On War

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War: What Is It Good For? By Ian Morris, Profile Books, 506 pages

The United States of America and the European Union share a western view of the world in which a democratic political order and the wealth engines of capitalism have made overt interstate violence obsolete. On this view, the great wars of the twentieth century were the last expressions of such violence and the culmination of a long historical process that began when human beings first let themselves be herded into organised states. Mass killing in warfare now seems abhorrent to us because modern political states have made it obsolete.

That claim is only the minor part of the message of the book *War*, by Stanford professor Ian Morris. The claim will probably find general agreement among the thinking public, in the western world at least. Citizens in democratic states with free markets recognise that their best interests lie in peaceful trade and cooperation. A Pax Americana has stabilised the free world and allowed a new and higher form of civilisation to flourish. Who among us would wish to disagree with that?

The major part of the message Morris delivers is more controversial. War, he contends, was the enabler for the evolution of modern states, which following Thomas Hobbes he calls Leviathans. Winning wars meant organising one's own side more effectively than the enemy could organise its opposition, and this asymmetry became a ratchet in which bigger generally meant better. Might was right, and the biggest bully ended up taking all. Now we enjoy the peace and protection offered by the meanest monster on the planet, namely the sole remaining military superpower, the United States, Globocop.

Morris presents this message in a chatty style, replete with repetition to hammer home his core message, in the evident hope of making the book a popular bestseller. But this only serves to highlight the obscenity, to a casual modern reader, of the idea that war was ever good for anything. Only a scientist who had studied the steadily diminishing casualty figures for conflicts over the ages, as a fraction of all deaths and in comparison with death tolls from famine or plague or other diseases, and then calmly contemplated the cruelty of the evolutionary process in all its natural forms, could happily assert anything so positive about war. For if Morris is right, we should welcome the pursuit of war in its latest guises as harbingers of further societal evolution. And this offends the modern sensibility mightily, so much so that a better explanation of why we should welcome war than Morris provides is really essential if anyone is to take his core thesis seriously at all.

The steady diminution of homicidal violence over the last few thousand years is now a widely accepted fact. Steven Pinker described and sought to explain the phenomenon in his 2012 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. But Morris adds what might seem an ironic twist in his claim that this diminution was positively facilitated by the evolution of warfare. His point is that war forced the emergence of ever bigger and better Leviathans, which learned both to pacify their interiors and to stabilise their external borders ever more effectively as history rolled on. Leviathans are good for us, or at least better than life in a savage society beyond the reach of law and order, so anything that helped usher the big beasts onto the stage of history was good too, including war.

The irony of this claim is not lost on Morris, who may even look forward with relish to the stir it will doubtless cause among the chattering classes, but science is a hard taskmaster. We need to examine the claim more carefully than Morris has done in his brisk and breezy overview of human history from the stone age to the present day. Now, he says, we are sharing in a global hive mind in the cloud of online connectivity, which thinkers like Ray Kurzweil predict will lead to the singularity, the rapture of the nerds. Our own examination should highlight two aspects. One is the evolution of war-fighting technology from hand axes and wooden spears to robot systems in kill chains that end in nuclear apocalypse. The other is ongoing change in human nature, based as it always was in the biology of our genes and modulated as it soon will be by our growing power to transform ourselves both physically and mentally. These two sides of the evolution of Leviathans, both in the past and into the future, deserve a much wider and deeper analysis than Morris has so far conducted.

As to the technology of warfare, its role in the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, the depredations of horsemen from the steppes of Asia, the rise and fall of the British Empire and its ruinous German nemesis, the revolt and decay of Soviet communism, and the modern emergence of asymmetric warfare, all invite

closer study. As for us, the human perpetrators and victims of war, the changes in our nature due to nutrition, religion, modern medicine, and genetic engineering all merit a closer look. Morris makes stabs at considering most of these issues, but misdirects some of his stabs and hence weakens his case.

On the Romans and the Huns and Mongols, Morris makes a pretty good case. The Romans generally made better use of iron weapons and iron discipline than their opponents and hence won big, but the Huns and later Asian nomads made better use of horses and mobile warfare for a thousand years and more. Then the Europeans fought back with guns, developed from early Chinese ideas, and created new Leviathans, which led in turn to what Morris calls the "Five Hundred Years' War" that led to a brief Pax Britannica based on naval supremacy before the Americans took the prize. The demise of the British Empire in genteel poverty, as national debts accumulated to pay for the imperial struggle against German militarists in two world wars, gets a rather superficial gloss in the Morris myth, and much more about the role of national rivalries in Europe as well as about the gradual morphing of Anglo-American power when capital flowed westward would be needed to tidy up the tale, but still there is wide agreement on the main story here. The decades of nuclear confrontation in the Cold War were clearly shaped by the technological enablement of four-minute megadeath scenarios, but Morris does not really explain how this developed or evolved. Perhaps only a physicist could fill out that story properly. As for asymmetric warfare by western forces against various kinds of insurgents and fundamentalists, Morris has simply missed the sudden rise of electronic mass surveillance it triggered. But the jury is still out on what all this means, and clearly there are still plenty of devils in the detail to be chewed over.

Changes in human nature are even harder to evaluate, and they are crucial to making sense of our changing views of war over the centuries. Morris discusses the lessons offered by chimpanzees and bonobos in Africa, and their relevance to early humans, but most of his tale unfolds over a timescale in which genetic changes to *Homo sapiens* are unlikely to be significant. What he does not mention is the possible relevance of epigenetic changes, and of selection effects at the level of neural organisation, which could well have put significant distance between us and our remote ancestors. A simple comparison with breeds of dogs, which have an equally brief history, suffices to suggest their relevance. War may be civilising us by killing off the foolhardy, or the weaklings, or both, but it is hard to see how we can measure such effects. Morris mentions the roles of nutrition and disease in his tale, but again only briefly. Millions of Native American were sickened to death by exposure to European pathogens, and poor peasants were starved in their millions by Soviet and Nazi overlords in the gory days of their lordship. Such phenomena may have left genetic scars we shall measure some day.

The role of religion in war and human evolution is a topic that bursts the bounds of the analysis Morris undertakes, but it is surely relevant to the overall picture. The various religions variously foster sexual and martial discipline, and variously incite their followers to acts of wisdom or folly that have great relevance, over historical time, to the evolution of Leviathans. One need only mention the influence of Christianity on Roman martial prowess, for good or ill, in the latter days of the Roman Empire, or the impact of Islam on the warlike propensities and capabilities of the Persian, Mughal, and Ottoman empires, to see a huge research field, as yet only thinly cultivated. And the future impact of modern medicine and genetic engineering on our readiness as a species to engage regularly in war, "productive" or otherwise, is of course anyone's guess.

The policy implications of the case for war in the book are hard to extract. If war has sometimes been productive, in the sense of fostering the growth of Leviathans that have in the end served us well, we should be less eager to condemn wars outright. In a world where conflicts still break out with distressing frequency, this may seem a disastrous conclusion to indulge. But more distressing is the idea that the fall in death rates may only be temporary. We see a lot of noise in the data, such as a thousand-year blip caused by horsemen from central Asia, and if the twentieth century had culminated in a nuclear spasm war with a death toll approaching a billion souls, which Morris briefly entertains, we would have seen the stats revert to stone-age levels. So the argument is dancing on thin ice as each new Leviathan finds new ways to cull us by many thousands or millions, and surely soon by billions. If in future the robots decide to continue on their terrestrial course without human aid and comfort, they might choose to delete mankind by means of an extinction-level event (a.k.a. ELE).

Altogether, Morris has opened a can of worms and hardly begun to sample its delights. His book is fun to read and stimulating, and he includes plenty of notes and references for readers who are determined to go deeper. But in the end, how much of his case is sustainable in science and how much is bluster and nonsense is still far from clear. To his credit, Morris says as much, but then, undaunted, he goes right ahead anyway and makes bold claims that will surely annoy more sensitive readers.