



2014–106

Ian Morris, *War! What Is It Good For?: Conflict and the Progress of Civilization from Primates to Robots*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. Pp. xi, 495. ISBN 978–0–374–28600–2.

Review by Lawrence A. Tritle, Loyola Marymount University (lawrence.tritle@lmu.edu).

What is war good for? As Edwin Starr's 1970 Motown hit "War"¹ says, "absolutely nothing." Vietnam veteran and novelist Tim O'Brien has written that "war is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead."² In his four-part argument, Ian Morris (Stanford Univ.) claims that war has created larger, better organized societies that have reduced the risk of violent death; that, while terrible, war has created more peaceful societies; that, in creating more peaceful societies, war has made us richer; and that, having brought these boons, war is now making further war impossible (7–10, 208–9, 334, 393). By the 2040s, Morris believes, the population of planet Earth will at last enjoy tranquility and peace (389).

All this is a great deal to ponder over. Morris tackles his subject in a densely packed, wide-ranging discussion of war from earliest times up to today and tomorrow. To make the nature of war comprehensible to a wide audience, as he has done, is most laudable. His ideas and interpretations are engaging and expressed in clear and vigorous prose. The emphasis, however, on war as the essential unifying human activity is too reductive (what of trade and commerce, religious belief, etc.?) and calls to mind Archilochus's famous adage: "the fox knows many tricks, the hedgehog one—but a big one."³

More troubling is the underlying elitist, "WEIRD" (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) perspective (320), which offers fortune to too many hostages. Few who have lost someone in war will easily accept a "war is good" thesis. This applies to warriors and soldiers as well as to their families and friends. The consequences of witnessing death vitiate any "good" one might imagine coming from war. And, too, considerations of the personal voice and the testimony of survivors of war and violence are omitted here, as are issues of remembrance and memorialization. Morris contends that such things, which might constrain his thesis, answer "only part of the question of what war is good for [since] war is about more than what it feels like to live through it" (21). Of course, historians select the evidence to support their arguments, but to assert that "war is good" and then elide the voices of survivors is prejudicial and reflects the judgment of one who writes about war but does not really know it.⁴

In chapter 1, "The Wasteland? War and Peace in Ancient Rome," Morris focuses on the apparent order and peace that Roman rule brought to the Mediterranean world. There were (rarely audible) dissenters like the British chieftain Calgacus, who uttered the famous verdict: "The Romans make a desert and call it peace."⁵ But the ruling elite, like Cicero in letters to his brother, claimed that Roman rule brought security and prosperity. Similar sentiments have echoed through time in the rationales for the British Raj and the Pax Americana. Many in the Roman world did enjoy prosperity, as Morris assures us (42–43), but, on the other side of the ledger, he takes little notice of the plight of millions of destitute urban poor or slaves suffering in the fields, mines, mills, and arenas of the empire. The brutality of Roman rule was on full display in the Jewish War (AD 66–73), as Morris duly notes (38), but he does not mention that it inspired the hatred behind the German uprising that destroyed three legions⁶ in the Teutoburg Forest (AD 9). Nor does he cite the famous "Asian Ves-

1. Lyricists Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong have gotten too little recognition.

2. *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990) 87.

3. πολλὰ οἶδ' ἀλώπηξ, ἀλλ' ἐχῖνος ἔν μέγα (103 D.).

4. While I may be WEIRD, too, a year in Vietnam long ago revealed much that leads me to question Morris's thesis; I respond to his personalizing (19–20, 319–20).

5. Tacitus, *Agricola* 30.5: "ubi solitudinem faciunt pacem appellant."

6. The dead legionaries, auxiliary cohorts, and civilian camp followers totaled altogether some twenty-five thousand.

pers” (88–87 BC), when an uprising orchestrated by Mithradates VI ended in the slaughter of many thousands of Italians⁷ living in the Aegean region.

Morris tacks on to his discussion of ancient Rome an appraisal of native life in the South Pacific and South America, based on the work of anthropologists Margaret Mead and Napoleon Chagnon, respectively. His purpose is to develop his argument that in the era before civilization produced Leviathan, or “Big Government,” violence was much more prevalent, taking a higher percentage of lives than did even the twentieth century’s World Wars (58–59). But this argument is tenuous and there are contrary positions.⁸

Chapter 2, “Caging the Beast: The Productive Way of War,” examines ancient Roman, Chinese, and other empires that grew and flourished in the so-called “Lucky Latitudes.”⁹ Here Morris adds the ideas of “circumscription” or “caging,” developed by social scientists R. Carneiro and M. Mann in the 1970s and 80s; these concern the response societies must make in the face of more powerful enemies: to stand, fight, and die, seek the protection of others, or run away (78–81). He concludes that war and empire have together made “humanity safer and richer” (93), while reducing violent deaths to something between the 10–20 percent of the prehistoric era and the 1–2 percent of modern times (109).

Although Morris admits that the statistics he cites for hunter-gatherer cultures are often guess work (87, 103, 109), he yet remains confident that civilization has made the world gentler and kinder and will continue to do so. But the percentages he suggests for pre-civilized humankind are just short of meaningless in the absence of hard data.¹⁰ Percentages for “civilized” times are hardly more useful. To say that “only” 1–2 percent of the world’s population died as a result of war in the twentieth century (100–200 million of 2.5 billion) is misleading. A more relevant figure would be the percent of *participants* who died in those wars (8).¹¹ I would argue it is more likely that civilization has enabled human beings to become much more efficient killers.¹²

Chapter 3, “The Barbarian Strikes Back,” ranges broadly—and breathlessly—across time and place: it considers the travails of Romans repelling barbarian assaults from Britain to the Eurasian steppes, Muslim raiding parties everywhere from France to Pakistan, Charlemagne’s Carolingian empire fending off Vikings and Magyars, the Crusading era, and conflicts in Africa, Japan, and the New World! Morris is reduced to making generalizations about, for instance, overall patterns in history (132–33) and the influence of feudalism.¹³

In chapter 4, “The Five Hundred Years’ War: Europe (Almost) Conquers the World, 1415–1914,” the author acknowledges that “as always, the defeated fared less well than the victors, and in many places colonial conquest had devastating consequences” (168), but sees a silver lining in the European conquerors’ suppression of local wars, banditry, and piracy, which made their subjects’ lives safer and richer. Mahatma Gandhi’s famous assessment of western civilization, then—that it would be a good idea—seems a surprising verdict.

7. For lurid details, see Appian, *Roman History* 12.4.22–23. The figure of eighty thousand killed provided by Valerius Maximus (9.2) is surely an exaggeration.

8. See, e.g., R. Brian Ferguson, “Pinker’s List: Exaggerating Prehistoric War Mortality” and “The Prehistory of War and Peace in Europe and the Near East,” in Douglas P. Fry, ed., *War, Peace, and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013) 112–31, 191–240.

9. For the concept, see, e.g., Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (NY: Norton, 2005) 183–86.

10. Anthropologists Richard Wrangham and Luke Glowacki warn that “very little can ... be said of the rates of death in hunter-gather culture areas”—“Intergroup Aggression in Chimpanzees and War in Nomadic Hunter-Gatherers: Evaluating the Chimpanzee Model,” *Human Nature* 23 (2012) 16.

11. Benjamin Disraeli’s famous (attributed) dictum “lies, damn lies, and statistics” applies here. Morris fails to observe the rule that, in calculating percentages, one must consider the “frequency, or the number of cases in any category” as well as “the number of cases in all categories”; i.e., percentage = $(f/N) \times 100$. See further Joseph F. Healey, *Statistics. A Tool for Social Research*, 9th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2012) 22.

12. Morris cites the “easy” US victory over the Iraqi Army in 1991 (81). This is a straw man: Iraqi soldiers were outgunned, out-matched, and naked before American airpower. Also problematic in this chapter is the analysis of the appearance of disciplined armies (young men following orders) in the ancient Near East. Morris ought to have addressed the origins of discipline and courage or, more broadly, the reasons why men fight. See, e.g., Sebastian Junger, *War* (NY: Twelve, 2010), who looks at these issues from the perspective of serving soldiers in Afghanistan, using recent scientific studies by Dunbar (note 15 below) and others.

13. Readers should note that the successors of Muhammad, the caliphs, were not “divinely inspired” (136), and Charlemagne was not Holy Roman Emperor (137). Morris’s discussion of medieval firepower includes gunpowder but overlooks “Greek Fire” (143).

Chapter 5, “Storm of Steel: The War for Europe, 1914–1980s,” treats the causes and means of European self-destruction in the twentieth century. The very analytic discussion here often veers into highly dubious political theory. Morris too readily assumes, for example, the rationality of the ideas and ambitions of Adolf Hitler.¹⁴

Chapter 6, “Red in Tooth and Claw: Why the Chimps of Gombe Went to War,” revisits themes touched on earlier, especially the underlying nature of human beings, as revealed by our nearest primate relatives, chimpanzees. The chapter begins with an astute anthropological survey of human origins, in which, however, “war” does not figure much. Strikingly absent is any reference to the seminal work of anthropologist Robin Dunbar, whose identification of the “Dunbar Number” linked the size of the first settled communities to the size of the human neocortex.¹⁵

In chapter 7, “Last Best Hope on Earth: American Empire, 1989–?,” Morris summarizes his arguments and theories, with a stress on both war and geopolitics.¹⁶ Several of his historiographic assumptions about “the future of war in history” are unsatisfactory.¹⁷ The claim that “history repeats itself” (339, 364) is the sort of bromide one expects to find in popular accounts of the past, not in a work of scholarship; and the idea that history is at all concerned with the future is groundless. As historian Richard Evans has noted, “it is always a mistake for a historian to predict the future”;¹⁸ his reminder that life is full of surprises baldly understates the case. In this instance, Morris is writing journalistic political science, and his theory of history is no more viable than any other.

Morris concludes with a cheery prediction that, by the decade of the 2040s, all will be well in the world: “war has made the planet peaceful and prosperous; so peaceful and prosperous ... that war has almost, *but not quite*, put itself out of business” (389). The West has heard this before. In 1899, Warsaw financier I.S. Bloch argued in detail in his *Is War Now Impossible?* that a general European war amounted to suicide and was impossible to conceive.¹⁹ In 1914, that forecast would have seemed premature; in 1918, a prescient though tragic joke. Civilized life comes easily in times of plenty, but what happens in a world of shrinking resources and growing populations, when the income gap between haves and have-nots, as in the United States today, threatens to become insupportable? Civilization’s veneer is frightfully thin. Modern evolutionary biology and psychology reveal the truth of Thucydides’s observation that “war is a violent teacher” (3.82.2) in his classic account of the civil strife that wracked Corcyra, a prosperous community transformed by war.

In a time of ISIS and ISIS-inspired beheadings, suicide bombings, and the killing of civilians from Syria and Iraq to the West Bank and Gaza, Mexico, much of Africa, and Ferguson, Missouri, when violence seems to inspire only retribution, it is passing hard to imagine that the 2040s will see the triumph of civilization and the eclipse of war and violence among humankind.

14. Corrections and reservations: in late autumn 1914, Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn (among others) advised the Kaiser to negotiate (247)—see Holger H. Herwig, *The Marne, 1914* (NY: Random House, 2009); there is controversy over the authenticity of the photographs provided on 263 and 270; recent scholarship has cast doubt on the 1940 German “Blitzkrieg” (265), especially the push through the Ardennes (“a near catastrophe”), which was more a matter of luck than genius—see Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2005) 118.

15. Dunbar has also studied the origin of language and the brain’s development. See his *The Human Story: A New History of Mankind’s Evolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) and *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1996). This work greatly enlarges our understanding of human society and should have been noticed by Morris.

16. Further points of dispute and interpretation: “hatred of Israel” and “Islamic fundamentalism” (347) are loaded terms; mention of the 1979 Iranian revolution (347) without reference to the 1953 CIA coup is one-sided; reference to Saddam Hussein in the 1980s (347) without noting his US patrons is disingenuous; as for overwhelming the Iraqi army in 2003 (350)—it chose not to fight, so encouraged by the United States.

17. The influence of Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (NY: Viking, 2011) on Morris is extensive and unfortunate. Pinker is too cavalier about the meaning of “history.” To cite one example, he suggests that only Hitler and a “few henchmen” were responsible for the Holocaust (131), ignoring the fact that fifteen Nazi officials at the 1942 Wannsee Conference decided and worked out the details of the “Final Solution,” which was then carried out by many thousands of German executioners and their abettors—see, e.g., Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (NY: HarperCollins, 1992).

18. *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997) 62. Morris also refers to “accidents in history” (236); these are ahistorical events, in that they offer no lessons. Evans, too, dismisses accidents as a type of “cause” of any value to a historian (138).

19. On Bloch’s (originally six-volume) book, see Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (NY: Basic Books, 1999) 9–10.