

HUMAN PENCHANT FOR WAGING WAR

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THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL — Human Nature and the Origins of War: David Livingstone Smith; St. Martin's Press, 175, Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010. \$ 24.95.

Are humans conditioned by their nature to wage war, is a question debated over centuries. If a human decides to kill, there is no animal as dangerous because of the superior intellect, skills, tools and technology available to the species. None other in the animal world can match human ingenuity in finding ways to kill more effectively or efficiently. Humans unlike other animal species also wage wars which require planning, purpose and resources. One comes back to the question, whether the human race is predisposed to war, by its genetic nature.

The reality

The reality through the ages has been of wars of extreme cruelty, barbaric genocide and wholesale disregard for life — even of women and children. No state and race has been free of this from the Vikings, Mongols, Christian Crusaders, to modern instances of Holocaust, Japanese excesses in China or the Pol Pot killings. India had faced the towers of human skulls laid out by Ahmad Shah Abdali, even as it remembers harrowing instances of British and Indian cruelty to each other in 1857. Darfur, Somalia, and the wars of ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia have only confirmed the historical trends. Even as the concept of Just Wars, the statutes, Geneva Conventions and Human Rights have all sought to limit the scale of carnage in wars, wars have remained a constant presence through human history. Nevertheless, the human race has also demonstrated its infinite capacity to build and sustain peace. The best of human achievements have come about in long periods of peace.

Urge to wage war

What then explains the yin and yang of human urges to higher values with the need to wage wars? The Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana have grappled with this by relating wars to human covetousness. The role of the monarch in defence of both his people and of a higher moral order is powerfully depicted in them. The great thoughts of Plato and Aristotle have provided the foundations of philosophical thought on war amongst states. The central theme which unites these great traditions is the essential value of respect for human life.

The assumption that humans are essentially humans driven by their natural compulsion to wage wars is examined in this book. The author, a professor of psychology, makes a bold foray into examining the behaviour of apes — killer apes as he terms them — to seek answers to human history's continuing phenomena of war waging. He moves confidently

between archaeology, anthropology, psycho-analysis and life sciences to find answers to the eternal question. The book draws powerfully on the long history of wars and their catastrophic consequences. The role of religious beliefs in war waging and the Hobbesian world of conflict of interests are examined. The contradiction between man's ability to think most nobly together with his descent to bestial behaviour figures again and again in this analysis. The answer is sought in the realms of human nature, which is portrayed as having forever fixated the human race to war.

Avoiding wars

There is a fascinating account of a discussion between Einstein and Freud, which had been published in 1933, under the title "Why War?" That year Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany and promptly banned the book, and the Nazis burnt copies of the book. Freud is stated to have remarked, "What progress we are making. In the Middle Ages they would have burned me. Now they are content with burning my books." In the book, Einstein had asked how mankind can be delivered from the menace of war. Freud had blamed the twin stimuli of sexual desire and destructive urge. That in itself cannot be a sufficient answer to the question of war and human nature. Nuclear weapons have now made the prospect of war unthinkable. Yet at lower levels of technology armed conflicts are being played out, with large scale killings.

This book explores man as the critical element in war. There is another dimension to war, which needs to be taken into account. Man as an individual is a different animal, in contrast to man as part of a society or state. It is humans who form themselves into states and subject themselves to regulations to find security in an anarchic world. The same humans as states have formed the United Nations to bind themselves to processes for avoiding wars.

At the personal level, man needs to govern himself by his faculty to discriminate. Plato wrote in the 4th Century of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi having an inscription, "Know Thyself." At the collective human level, the U.N. Charter lists the need to rid mankind of the scourge of war as the first human need. Man thus remains more capable of seeking peace than waging wars. This most interesting book thankfully reaches that heartening conclusion.