

THE END OF WAR, by John Horgan
Book Report and Comment, by David G. Schwartz, M.D.

What is the probability that we could see the end of war, as we know it in the next few decades? No one knows, but what enormous global public health outcomes would result? John Horgan makes the case very well that war is not inevitable, and it never has been. In contrast to other disasters such as earthquakes or pandemics that kill many people, we collectively make a choice to make war or to not make war. War does not cause all the poverty, famine, and disease in the world, but it is a major factor in disease, suffering, illiteracy, disability, both physical and mental, and poor quality of life in many aspects. And war just perpetuates more war. Just 3% of the U.S. military budget could eliminate starvation on earth. Diverting military financial resources to constructive human activities could raise the level of health and well being for the masses.

The author does not predict the end of war at any particular time, but he considers every argument for the inevitability of war and disproves each one.

He has given talks around the U.S. and Europe, has done surveys on the Internet. In every audience, 80% of people believe that war will never end, whether they are conservative or liberal, male or female, affluent or poor, educated or uneducated. Some say war is a “universal law of life,” that war is part of human nature. In a debate I attended entitled, “Is War Ever Justified?” between David Swanson of “World Beyond War,” and a retired high-ranking military officer, the latter stated that, since the “Fall of Man,” (in the book of Genesis), people would always do evil things, including war, and we have to defend ourselves. Some say people would be bored without war. Some say war among humans will only end when people are united against an alien force from outer space, or if we unite under one religion, or if everyone dies.

This author, through his research on war, proceeds to debunk the idea that war is inevitable. Scientists have not been successful in tracing war to a single cause or a set of causes, such as genetics, ecological, economic, political, or cultural, although every one of these factors can influence war making.

He says that, “we are not hardwired for war.” Evidence of lethal violence first showed up about 13,000 years ago, shortly before the beginning of civilization, not at the beginning of Homo sapiens or the genus Homo, millions of years ago. From prehistory to the present, many societies have not resorted to war and militarism. So it is not universal, not genetic. In fact since the first half of the 20th century, annual war related casualties have dropped ten fold in spite of population growth. Is humanity as a whole gradually moving away from war?

He declares that war must end for moral reasons, as it is “not only wrong but crazy, absurd, contradictory,” even when fought for seemingly just causes. Violence is basically contrary to human nature. Even in war zones, combatants routinely do acts of heroic kindness and generosity.

I would insert that wars are never won. Only one side loses worse than the other. The myth of “redemptive violence” is pervasive in our culture, violence to overcome violence. The movies, cartoons, video games consistently preach that the way to overcome injustice, bullying, and violence, is to use violence. Entertaining though it is, the absurdity becomes more obvious when we see that violence does not end violence. The means may be more important than the end. Specific goals have been achieved, but the violent means has not changed the paradigm. Violent punishment seems to justify the violent crime, because it is supposed to correct something, as if it makes it all right, because the crime is paid for by more violence. Crime and punishment go together like hand and glove, as they both perpetuate violence. Revenge follows revenge, and it goes on and on, if the cycle is never broken. The premise is that two wrongs make a right, which is the absurdity of it. So instead of focusing on some problem that we think war can correct, we need to look at war itself and its causes and its self-fulfilling prophecies. If we believe that war is inevitable, then our belief will continue to create that reality through fear and paranoia. If we are fatalistic and think we have nothing left in our choice of actions except violence as a last resort, than we fulfill the saying, “violence is the last resort of the incompetent.” We do have choices other than violent means to solve our problems. We do not have to resort to incompetence.

In the 1980's, David Adams, a psychologist at Wesleyan University demonstrated that people who believe that war is inevitable “because human beings are naturally aggressive,” were less likely to work for disarmament and peace, thus promoting the self-fulfilling prophecy. He met with 19 other scientists in Seville, Spain in 1986, all of whom set out to launch a campaign sponsored by the U.N., to dispel the myth that war is instinctive and intrinsic to human nature. They said that “it is scientifically incorrect” to say that we have inherited a tendency to make war, from our animal ancestors, that war or violent behavior is genetically programmed into our human nature, that in evolution, there has been a selection for aggressive behavior more than other kinds of behavior, that humankind has a violent brain, or that war is caused by “instinct,” or any single motivation. UNESCO approved the Seville statement in 1989, and it has disseminated it ever since. It has been endorsed by many scientific organizations, including the American Anthropologic Association, and the American Psychological Association. Yet since then, people, young and old, still remain pessimistic and fatalistic about war.

The author discusses the myth of the “demonic male.” Many have cited evidence of male chimpanzees’ violence and killings and sometimes group killings that resemble war on a small scale. Research shows that it is environmental conditions and culture within the apes’ societies that determine aggressive tendencies more than genetics. The research of Sapolsky, deWaal, and Wrangham show that the aggressive behavior of these primates is not hardwired, but flexible and varied, and “coalition killings” are rare. It may also be that contact with humans has led to more violence, that in their primal environments, the apes are less aggressive. Many of the studies showing violence have been since chimpanzees have been in contact with humans.

Anthropological research shows that pre-civilization humans, hunters and gatherers, sometimes had violent skirmishes, and sometimes not. Anthropologist Lawrence Keeley,

in his book War Before Civilization, cites incredible plasticity of human social behavior. Extremely belligerent human societies can rapidly become peaceful, and vice versa.

What about the notion that “a few bad apples spoil the whole barrel,” that a few bloodthirsty males are hardwired to enjoy hurting others? They then put others in a position to react with violence for defense, and to promote violence among their countrymen. A few men do enjoy war, but most find it traumatic, and many have psychological breakdowns during war. Samuel L.A. Marshall, U.S. Army brigadier general and historian, polled 400 companies of infantrymen who fought in Europe and the Pacific during WW II. He found that only 15-20% of veterans fired their weapons in combat, even when ordered to do so. He wrote Men Against Fire in 1947, and said, “The average and normally healthy individual has such an inner and usually unrecognized resistance toward killing a fellow man that he will not of his own volition take life if it is possible to turn way from that responsibility.” With more intense combat training, firing rates rose to 55% in the Korean War and 90% in the Vietnam War. This may explain why more veterans in modern wars have PTSD, and many are scarred for life, because of the insane training to do insane things that are repulsive, such as killing.

This author writes, “War in the end, annihilates meaning, because it renders individual lives worthless. That is why it traumatizes so many soldiers.

What about the 2% of every population that is psychopathic and will kill with no empathy or remorse? Many dictators like Hitler and Stalin were psychopathic and were responsible for much of the slaughter of the 20th century, but also several U.S. Presidents were personally averse to killing, yet sent soldiers to war, and most of the Nazi war criminals were terrifyingly normal. This shows that it is the military process that makes people killers, and mostly not killers who make war. No biological model can explain why homicide rates in the U.S. are 10 times lower than in El Salvador and 10 times higher than in Japan.

Neither the male gender, fondness for sports, or more sex or less sex have been shown to be consistent correlates with belligerence. Though men fought most of the wars, the female battalions have shown courage, bravery, and ruthless butchery, and women organized campaigns to shame men into joining the military in WW I.

What about scarcity of resources, fights over water, climate changes, etc? Steven LeBlanc, director of collections at the Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, wrote in Constant Battles, Why We Fight, that demographic and environmental factors, in particular population outgrowing its food supply, caused wars. This Malthusian theory has been very popular. Many wars have been fought over scarce resources. The recent war in Syria may have been triggered by scarcity from climate change.

On the contrary, densely populated areas in ancient Ur and Uruk in Mesopotamia as well as in China and in the Americas did no warfare for several generations. Some tribal societies fought, in the absence of dense population and deprivation. Napoleon Chagnon,

writing about the Yanomamo, said warfare is more intense in areas with the sparsest population and most plentiful food. Some tribal people recognized war as cause of scarcity instead of vice-versa. Anthropologists Carol and Melvin Ember at Yale University, studied files of detailed information gathered over two centuries about 360 simple and complex societies, and found that “Chronic scarcity has no effect on warfare frequency.” There was enormous variability of warfare within and between cultures, also disproving genes or biology as propensity for war. They did find that psychological factors, fear of scarcity did trigger conflicts, which can cause war in any society any time due to imagined disasters. War then can cause worse disaster than what was feared originally. Warfare causes scarcity that then can trigger more wars, a destabilizing cycle, and that probably caused the fall of Rome, the Mayan Empires, and Easter Island.

Many other theories, such as income inequality, cultural machismo, arms races, lack of shared trade or language, have been proposed, but warfare seems to promote cultural machismo rather than vice versa. “Arms races are not strongly correlated with wars, nor do trade or a shared language make nations less likely to fight.” Neighbors are more likely to fight each other than non-neighbors. “Wars overall, are not associated with a particular culture or with economic expansion or decline.”

War has been blamed on a plethora of factors, but wars are so diverse that evidence can be found for or against almost every theory, even “the desire for peace.”

Margaret Meade, in her essay in 1940, “War is Only an Invention-Not a Biological Necessity,” she states that not all societies engage in war. Some, in fact, are very puzzled by the very concept. Some, like the Eskimos, have individual violence, but not war. Then some societies war, just because it is a cultural tradition, with none of the aforementioned triggers for war, such as scarcity, greed, etc.

She says war is a cultural invention, and once invented, it can become a habit, a custom, a tradition. War is its own cause. War is a “meme.” A self-perpetuating cultural belief or behavior that can sometimes spread in spite of the harm it does, is called a meme, a term coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in the 1940’s. This explains why Meade found that some societies with no good reason to fight, do, and others with every reason to fight, don’t. How did this meme spread so rapidly after its invention 13,000 years ago? It is like an infectious disease that spreads to societies that do not want it. The fear of war, like fear of scarcity, can breed war.

War crimes come from docility, receptivity to social influence. Ordinarily non-violent people do egregious atrocities when ordered to do so, out of “altruism,” sacrificing for the “love of country.” Again, it is war itself that results in war crimes, not criminal intent on the part of the perpetrator.

How can peace be achieved? Political scientist J. David Singer founded the Correlates for War project. His research undercut many solutions for war. He found no evidence that preparing for war, maintaining a powerful military force, or keeping strong alliances keeps the peace. Allies are more likely to fight than non-allied nations.

Mead says that to make war obsolete, a society has to see the defects of the old invention, and someone must make a new invention. Well, many effective “new” inventions have existed even before the invention of nation-states. Douglas Fry, in his book, The Human Potential For Peace, documents countless methods for resolving disputes non-violently. He cites the Hopi, the Mehinku of Brazil, the Netsilik of the Inuit people, the Senai, the Iroquois Confederacy on this continent, and the U.N._

Mr. Horgan recounts several tribes and countries that simply made a conscious decision to stop warring, and they did.

The author recommends disseminating the writings of Gene Sharp, then 83 years old, running the under funded Albert Einstein Institution. His writings have influenced opposition movements in many countries, and many leaders see him as a threat. Since he published his first book, The Politics of Nonviolent Action in 1973, while teaching political science at Harvard, his many other works have been translated into 30 languages.

A major goal of Sharp’s work is for people to realize that they have more choices and power than they think that they do. Even the most brutal tyrants rely, to some extent, on the cooperation of the citizens, not on just the soldiers and the police.

Sharp was a Quaker in the 1950’s, and was imprisoned for being a conscientious objector, but he now dismisses conscientious objection as an ineffective gesture. He advocates nonviolence for practical rather than spiritual reasons. The best way is nonviolent action. He doesn’t believe in the inherent goodness of people. A world in which bad people pursued their goals nonviolently would be a vast improvement over ours. He believes that most people wage war as a means to an end. If they can see that nonviolence is more effective than violence, they will choose nonviolence.

He describes a wide variety of tactics: strikes, petitions, underground newspapers, skywriting, flags and banners, boycotts, rent refusal, withdrawal of savings, fasts, mock trials, occupations, marches, motorcades, teach-ins, pray-ins, ostracism of collaborators with unjust systems, publication of names of collaborators, seeking imprisonment, parallel governments, and mass disrobing.

I would like to add that many of these actions, especially civil disobedience, need proper training to be effective. We saw what happened with the spontaneous, untrained, nonviolent strikes and mass demonstrations in Syria during the Arab Spring.

Without the success stories of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and nonviolent movements in East Germany, Mongolia, The Phillipines, Argentina, Chile, etc., the 20th century would have been a lot bloodier.

Are nonviolent methods ever less moral than violence? What about a “just war?” Nearly all wars in modern times have been considered, by the participants, to be just.

Even “warriors fighting for the noblest of causes almost invariably commit horrific crimes.” Once the threshold is crossed into unleashing violence, all bets are off. There is no control over what happens next. “All’s fair in love and war.” Who would you trust to justify a “just” war?

A certain amount of policing is necessary to keep dangerous psychopaths off the streets, and sometimes a minimal amount of force that does as little harm as possible, is needed. Three aspects of policing are different from war: Policing places safety of civilians above all other goals. Good policing tries not to kill criminals but to bring them to justice. Police try to tamp down emotions instead of inflaming them with rhetoric to rally against an enemy. But with the recent militarization of police forces, some of that good policing has been lost.

The United Nations is the best organization for doing international police interventions.

The questions about what to do to wage peace should be directed primarily at the U.S., that violates international law, invades countries preemptively, has military bases all over the globe, does secret commando raids and drone attacks around the world, sells weapons to other countries and to their adversaries, and props up dictators to keep military bases in their countries, a strategy filled with hypocrisy.

We could start by slashing the bloated and unmonitored military budget, getting rid of nuclear arsenals and leading other countries to do the same. We could ban capital punishment, which also sanctions violence and perpetuates the concept that punishment justifies crime. Most countries decide to end war because they have had enough, having been on the receiving end of horrifying violence to their own homes and homelands. Will the U.S., a large part of which has never suffered this destruction of its own territory, come to the conclusion that it is time to end war, without experiencing war at home? What will it take, major destruction of this land? If empathy for others who suffer in far away lands is great enough, realizing our commonality with others, not dividing us into “us and them,” then maybe we can make that decision without having to bring a holocaust home to us.

If the world abolished many forms of slavery because it was morally unacceptable, war as we know it could be abolished for the same reason, if most nations agreed to end it. If we think we can’t end war, we are right. But if we choose to believe that we can, we are also right.

The main premise of this book is that to war or not to war is a choice, not a fatalistic certainty. If we use our intellectual and our emotional intelligence and communicate well with people in other countries, we actually can achieve the goal, to end war.