

War Is Good for Us, Dumb New Book Claims

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Theme: [History](#)

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Ian Morris has stuck his dog's ear in his mouth, snapped a selfie, and proclaimed "Man Bites Dog." His new book *War: What Is It Good For? Conflict and Progress of Civilization from Primates to Robots* is intended to prove that war is good for children and other living things. It actually proves that defenders of war are growing desperate for arguments.

Morris maintains that the only way to make peace is to make large societies, and the only way to make large societies is through war. Ultimately, he believes, the only way to protect peace is through a single global policeman. Once you've made peace, he believes, prosperity follows. And from that prosperity flows happiness. Therefore, war creates happiness. But the one thing you must never stop engaging in if you hope to have peace, prosperity, and joy is — you guessed it — war.

This thesis becomes an excuse for hundreds of pages of a sort of Monty Python history of the technologies of war, not to mention the evolution of chimpanzees, and various even less relevant excursions. These pages are packed with bad history and guesswork, and I'm greatly tempted to get caught up in the details. But none of it has much impact on the book's conclusions. All of Morris's history, accurate and otherwise, is put to mythological use. He's telling a simplistic story about where safety and happiness originated, and advocating highly destructive misery-inducing behavior as a result.

When small, medium, and large societies have been and are peaceful, Morris ignores them. There are lots of ways to [define peaceful](#), but none of them put the leading war maker at the top, and none of them place at the top only nations that could be imagined to fall under a Pax Americana.

When societies have been enlarged peacefully, as in the formation of the European Union, Morris applauds (he thinks the E.U. earned its peace prize, and no doubt all the more so for its extensive war making as deputy globocop) but he just skips over the fact that war wasn't used in the E.U.'s formation. (He avoids the United Nations entirely.)

When the globocop brings death and destruction and disorder to Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Yemen, Morris sticks his fingers in his ears and hums. "Interstate wars" he informs us (like most of his other claims, without any footnotes) have "almost disappeared." Well isn't *that* great news?! (Morris grotesquely minimizes Iraqi deaths from the recent [nonexistent?] [war](#), and of course supplies no footnote.)

In a culture that has long waged wars, it has been possible to say that wars bring courage, wars bring heroism, wars bring slaves, wars bring cultural exchange. One could have asserted at various points that wars were the only way to a great many ends, not just large societies that reduce small-scale murders. Barely a century ago William James was worried

there was no way to build character without war, and defenders of war were advertising it as good for its participants in a much more direct way than Morris has been reduced to. Has war been the means of building empires and nations? Sure, but that neither means that empires are the only way to peace, nor that war was the only nation-building tool available, nor that we must keep waging wars in an age in which we aren't forming empires or nations any longer. That ancient pyramids may have been built by slaves hardly makes slavery the best or only way to preserve the pyramids.

Tying something good, such as ending slavery in the United States, to a war, such as the U.S. Civil War, doesn't make war the only way to end slavery. In fact, most nations that ended slavery did so without a war. Much less is continuing to wage wars the only possible way (or even a useful way at all) to hold off the restoration of slavery or to complete its eradication. And, by the way, a great many societies that Morris credits with making progress through war also had slavery, monarchy, women-as-property, environmental destruction, and worship of religions now defunct. Were those institutions also necessary for peace and prosperity, or are they irrelevant to it, or did we overcome some of them through peaceful means? Morris, at one point, acknowledges that slavery (not just war) generated European wealth, later crediting the industrial revolution as well — the godfather of which, in his mind, was no doubt peace created by war. (What did you expect, the Spanish Inquisition?)

The tools of nonviolence that have achieved so much in the past century are never encountered in Morris' book, so no comparison with war is offered. Nonviolent revolutions have tended to dismember empires or alter the leadership of a nation that remains the same size, so Morris must not view them as useful tools, even when they produce more free and prosperous societies. But it's not clear Morris can recognize those when he sees them. Morris claims that in the past 30 years "we" (he seems to mean in the United States, but could mean the world, it's not totally clear) have become "safer and richer than ever."

Morris brags about U.S. murder rates falling, and yet dozens of nations from every continent have lower murder rates than the U.S. Nor do larger nations tend to have lower murder rates than smaller nations. Morris holds up Denmark as a model, but never looks at Denmark's society, its distribution of wealth, its social supports. Morris claims the whole world is growing more equal in wealth.

Back here in reality, historians of the Middle Ages say that our age has the greater disparities — disparities that are growing within the United States in particular, but globally as well. Oxfam reports that the richest 85 people in the world have more money than the poorest 3.5 billion. That is the peace that Morris swears is not a wasteland. The United States [ranks](#) third in average wealth but 27th in median wealth. Yet, somehow Morris believes the United States can lead the way to "Denmark" and that Denmark itself can only be Denmark because of how many people the United States kills in "productive wars" (even though they have "almost disappeared"). Morris writes these scraps of wisdom from Silicon Valley, where he says he sees nothing but wealth, yet where people with nowhere to sleep but in a car may soon be [banned](#) from doing so.

We're also safer, Morris thinks, because he sees no climate emergency worth worrying about. He's quite openly in favor of wars for oil, yet never notices oil's effects until the end of the book when he takes a moment to brush such concerns aside.

We're also safer, Morris tells us, because there are no longer enough nukes in the world to kill us all. Has he never heard of [nuclear famine](#)? Does he not understand the growing risks of proliferating nuclear weapons and energy? Two nations have thousands of nukes ready to launch in an instant, every one of them many times more powerful than the two nuclear bombs dropped thus far; and one of those nations is prodding the other one with a stick in Ukraine, resulting in more, not less, violence in the beneficiary of such expansionism. Meanwhile the officials overseeing U.S. nukes keep getting caught cheating on tests or shipping nukes across the country unguarded, and generally view nuclear weapons oversight as the lowest most dead-end career track. This makes us safer?

Morris hypes [lies](#) about Iran pursuing nuclear weapons. He opens the book with a tale of a near nuclear holocaust (one of many he could have chosen). And yet, somehow disarmament isn't on the agenda, at least not with the priority given to maintaining or increasing war spending. Not to worry, he assures us, "missile defense" actually works, or might someday, so that'll protect us — although he parenthetically admits it won't. The point is it's warlike, and war is good, because war spreads peace. That's the role the U.S. must play for the good of all: policeman of the world. Morris, while clearly a huge fan of Barack Obama, believes that all recent U.S. presidents should have a Nobel Peace Prize. Never does Morris comment on the fact that [the rest of the world sees](#) the United States as the greatest threat to world peace.

Morris admits that the United States is encircling China with weapons, but he describes in sinister tones China's response of building weaponry that will only serve a function near China's own shores, not as defensive or unimperialistic, but at "asymmetrical" — and we all know what that means: unfair! China might make it hard for the globocop to wage war on and around China. This Morris sees as the looming danger. The solution, he thinks, is for the United States to keep its militaristic edge (never mind that its military makes China's look like a child's toy). More drone killing is not only good but also (and this sort of nonsense always makes you wonder why its advocate bothers advocating) inevitable. Of course, the United States won't start a war against China, says Morris, because launching wars hurts a nation's reputation so severely. (You can see how badly the U.S. reputation has suffered in Morris' eyes following its latest string of wars.)

And yet, what lies on the horizon, almost inevitably, Morris contends, is World War III.

There's nothing you can do about it. Don't bother [working for peace](#), Morris says. But a solution may arrive nonetheless. If we can go on dumping our money into wars for just one more century, or maybe more, proliferating weapons, destroying the environment, losing our liberties in the model land of the free, then — if we're really lucky — the computer programmers of Silicon Valley will save us, or some of us, or something, by . . . wait for it . . . hooking us up to computers so that our minds all meld together.

Morris may be more confident than I that the result of this computerized rapture will be worldwide empathy rather than revulsion. But then, he's had longer to get used to living with the way he thinks.

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