slate, Politico, The Guardian and The Times of London. She has been interviewed regarding her work on ABC, NBC, CNN, FOX News and NPR as well as presented on a variety of topics at the Pentagon, the U.S. Senate, the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security. Her previous books include “The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes – and Why” in 2009 and “The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way” in 2014.

The further I got into the book, the more I saw the method to Ripley’s madness. It was important to go into considerable detail in laying out the full extent of the challenges we face when attempting to resolve conflict. You need a clear understanding of what you are up against before mounting an effective response. So when she did begin talking in earnest about how to deal with ‘high conflict,’ the strategies she recommends – both short-term and on a more permanent basis – made perfect sense. One of the more thought-provoking techniques involves ‘marginalizing the fire starters,’ which she eloquently describes in Appendix III, “How to Prevent High Conflict.”

“Notice who around you delights in the conflict,” Ripley notes. “Who tries to bond with other people over their shared loathing of a co-worker or a mother-in-law? Which leaders use the language of war to motivate their followers, when there is no war? I’ve become much less interested in which politicians are ‘moderate’ and much more interested in which are conflict entrepreneurs. Which ones divide the world clearly into us-versus-them, good-versus-bad? Which ones frame losses as a humiliation? Create some distance from these people. These are fire starters.”

Obviously, I liked this one. It should be required reading for anyone involved in any situation where interaction with other people is unavoidable. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.