

JOHN KEEGAN - A HISTORY OF WARFARE

"The written history of the world is largely a history of warfare, because the states within which we live came into existence largely through conquest, civil strife, or struggles for independence."

CONTENTS

- 00 - [Introduction](#)
- 01 - [War In Human History](#)
- 02 - [Stone](#)
- 03 - [Flesh](#)
- 04 - [Iron](#)
- 05 - [Fire](#)
- 06 - [Conclusion](#)
- EX - [Beyond The Book](#)

INTRODUCTION

Soldiers are not as other men - that is the lesson that I have learned from a life cast among warriors.

War is wholly unlike diplomacy or politics because it must be fought by men whose values and skills are not those of politicians or diplomats. They are those of a world apart, a very ancient world, which exists in parallel with the everyday world but does not belong to it. Both worlds change over time, and the warrior world adapts in step to the civilian. It follows it, however, at a distance. The distance can never be closed, for the culture of the warrior can never be that of civilisation itself. All civilisations owe their origins to the warrior; their cultures nurture the warriors who defend them.

Ultimately, however, there is only one warrior culture. Its evolution and transformation over time and place, from man's beginnings to his arrival in the contemporary world, is the history of warfare.

The British army is tribal to an extreme degree; some of its regiments have histories which go back to the 17th century, when modern armies were only beginning to take shape from the feudal hosts of warriors whose forebears had entered western Europe during the invasion that overthrew the Roman empire.

#1 WAR IN HUMAN HISTORY

War is not the continuation of policy by other means. The world would be a simpler place to understand if this dictum of Clausewitz's were true.

War antedates the state, diplomacy and strategy by many millennia. Warfare is almost as old as man himself, and reaches into the most secret places of the human heart, places where self dissolves rational purpose, where pride reigns, where emotion is paramount, where instinct is king. 'Man is a political animal', said Aristotle. Clausewitz, a child of Aristotle, went no further than to say that a political animal is a warmaking animal. Neither dared confront the thought that man is a thinking animal in whom the intellect directs the urge to hunt and the ability to kill.

Shaka was a perfect Clausewitzian. He designed a military system to serve and protect a particular way of life, which it did with dramatic efficiency. Zulu culture, by making warrior values paramount, by linking those values to the preservation of a cattle-herding economy, and by locking up the energies and imagination of the most dynamic members of the community in sterile military bondage until well past maturity, denied itself the chance to evolve and adapt to the world around it.

Soldiers might, however, be slaves under the law in past times, however contradictory their status seems to us today. Slavery in the modern world implies the absolute deprivation of the individual's liberty, while possession of weaponry and mastery of their use are means to an individual's liberation. We do not perceive how a man may be armed and at the same time bereft of his freedom.

Culture is as powerful a force as politics in the choice of military means, and often more likely to prevail than either political or military logic.

Once Christendom was divided by the Reformation at the precise moment when technology made cannon mobile and personal firearms reliable, inhibitions against Christian shooting at Christian were dissolved. No such factors impinged on Japan. Domestically, the Japanese, though divided by class and faction, formed a single cultural unit. Gunpowder was therefore not essential to national security, nor was it sought as a means to victory by factions opposed to each other ideologically.

In ensuring that warriors had a monopoly on swords, the Tokugawa were guaranteeing the samurai at the pinnacle of Japanese society.

War may be, among many other things, the perpetuation of culture by its own means.

Poor states which fall into war with rich states are overwhelmed and humiliated. Poor states which fight each other, or are drawn into civil war, destroy their own well-being, and even the structures which make recovery from the experience of war possible.

"The institution of human slavery was created at the dawn of the human race, and many once felt it to be an elementary fact of existence. Yet between 1788 and 1888 the institution was substantially abolished... and this demise seems, so far, to be permanent. Similarly the venerable institutions of human sacrifice, infanticide and duelling seems also to have died out or been eliminated. It could be argued that war, at least war in the developed world, is following a similar trajectory."

- John Mueller

INTERLUDE #1 - LIMITATIONS ON WARMAKING

To look forward to a future in which recourse to war has been brought under rational limitation should not lead us into the false view that there have been no limitations on warmaking in the past.

The most important limitations on warmaking, however, have always lain beyond the will or power of man to command. They belong in the realm of what the Soviet General Staff used to call 'permanently operating factors' - weather, climate, seasons, terrain, vegetation etc.

70% of the globe's surface is covered by water, most of it open sea, and most large sea battles have taken place in all but a fraction of that area. What is remarkable is how close and often the sea battle cluster in the same corner of the map. Camperdown, Copenhagen and Jutland were all fought within 300 miles of each other; Salamis, Lepanto and Navarino, the first and last separated by 2300 years in time, took place at points scarcely more than a hundred miles apart. The Armada battle, Quiberon Bay and Trafalgar

were fought within a hundred miles of Longitude Five West, between Latitudes Fifty and Thirty North, a comparatively tiny patch of the globe.

In all, about 70% of the world's 60,000,000 square miles of dry land is either too high, too cold or too waterless for the conduct of military operations.

Battles not only tend to recur on sites close to each other - the 'cockpit of Europe' in northern Belgium is one such area, the 'Quadrilateral' between Mantua, Verona, Peschiera and Legnano in northern Italy another - but have frequently been fought on exactly the same spot over a very long period of history. The most arresting example is Adrianople, now Edirne, in European Turkey, where 15 battles or sieges have been recorded, the first in AD 323 and the last in July 1913.

War is always limited, not because man chooses to make it so, but because nature determines that it shall be.

#2 STONE

Why do men fight? Did men wage war in the Stone Age, or was early man unaggressive? Men - but also women - fight, with ink and paper, very fiercely over these questions.

Observation demonstrates that animals kill members of other species but also fight among themselves; the males of some species fight to the death. It is necessary to deny all genetic connection between man and the rest of the animal world - a position now held only by strict Creationists - in order to discount the possibility that aggression may be part of man's genetic inheritance.

British anthropologists, leaders in ethnography because of the opportunities for fieldwork that the enormous extent of their empire offered, accepted the importance of the thrust of Cultural Determinism but recoiled from its intellectual imprecision; they were dissatisfied above all by the refusal of the Cultural Determinists to admit that human nature and man's material needs might be as important as freedom of choice in determining within which culture he lived.

The Aztecs who fought were warriors, not soldiers; that is to say, they expected and were expected to fight because of the place they held in the social order, not because of obligation or for pay.

We date 'history' from the moment when man began to write or, more precisely, from when he left traces of what we can recognise as writing. Such traces, left by the people of Sumer, in what is now Iraq, have been dated to about 3100 BC.

"He still retained all the faculties that civilization has blunted - rapid action and highly trained senses of sight and hearing, physical toughness in an extreme degree, a detailed, precise knowledge of the qualities and habits of game, and great skill in using with the greatest effect the rudimentary weapons available."

- Brueil & Lautier, "The Men of the Old Stone Age"

These, of course, are the qualities of the warrior across the ages, which modern military training schools of Special Forces seek to re-implant in their pupils at the cost of much time and money. Modern soldiers learn to hunt to live.

At the beginning of the New Stone Age, some 10000 years ago, there occurred 'a revolution in weapons technology... four staggeringly powerful new weapons make their appearance... the bow, the sling, the dagger and the mace'.

Even in its simple form the bow transformed the relationship of man with the animal world. He no longer had to close to arm's length to dispatch his prey, pitting at the last moment flesh against flesh, life against life. In that departure ethologists like Lorenz and Audrey perceive the opening of a new moral dimension in man's relations with the rest of creation but also with his own kind.

Neither 'raiding' nor 'routing' is a true act of warfare. Each subsists below the military horizon and is better thought of as multiple murder than as an episode in a campaign.

The hunting men of the New Stone Age were no more than primitive warriors, members of groups without a distinguishable military class and without a 'modern' concept of warfare. Fight they no doubt did, ambush, raid and

perhaps 'rout' as well; but organise themselves for conquest and occupation they almost certainly did not.

In a still largely empty world, homo sapiens was devoting his energies to colonisation rather than conflict.

Hunters and gatherers may have 'territory'; pastoralists have grazing and watering-places; agriculturalists have land. Once man invests expectations of a regular return on his seasonal efforts in a particular place - lambing, herding, planting, reaping - he rapidly develops the sense of rights and ownership. Toward those who trespass on the places where he invests his time and effort he must equally rapidly develop the hostility of the user and occupier for the usurper and interloper. Fixed expectations make for fixed responses. Pastoralism, and agriculture even more so, make for war.

After the excavation of Jericho it was clear that warfare at least - for what could be the point of walls, towers and moats without a purposeful, well-organised and strongly armed enemy? - had begun to trouble man long before the first great empires arose.

INTERLUDE #2 - FORTIFICATION

A stronghold is a place not merely of safety from attack but also of active defence, a centre where the defenders are secure from surprise or superior numbers, and also a base from which they may sally forth to hold predators at bay and to impose military control over the area in which their interests lie. A refuge is a place of short-term safety, of value only against an enemy who lacks the means to linger in the vicinity or who operates a crude strategy of raiding against soft targets.

One of the fascinations of Jericho is that its builders, in the dawn of fortification practice, appear to have perceived all the dangers by which it might be threatened and to have furnished it with protection against each. To these three defensive features - walls, moat, tower - fortification engineers were to add little in the 8000 years between the building of Jericho and the introduction of gunpowder.

#3 FLESH

The modern thoroughbred is a force to be reckoned with, and the great thoroughbred may end his days more famous than most statesmen of his lifetime. The greatest of thoroughbreds may acquire regal and dynastic status.

A great horse, in a sense, becomes a king. It is not surprising that kings were made by the first great horses.

The horse that homo sapiens first knew was a poor thing; so poor indeed, that man hunted it for food. Equus, the ancestor of equus caballus, our modern horse, was actually hunted out of existence in the Americas by the Amerindians who crossed into the New World at the end of the last ice age. Stone Age man choose to eat the horse rather than drive or ride it because the animal they knew was almost certainly not strong enough in the back to bear an adult male human, while men themselves had not yet designed a vehcile to which a draught animal might be harnessed.

Why should charioteers, or the pastoralists from whom they directly or indirectly descended, have been more warlike than their hunting ancestors or agricultural neighbours? The answers requires a consideration of factors not for the squeamish, all having to do with how man has killed - or not killed - fellow mammals.

The farmer lacks skill both as a butcher of slaughtered meat and as a killer of young, nimble animals likely to evade his lethal intentions. Primitive hunters, though no doubt excellent butchers, were probably no more skilled in the techniques of the kill; their preoccupations were rather with tracking and cornering their prey rather than with the precise method by which they struck the fatal blow.

Pastoralists, on the other hand, learn how to kill, and to select for killing, as a matter of course... it was flock management, as much as slaughter and butchery, which made the pastoralists so cold-bloodedly adept at confronting the sedentary agriculturalists of the civilised lands in battle.

They knew how to break a flock up into manageable sections, how to cut off a line of retreat by circling to a flank, how to compress scattered beasts into a compact mass, how to isolate flock-leaders, how to dominate superior numbers by threat and menace, how to kill the chosen few while leaving the mass inert and subject to control. All pastoralists' methods of battle described at later dates in history disclose just such a pattern.

Quite as much as the charioteers' equipment and their familiarity with animals, their ability to move and readiness to do so fitted them for aggressive warmaking. All war requires movement, but for settled peoples even short-range moves impose difficulties. The farmer is harder than the artisan - but even he is soft compared to the nomad. The nomad is constantly on the move, eats and drinks when he can, braves all weathers, is grateful for small mercies. Everything he possesses can be bundled up at a moment's notice and his food moves with him, as grass and water call his flocks, whenever he shifts camp.

The ancient nomads of the arid steppe, where tribe had to compete against tribe for what scraps of grazing there were, must have been among the toughest people in creation.

As the apogee of its effectiveness, the chariot was overtaken in importance by a single element in the chariot system, the horse itself... by the 8th century BC selective breeding had produced a horse that Assyrians could ride from the forward seat, with their weight over the shoulders, and a sufficient mutuality had developed between steed and rider for the man to use a bow while in motion.

The fall of the Assyrian empire was due to the irruption, at the end of the 7th century BC, of a horse people known to us as the Scythians.

What is the steppe? To those who live in settled and temperate lands, the steppe means the enormous expanse of empty space that fills the map between the Arctic Ocean to the north and the Himalayas to the south, between the irrigated river valleys of China to the east and the barriers of the Pripet marshes and Carpathian mountains to the west. On the civilised man's mental map, it appears as not only featureless but climatically undifferentiated, a zone of sparse and uniform vegetation, without mountains, rivers, lakes or forests, a sort of waterless ocean without known voyagers.

"Man's greatest good fortune is to chase and defeat his enemy, seize his total possessions, leave his married women weeping and wailing, ride his gelding and use the bodies of his women as a nightshirt and support"

- Genghis Khan

The horse and human ruthlessness together thus transformed war, making it for the first time 'a thing in itself'. We can thenceforth speak of 'militarism', as aspect of societies in which there mere ability to make war, readily and profitably, becomes a reason for doing so. Yet militarism is a concept that cannot be applied to any horse people, since it presumes the existence of an army as an institution dominant over but separate from other social institutions.

Mongol sexuality was strict: adultery was punished by the death of both parties, and the taking of captive women was also disfavoured. This code eliminated quarrels over wife stealing so characteristic, and disruptive, of primitive societies. The Mongols, and Genghis Khan in particular, were nevertheless quick to take offence and brutal in taking revenge on outsiders; indeed, Genghis's life is largely a history of revenge-taking, and Mongol warfare mayb be viewed as an extension of the primitive urge to vengeance on an enormous scale.

The tools of warmaking already at Genghis's disposal - the horse warrior's mobility, the long range lethality of the composite bow, the do or die ethos of the ghazi, the social elan of exclusive tribalism - were formidable enough. When to those ingredients was added a pitiless paganism, untroubled by any of the monotheistic or Buddhist concerns with mercy to strangers or with personal perfection, it is not surprising that Genghis and the Mongols acquired a reputation for invincibility. Their minds as well as their weapons were agents of terror, and the terror they spread remains a memory to this day.

Arabs stood out among military peoples because they demonstrated an ability to transform not merely themselves but warfare itself. There had been military revolutions before, notably those brought by the chariot and cavalry horse. The Greeks had evolved the technique of the pitched battle, fought to the death on foot. The Arabs transfused warfare with a new force altogether, the force of an idea.

Their new religion, Islam, was a creed of conflict, that taught the necessity of submission to its revealed teachings and the right of its believers to take arms against those that opposed them. It was Islam that inspired the Arab conquests.

Though the Greeks took pride in their freedom and despised the subjects of

Xerxes and Darius for their lack of it, their hatred of Persia was at root nationalistic.

INTERLUDE #3 - ARMIES

Bodyguards, regulars, feudatories, mercenaries, military colonists, conscripts, self militias, remnants of warrior tribes from the steppe - can we impose any order on this medley? What theories explain the variety?

Military sociologists take as their premise the proposition that any system of military organisation expresses the social order from which it springs - and that this holds true even when the bulk of the population is held in thrall by an alien military hierarchy, of the sort that dominated Norman England or Manchu China, for example.

The most elaborate of these theories is the work of Anglo-Polish sociologist Stanislaw Andreski who is the best known for having suggested the existence of a Military Participation Ratio (MPR) by which, when other factors are taken into account, the degree to which a society is militarised may be measured.

Unfortunately, Professor Andreski's work is not 'accessible' - now, alas, an adjective of contempt in the academic world, where 'accessibility' is confused with shallowness - to the general reader, since he invented an elaborate vocabulary of new-coined words to define his terms.

Though he clearly prefers to live in a society with a low MPR, where the armed forces are subject to the rule of law, he is refreshingly free of the delusion that military dictatorships can be abolished by writing articles in journals of political science.

Our survey of military history so far reveals six main forms that military organisation may take: warrior, mercenary, slave, regular, conscript, and militia. The warrior group includes such groups as the samurai and the Western knightly class. Mercenaries are those who sell military service for money, grants of land, admission to citizenship or preferential treatment. Regulars are mercenaries who already enjoy citizenship or its equivalent but choose military service as a means of subsistence; in affluent states, regular service may take on some of the attributes of a profession. The militia principle lays the duty of performing military service on all fit male citizens;

failure or refusal to do duty usually entails loss of citizenship. Conscription is a tax levied upon a male resident's time at a certain age of life, though to citizens payment of such a tax is also usually represented as a civic duty; selective conscription, especially if for long periods of service to an unrepresentative government - 20 years was the term in Russia before the emancipation of the serfs - is difficult to differentiate from the slave system.

It is a central element of the contract between ruler and regulars that they are fed, housed and paid in peace as well as war. Rich states with an efficient taxing power may succeed in doing so for long periods; if militarily over-ambitious they may nevertheless overtax their inhabitants, while it is frequently the case that the attempt to reduce the size of an expanded regular force at the end of a long war drives it to mutiny, as the Irish Free State found in 1923.

Conscription is for rich states which offer rights - or at least the appearance of rights - to all. The first state to meet those conditions in full was the First French Republic. In France the benefit was citizenship to all who served.

In the long run, the establishment of universal conscription in the advanced states of continental Europe was matched by the extension of the vote, though for parliaments generally less responsible than those of Anglo-Saxon countries, and by processes that had no direct and visible connection.

#4 IRON

Stone, bronze and the horse - the principal means through which war was waged in the era when states were being established and when they were being assaulted by warrior peoples living beyond the settled zone - were by nature limited resources, though in different ways.

Given the extreme brevity of time in which attack could be made effective in the Greek farming world - and at least 80% of those we call 'citizens' of the city states were countrymen and not town dwellers - and given also that the attackers left their own fields vulnerable to spoilage when they marched off campaigning, the highest premium was placed, or placed itself, in settling matters as quickly and decisively as possible.

The 'idea' of military decision thus planted itself in the Greek mind beside those other ideas of decision - by majority in politics, of outcome by the inevitability of plot in drama, of conclusion by logic in intellectual work - which we associate with our Greek heritage.

The values of the Roman professional soldier were those by which his fellows in the modern age continue to live: pride in a distinctive (and distinctively masculine) way of life, concern to enjoy the good opinion of comrades, satisfaction in the largely symbolic tokens of professional success, hope of promotion, expectation of a comfortable and honourable retirement.

INTERLUDE #4 - LOGISTICS AND SUPPLY

Stone, bronze and iron furnished the instruments of combat, which is the central act of warfare, from its beginnings until its nature was transformed by gunpowder a mere 20 generations ago. Combat may only be joined, however, if the combatants find the means to meet on a battlefield, and to supply them on their way to such meetings presented difficulties second only to those of achieving success in combat itself. The horse peoples alone escaped such difficulties.

Experience, borne out by modern field trials, has established that the soldier's load cannot on average be made to exceed 70 pounds' weight - of which clothes, equipment, arms and necessities will form at least half; as a daily intake of solid food by a man doing heavy work weighs at least 3 pounds, it follows that a marching soldier cannot carry supplies for more than 10 or 11 days. These figures have not varied over centuries.

Moving at 20 miles a day, the very best speed to be achieved with regularity by men on foot - it was that of the legions of on the Roman internal lines of communication and of Von Kluck's army on the advance from Mons to the Marne in the French campaign of 1914.

The atomic bomb was the culmination of a process of technological development begun 500 years earlier, which sought to transfer demand for the energy needed for military purposes from the muscles of man and beast to a stored source. The search had begun with the discovery of gunpowder.

#5 FIRE

The modern frontiers of Europe are, indeed, largely the outcome of fortress-building, by which existing linguistic and the new, post-Reformation religious boundaries were teased and chivvied into neatness.

Even when a state possessed the means to identify its fit young males and their place of work or residence, as by 1914 all European states did, the best police force could not have sufficed to bring an entire age group to barracks if they resisted and if society at large supported their resistance.

By 1914 an entirely unprecedented cultural mood was dominating European society, one which accepted the right of the state to demand and the duty of every fit, male individual to render military service, which perceived in the performance of military service a necessary training in civic virtue and which rejected the age-old social distinction between the warrior - a man set apart whether by rank or no rank at all - and the rest, as an outdated prejudice.

The United States, least militarised of Western societies at mid-century, was the first to discover the danger of that movement. Plunged into civil war in 1861, neither North or South expected a long conflict.

Eventually the South was to assemble nearly 1,000,000 men under arms, the North 2,000,000 out of a pre-war population of 32,000,000; a military participation ratio of 10%, which these figures represented, is, as we have seen, about the maximum a society can tolerate while continuing to function at normal levels of efficiency.

By April 1865, when the North's strangulation of the South at last achieved its result, 620,000 Americans had died as a direct result of the war, more than the total number killed in the two world wars, Korea and Vietnam.

The emotional aftermath of the war inoculated several generations of Americans against the false romanticism of uniforms and training camps.

Perhaps the most powerful sentiment that supplied popular consent to militarisation was the thrill of the process itself. The proclamation of egalitarianism had provided the French Revolution was one of its headiest appeals. That appeal had been rooted in the identification of equality with arms bearing and had launched into the European consciousness the idea that to serve as a soldier made a man more not less of a citizen.

"Paradoxical as it may sound, escape from freedom was often a real liberation, especially among young men living under rapidly changing conditions, who had

not yet been able to assume fully adult roles."

- William McNeill

This judgement implies that there was a measure of infantilism in Europe's enthusiastic espousal of militaristic tendencies, and that may well be: 'infantilism' and 'infantry' have the same root. If so, it was the infantilism of a thinking child. Clever men and responsible governments found wordy arguments to justify themselves.

'Every man a soldier', the philosophy which underlay conscription politics, rested on a fundamental misunderstanding of the potentiality of human nature.

Warrior peoples might have made every man a soldier, but they had taken care to fight only on terms that avoided direct or sustained conflict with the enemy, admitted disengagement and retreat as permissible and reasonable responses to determined resistance; made no fetish of hopeless courage, and took careful measure of the utility of violence. The Greeks had shown a bolder front; but, while inventing the institution of face-to-face battle, they had not pushed their ethic of warmaking to the point of demanding Clausewitzian overthrow as its necessary outcome. Their European descendants had limited the objects of their warmaking also, the Romans to that of consolidating but then chiefly assuring a defensible frontier for the civilisation - quintessentially the Chinese military philosophy also - while the Romans' successors had fought, incessantly though they did, chiefly for enjoyment of rights within quite closely circumscribed territories. In a different form, battles for rights had also characterised the wars of states in the gunpowder age.

In none of these contests, moreover, had the combatants yielded to the delusion that the whole male population must be mobilized to persecute the quarrel. No pre-1789 society considered soldiering a calling for any but the few. War was rightly seen as too brutal a business for any except those bred to it by social position or driven to enlist by lack of any social position whatsoever.

The exclusion of the industrious, the skilled, the learned and the modestly propertied from military service reflected a sensible appreciation of how war's nature bore on human nature.

#6 CONCLUSION

The whirlwind victory of the forces sent to punish Iraq and deprive it of its illegal sequestration of territory, achieved without the infliction of civilian casualties and authorised throughout by United Nations resolution, was the first genuine triumph of just war morality since Grotious had defined its guiding principles at the height of the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century.

Man has a potentiality for violence; that cannot be denied, even if we concede that it is a minority, rather than a majority, in any society that is likely to carry potentiality into effect. Man has learned, over the course of 4000 years in which organised armies have existed, to identify in that minority those who will make soldiers, to train and equip them, to supply the funds they need for their support, and to endorse and applaud their behaviour at those times when the majority feel at threat. We must go further: a world without armies - disciplined, obedient and law abiding armies - would be uninhabitable. Armies of that quality are an instrument but also a mark of civilisation and without their existence mankind would have to reconcile itself either to live at primitive level, below the 'military horizon', or to a lawless chaos of masses warring, Hobbesian fashion, 'all against all'.

The civilised societies in which we best like to live are governed by law, which means that they are policed, and policing is a form of coercion. In our acceptance of policing we silently concede that man has a darker side to his nature which must be constrained by fear or superior force. Punishment is the sanction against those who will not be constrained and superior force is its instrument.

The Western way of warfare was to carry all before it in the years after Clausewitz died. During the 19th century all Asian peoples, with the exceptions of the Chinese, Japanese and Thais and the subjects of the Ottoman Turks, came under Western rule; the primitives of the Americas, Africa and the Pacific stood no chance at all. A few people of remote and inaccessible regions - Tibet, Nepal, Ethiopia - alone proved too difficult to bring under the sway of empire, though all experienced Western invasions. During the first half of the 20th century even China succumbed, at the hands of the Westernised Japanese, while most of the Ottoman lands were overrun by Western armies also.

The triumph of the Western way of warfare was, however, delusive. Directed against other military cultures it had proved irresistible. Turned in

on itself it brought disaster and threatened catastrophe.

The First World War, fought almost exclusively between European states, terminated European dominance of the world, and through the suffering it inflicted on the participant populations, corrupted what was best in their civilisation - its liberalism and hopefulness - and conferred on militarists and totalitarians the role of proclaiming the future. The future they wanted brought about the Second World War which completed the ruin initiated by the First. It also brought about the development of nuclear weapons, the logical culmination of the technological trend in the Western way of warfare, and the ultimate denial of the proposition that war was, or might be, a continuation of politics by other means.

Politics must continue, war cannot. That is not to say that the role of the warrior is over. The world community needs, more than it has ever done, skillful and disciplined warriors who are ready to put themselves at the service of its authority. Such warriors must properly be seen as the protectors of civilisation, not its enemies. The style in which they fight for civilisation - against ethnic bigots, regional warlords, ideological intransigents, common pillagers and organised international criminals - cannot derive from the Western model of warmaking alone. Future peacekeepers and peacemakers have much to learn from alternative military cultures, not only that of the Orient but of the primitive world also. There is a wisdom in the principle of intellectual restraint and even of symbolic ritual that needs to be rediscovered. There is an even greater wisdom in the denial that politics and war belong on the same continuum. Unless we insist on denying it, our future, like that of the late Easter Islanders, may belong to the men with bloodied hands.

BEYOND THE BOOK

>> In an [interview](#) with Booknotes, Keegan discussed the themes of the book and his beliefs:

"The historian ought to be an educated person, writing for other educated people about something which they don't know about, but wish to know about in a way that they can understand. "

"Are you a pacifist?"

"Ninety-five percent."

"What's the five percent?"

"There are certain wicked people in the world that you can't deal with except by force."

"The most wicked in your lifetime?"

"Hitler, without doubt. I think Hitler was seriously, seriously wicked - not mad; twisted. A lot of the Bolsheviks were simply dreadful, too: Nazi, terrorist, terrible. The great men of power who seek to change the nations they belong to usually are pretty terrible people."

"That 5 percent, then, allows what?"

"It allows the use of extreme force in a measured way - if possible, in a measured way in order to curtail or extinguish the activities of these wicked men we're talking about."

"I will never oppose the Vietnam War. I thought that the Americans were right to do it. I think it was a responsible effort by the United States. I think they fought it in the wrong way, it wasn't run as a proper war. It was run with one eye on public opinion the whole time. But I think that they were right to oppose the attempts by Ho Chi Minh and Giap to make the whole of Vietnam into a Marxist society. And looking to what's happened to the country since, I still believe that it was right to try and stop them. I wouldn't have felt it was the end of the world if the Vietnam War hadn't been fought. It's not that kind of war. I don't think it's a war like fighting Hitler, but I think it was a correct war, a right war, and it had indirect effects of the greatest importance as well. I think it demonstrated to the Russians of the Russian leadership of the last years of communism that the Americans were serious when they said that they opposed communism. And I think it, therefore, eventually contributed to the end of the Cold War and the fall of Communist regimes all over central and eastern Europe."

>> In this short [article](#) for the "Daily Times", Keegan gives an extremely brief history of warfare:

"War, historically, is a predatory affair. The more likely explanation of its origin is in the attacks made by our hunter ancestors on our other ancestors who, after retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last ice age, had begun to domesticate animals and cultivate the land. These early pastoralists and farmers made easy meat. It was only slowly that they learnt to protect themselves against the raiders who emerged without warning from the wilderness beyond the borders of the cultivated lands to pillage and slay.

The first form of protection they adopted was that of fortification. When the limited value of fixed defences was recognized, they began to take the offensive to the enemy. Armies originated as counter-attack forces, funded out of the agricultural surplus, which paid some of the early agricultural communities' members to undertake specialist, perhaps full-time, duty as soldiers. By the third millennium BC, such military specialists were campaigning at long distances from cultivated land to check raiders at the borders and even carry war into their homelands.

It was to be a long step, however, between the inception of purposive warfare and the domination of human communities by specialist armed forces. Civilisation, which depends for its survival on the maintenance of law and order, within and without, is a fragile creation. Between the invention of the first regular armies in the first millennium BC and their universal adoption by the world's advanced states only three hundred years ago, much disorder intervened. The Chinese empire, oldest and most durable of polities, underwent frequent periods of turmoil whenever its armies lost control of the border with Central Asia or of the population. Rome, which perfected the regular army in a form still influential today, succeeded in establishing stability and maintaining it for several hundred years. It did so, however, only by conducting an active defence of the frontiers as a permanent condition of the empire's survival and, when the army eventually failed as an instrument of state, disorder broke in, to persist over wide areas of Europe for a thousand years.

In the wider world, untouched by the Roman or Chinese empires, warfare was endemic, motivated often by predation but also, as a society complexified, by quarrels over personal, family, or group prestige, territorial control, access to markets or commodities or by the need to achieve security. All these motives are discernible in the military history of the Greek world, with its passion for discord. Quarrel over rights, legal or dynastic, was a particular cause of warfare in post-Roman Europe. To these impulses to belligerence the rise of Islam, in the seventh century AD, added that of demand for religious conformity, not previously known as a military imperative. It would eventually become a major cause of conflict, as would, later still, political ideologies that claimed a similar orthodoxy.

The rise of the European maritime empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had the indirect effect, meanwhile, of bringing local and

traditional warfare over much of Asia and Africa to an end. Whatever its injustices, imperialism brought domestic peace to Europe's colonies and possessions. Paradoxically, it was within Europe, after a comparatively untroubled nineteenth century, that war returned to rend civilized life with intensity never before known. The First World War shook the continent's political structure to its foundations, destroying historic dynastic states and creating circumstances in which aggressive ideologies came to rule where comparatively benevolent monarchies had done before. The Second World War, essentially a conflict of those ideologies, broke continental borders to engulf eventually almost the whole world and to carry to its far corners the most destructive military technology human ingenuity could invent, of which the atomic bomb was the ultimate development. By 1945 the many transformations through war had passed had culminated in a form of war mankind could no longer risk waging. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not simply events but warnings that warfare was now a medium of human relations that would destroy all who tried to turn it to their use."

>> More Quotes from John Keegan

Men killing other men really is an extraordinary phenomenon. Why does it happen? And how long has it gone on? And have the motives changed?

The suspicion grows that battle has already abolished itself.

Good men who exercise power are really the most fascinating of all people.

I do despise the direction that university history writing has taken, in which enormous effort and years of work are given to writing books which really only interest a few hundred others.

I don't look to find an educated person in the ranks of university graduates, necessarily. Some of the most educated people I know have never been near a university.

I've got a sort of an 18th century view of what being educated is, which is having read the major works of literature, having an understanding of the broad periods of history into which the world's past is divided, perhaps speaking another language.

Those who say if you put lawyers in charge, nothing ever happens. And that's the soldiers' view and the view of government in countries like the United States and Britain.

If they are trying to kill you, on the whole they're the people you have to kill, aren't they?

When I was at Princeton as a fellow in 1984, I became afflicted by cultural homesickness and I read the whole of Jane Austen in about two or three weeks.

#

Return to [Quotes](#) index, or [Site](#) homepage.

By Keegan: [Warpaths](#) * [Intelligence In War](#) * [Soldiers](#) * [First World War](#) * [Second World War](#)