Book Reviews

# War: What Is It Good For? The Role of Conflict In Civilisation, From Primates to Robots

By Ian Morris

Reviewed by Squadron Leader Ralph Dinsley

**Biography:** Squadron Leader Ralph Dinsley is currently assigned to HQ 1 Gp as the lead staff officer for space operations. He leads the RAF contribution to global space situational awareness activity which includes 2 significant programmes; the Combined Space Operations Initiative and EU Space Surveillance and Tracking Framework.

## Introduction

Depending on the age of the reader the title of this book will immediately invoke Marvin Gaye's counter culture song of the late Sixties or, Frankie Goes to Hollywood or Bruce Springsteen's covers from the early/mid-Eighties respectively. However, putting popular music aside, the aim of Ian Morris's latest book is not to advocate the evil of warfare but to convince us of the unpalatable paradox that although "war is mass murder" (p. 7) it has been inherently good for the development of society over the centuries. Challenging some of our core beliefs he argues that war has been instrumental in the gradual pacification of civilisation whilst concluding that although we are still far from the eradication of warfare its end may also be within our grasp. In this his third commercial publication, the acclaimed author, historian and archaeologist leaves no stone unturned to support the theory that war has made the world a richer and safer place recognising also that the future of warfare is intrinsically changing. It is a compelling read which draws upon a breathtaking, yet

sometimes confusing, array of data from palaeography, anthropology, history, psychology, political science and more to support an unimaginable conclusion.

Following an introduction highlighting a four-part case supporting the author's argument, the book is divided into seven chapters covering three core sections. Chapters 1 – 5 establish the history of war before Morris contextually explores its evolutionary roots, finally moving on to speculate on the future of both warfare and mankind ("transhuman" and "posthuman" p. 387-88). Telling "the story of war" (p. 25) over the first five chapters he tracks the evolution of warfare from ancient times through to the 1980's, culminating on a moment in time introduced early in the book as "when I almost died in battle" (p. 3); a reference to one night in 1983 when the Third World War almost began and a thread the author revisits many times. Morris reasons that historically there are two kinds of warfare, 'productive' and 'counter-productive', and rather than a steady linear progression from early simple societies through to the complex ones of modern times, conflict has created an 'ebb and flow' as empires have expanded and subsequently declined. These examples underscore the first part of his case, that productive wars created more organised societies subsequently reducing the risk from violent death. With the collapse of empires, through counter-productive war, there was a decline in safety and prosperity and therefore a greater risk of violence.

Referencing Hobbes Leviathan the author shapes his argument around the theory that "war makes the state and the state makes peace". Chapter 4 focuses on the global rise of European countries through their unique ability to take "Asian ideas in radically different directions" (p. 178) and utilise them to their own advantage; particularly in the case of the development of the gun. By the time Chapter 5 concludes Leviathan has spawned a greater beast in the form of a 'globocop'. A giant which not only had the power to transform but ultimately the power of near total destruction; first in the form of "Pax Britannica" (p. 225) transforming the world and ultimately assumed by "Pax Americana" (p. 340) and its modern weapons of mass destruction. At this point the narrative of war, stability, prosperity and safety is broken by broadening the context to explore the evolutionary nature of conflict in Chapter 6. Morris enlists the anthropological studies of chimpanzees not only to "answer the fundamental question of what war is good for" (p. 293) but also to project the future of humanity. The final chapter provides some fascinating analyses of a number of troubling scenarios which may play out in the near future, but ultimately settling on the overarching aim of the book.

Ian Morris is quickly becoming an internationally recognised author of 'big history'. The Willard Professor of Classics and fellow of the Archaeology Centre at Stanford University wrote a number of scholarly works before penning his first commercial book in 2011. In this book he combines a personal account, military historian, technical study and reviews war within the broader pattern of evolution thus presenting a convincing argument for war; albeit through a 'single lens'. A libertarian, economist or pacifist would be horrified by the conclusion and perceive the pacification of society in a completely different light. Although Morris succeeds in his aim of making the provocative notion of 'war being good for society' appear feasible

I cannot concur with this conclusion. I find the concept particularly disturbing and morally corrupt; with the future vision not only unpalatable but also mind boggling. Simplistically, a world order 'policed' by the US to maintain the peace is a nightmarish contradiction. No matter how the facts are presented, the modern democratic state through free markets should recognise that its best interests lie in peaceful trade and cooperation, not through warfare. However this cannot detract from the risk of this book being used as the standard bearer for the justification of warfare.

Written for a generally educated audience his book will frustrate a number of academic and military readers and there is one fundamental question the author fails to answer even though he poses it early, during the introduction; what does he define as war? There is no clear cut definition within this book with violent death statistics taken from times when population density was scant through complex military conflicts and on to modern times. Arguably we've experienced some of the worst conflicts in history over the past hundred years but statistically with the world population at record highs the percentages are likely to be lower. Ultimately, this book is a fascinating alternative to conventional thought and I would recommend it to history and military buffs and social scientists alike. For a big picture view it is an original and challenging work which also advocates an extremely important discussion.