



The Father of Us All: War and History, Ancient and Modern

Victor Davis Hanson

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Victor Davis Hanson has long been acclaimed as one of our leading scholars of ancient history. In recent years he has also become a trenchant voice on current affairs, bringing a historian's deep knowledge of past conflicts to bear on the crises of the present, from 9/11 to Iran. "War," he writes, "is an entirely human enterprise." Ideologies change, technologies develop, new strategies are invented—but human nature is constant across time and space. The dynamics of warfare in the present age still remain comprehensible to us through careful study of the past. Though many have called the War on Terror unprecedented, its contours would have been quite familiar to Themistocles of Athens or William Tecumseh Sherman. And as we face the menace of a bin Laden or a Kim Jong-Il, we can prepare ourselves with knowledge of how such challenges have been met before.

The Father of Us All brings together much of Hanson's finest writing on war and society, both ancient and modern. The author has gathered a range of essays, and combined and revised them into a richly textured new work that explores such topics as how technology shapes warfare, what constitutes the "American way of war," and why even those who abhor war need to study military history. "War is the father and king of us all," Heraclitus wrote in ancient Greece. And as Victor Davis Hanson shows, it is no less so today.

The Father of Us All: War and History, Ancient and Modern Details

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From Reader Review The Father of Us All: War and History, Ancient and Modern for online ebook

Kate says

I got 68% through this book, which I had great hope for, but it is so filled with opinions that are so far out there, that I could not go on. Presented as an overview of war from the time of the Greeks through present and the ways wars have changed. taken from this historian's lectures and articles.

I began to have problems with the chapter How we fight...which was about American Exceptionalism, how we saw in Europe innovations and brought them home from the wars and created the greatest nation with the greatest infrastructure, excelling in transportation, manufacturing, innovation and utilities...as though this was still true, our infrastructure is getting close to third world stature. He believes firmly that our all volunteer military is the best fighting force in the world because our 16 year olds get to have and work on cars, which allows them at a young age to drive and work on Abram tanks...and because we are a gun culture our youth are so familiar with the use of guns that they have a head start over our European allies youth. It is obvious that he has not served in this volunteer military which is pulled primarily from lower income families, ones whose children don't get new cars on their 16th birthday, and he obviously has never worked on cars, because newer cars unlike vehicles of old are not things you can tinker with, as we did in our youth...you cannot adjust the carburetor with a hairpin....most young lower middle-class kids do not have gun arsenals at home where they get all of this pre-enlistment training.

Then where I couldn't go on anymore was his look at the Iraq war where his revisionist history was something I almost choked on and infuriated me to the extent that I couldn't turn another page. He implied that our military was the impetus of the concept of nation building and "might see democratization as a means of reducing the likelihood of its own deployment in dangerous foreign wars to come." Our military has been very clear that they are not the tool to implement nation building.

He believes that "For a full generation now, the all volunteer American military has trained an entire cadre of officers who have received advance degrees in our finest academic institutions and thus possess proconsul skills that far exceed those necessary to command men in battle." My son an retired officer would be very interested to hear this, that the military is training men to become proconsuls ruling the citizens of defeated enemies and leading them to democratization.

But the straw that broke the camels back was after his defense of Bush his belief that "...military liberalism's failure to democratize Iraq has made 'nation building' the new slur." First it was civilian neo-con belief that drove the concept of democratizing Iraq, in spite of many Generals telling them that their 'shock and awe war" conducted by a force that did not have enough strength to insure law and order after the regime fell would lead to failure. Wolfowiz, Cheney, Rumsfeld and the neo-con cadre knew that they knew better than any of our best military minds and shuttled these men aside. I was really paying attention to every utterance of any Bush spokesmen as a mother of a soon to be deployed officer...knowing full well that their 3 month war with overwhelming victory which could take as little as a few weeks, a war which would easily pay for itself from the revenues of the oil profits, as we intended to bill the Iraqis for their liberation and on and on, was going to be an abysmal failure as it was asking of our military the near impossible task, that was more political in nature than is within their purview. It was not the 'military liberalism' that failed in Iraq...we don't have a liberalized military...a concept that is laughable at best.

Almost everything that went wrong in Iraq can be laid at the feet of the neo-con civilians who bought into a dogma which sounded so good on paper and in theory and had no precedent in the real world, a group who denigrated the Generals who objected to their folly and dismissed them. How this person is touted as a 'historian' is quite beyond me.

Nathan Albright says

It is one of the most notable and strange aspects of my reading of the author's works that I have liked him least when he was talking about what he considered to be his specialty, namely the classical history of Greece (and to a lesser extent Rome) and its implications for present society. A great deal of that difficulty comes from the author's obviously Greek boosterism [1], which I am at best ambivalent and at worst hostile to. Indeed, even though I am a scholar of military history, there is a great deal of disagreement there too, because the author holds to the unscriptural view that the Bible is a pacifist document, rather than one which recognizes the need for force but which commands believers to be peaceful insofar as it depends on them. Sometimes it does not, which is the author's own point regarding the need to preserve military strength despite our own desires to be peaceful. The author's persistent and willful misunderstanding of the biblical record and law and approach makes this book less enjoyable to read than it would be otherwise.

In terms of its contents, this book is divided into four parts and thirteen chapters that are based in large part on various book reviews and editorials that the author wrote during the first decade of the twenty-first century. After a short preface, the author talks about the orphaned status of military history as a discipline (I) because of its unfashionable nature, discussing the worth of studying war (1), some classical lessons on the wars fought after September 11 (2), and the relevance of the film 300 to today (3). He then discusses war writing (II) with chapters on Xenophon's *Anabasis* and how it has been treated by contemporary scholars (4), discusses *The Old Breed* as a classic in war memoirs, looks at the importance of the conflict between Athens and Sparta, and discusses the similarities between the Western effort at Lepanto and today. Several chapters examine the encounter between the postmodern and the premodern (III) in looking at the contemporary absence of decisive battle (8), the importance of men to the polis (9), and some qualities that mark the American way of war (10). Finally, the book concludes with a discussion of how Western wars are won and lost (IV) with chapters on the importance of fighting for victory (11), the strange relationship between war and democracy (12), and an identification of the enemy (13) before an epilogue and index that takes the book to almost 250 pages in length.

Ultimately, my impressions are mixed on this book. As is often the case, Hanson has some sound insights to make on the harm that leftist behavior has on the well-being of the West as a whole, and points out the parasitic nature of the anti-patriotic and intensely self-critical aspects of academic discourse and the mainstream press. The author shows himself to be deeply interested in the contemporary portrayal in books and movies of the classical history he has studied and taught for so long. He demonstrates an interest in military history and its uncomfortable relationship with both the academy and the political philosophy of democracies in both Athens and the present-day United States. Yet the author persistently and maliciously fails to comprehend the proper relationship between Athens and Jerusalem, and in his desire to bolster his own field of the classics, he lumps biblical culture and the godly perspective with the Oriental heathens of Egypt, Persia, and Mesopotamia, to the extent that it limits his own insight into matters of morality and wisdom. For all of his pretensions to wisdom and insight, the author ultimately ends up being a blind guide seeking autonomy for mankind rather than repentance and reconciliation. For it is God and not warfare that is the father of us all.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2011...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2010...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2013...>

Bob says

Summary: A collection of essays arguing from history that war is a tragic but persistent feature of human existence that explores some of the particular challenges that democracies from Athens to the present day United States face as we are faced with the prospect or reality of war.

It seems that, along with the poor, we will always have war. Victor Davis Hanson would say that this is in fact one of the lessons of history. Hanson, in this collection of essays draws upon both ancient history going back to the wars between Athens and Sparta, and the wars of a post-9/11 age to make this point.

In his opening essay he sounds themes that recur throughout this collection. Military history is an oft-neglected but useful discipline of study. It shows us that war is indeed a persistent feature of human nature. Efforts of appeasement to avert war often only make the situation worse. The idea of war as a miscommunication is mistaken—the fact is there are adversaries who are only too clear concerning their malevolent intent. Asymmetrical methods, such as IED's versus Humvees are hardly a new invention, but rather the inevitable resort of an inferior but determined foe. Those who make war must always be aware of political considerations. At the conclusion of this essay, Hanson introduces the unfamiliar reader to the riches of military history writing, from the ancients to contemporary.

The essays, originally articles or presentations, are grouped under four headings. The first part, as already alluded to, explores the “orphaned” discipline of military history. The second considers war writing from Thucydides through the battle of Lepanto in 1571, a critical example of conflict of east versus west. Part three then looks at the contemporary phenomenon of war—how we as a nation like to fight battles, and the result in a post 9/11 war of asymmetrical conflicts between the west and radical terror organizations. The last section explores the unique challenges of democracies in war-making, and that often we are our own worst enemies, and yet also, that a democracy aroused, mobilizing the full resources of free peoples is a fearsome foe.

As you may be able to tell, Hanson speaks against a prevailing progressive notion that if only we communicated better, understood our enemies better, and so forth, we would not fight wars. He would contend we engage in far too much self-criticism, and far to little moral assessment of the evil of the ideologies of radical elements in the world. Paradoxically, he observes that often, Democratic presidents such as Roosevelt have often done a better job of leading in war, explaining both their reluctance to make war, and its necessity rather than engaging in sabre-rattling. What this should reveal to us is the persistent character of war in the world, and like it as little as we do, that if we are confronted with war, the worst thing that can be done is to shrink from it, but rather meet it with resolve.

I do think that Hanson's essays challenge progressive notions cogently. But I wonder if he insufficiently wrestles with what Barbara Tuchman once called “the march of folly.” Perhaps it is also part of human nature that we often pursue foolhardy courses of bellicosity that make war inevitable, but must we? Is not war often a failure of political leadership, as in our own Civil War, or the bellicosity and incredible build-up of arms that led to World War I? Likewise, the argument that war must be fought such that foes are utterly defeated and humiliated seems to be the argument at the end of World War I that gave us World War II out

of the grievances of the German people, played upon skillfully by Hitler.

In the end, Hanson has history on his side in arguing war's persistence, and that this is a reflection on human nature. What he doesn't explore here, which I think perhaps is more curious is why we are this mixture of noble ideals as well as malevolent motives? If this is indeed the human condition, then what hope is there for us?

Dan Hoadley says

Hanson bounces from Ancient Greece to modern day Afghanistan as he explores various aspects of war and how it has evolved over the ages. He has a special focus on the interaction between the populous and how it has changed over time. He believes that as technology plays a greater role in war the American public is losing its taste for pursuing a winning military policy.

Raully says

Once I wrapped my head around the fact that this is really a farrago of lectures and book reviews that its author did not want to go unpublished, and not a coherent narrative about war, I began to enjoy this book a little bit more. Let the reader be forewarned.

Kevin Scott Olson says

This collection of essays will probably be read only by students of history, but its wisdom would benefit us all.

The author, a Stanford professor and renowned scholar, examines the question of why wars exist: Why did wars occur in the past? The present? Most important, will they continue to exist in the future?

With remarkable breadth of knowledge, Hanson reaches back to ancient times, to the Peloponnesian War between Greece and Sparta, then walks us through history—Caesar, Napoleon, the American Civil War, the World Wars of the twentieth century, the present-day war on terror—and draws correlations that provide us the answers.

There is far too much here to touch on in a blog post or review, but I can list a few select highlights:

—The field of military history itself is of vast importance, yet it is increasingly isolated and hard to find in today's college environment. As a formal academic discipline it is atrophied, shunned by political correctness that finds the subject distasteful. Yet only by objectively studying past military conflict can we prevent or minimize future conflict.

—The balance between war and democracy, freedom and security. Are dictatorships, with their command structure, innately superior in fighting wars? Fortunately, no. The political and economic freedoms of the United States, and the resulting innovation and dynamism, have produced the world's finest fighting forces.

–The rise of “utopian pacifism.” This is the belief that wars are the result of a misunderstanding, and that future wars can be eliminated through reason, education, and diplomacy. Such a myth has cycled throughout history, as it appeals to the romantic yearning for the perfectibility of human nature. Such beliefs are prevalent again today, despite the disconnect from reality.

The truth is that war has always been a part of the human condition, and always will be. War should always be a last resort, but will always be necessary for the survival of civilization. As the author points out, the United States of America was “born through war, reunited in war, and saved from destruction by war.” Moreover,

“Our freedom is not entirely our own, in some sense it is mortgaged by those who paid the ultimate price for its continuance.”

America today, with its prosperity and its principles of personal freedom, market capitalism, and constitutional government, is ipso facto envied and hated by the various warlords, dictators, and tribalists that litter the globe. For this reason, our continued existence is best assured by military preparedness, deterrence-based diplomacy, and the courage to fight and defeat our enemies.

Brian Meadows says

As one who is interested in history, but had an engineering career, I found myself a bit weak in my history background to get the most out of this book. It is really a collection of excerpts from lectures and published articles by the author, which made the book a bit disjointed. Since he is a professor, he presumes much knowledge from the audience. I was lost many times, especially in the early parts of the book, and sometimes had to do some online research to try to understand and appreciate what the author was saying. This is especially so when he was referencing ancient history. The style was smooth and not difficult to read but I lacked the prerequisites to be in this advanced course. I typically felt like I was in a college graduate school lecture. The book had reasonably good balance as he was drawing conclusions based on warfare in many different time periods of history - often in the same paragraph. I know it would be a much bigger book, but his efforts could impact a much broader audience if the assumptions about the previous knowledge of the reader were relaxed and the necessary background filled in.

Having said this, I would say that Hanson, at least, is not a head-in-the-clouds professor dreaming of the ideal utopia where we have advanced beyond war. He makes it plain that we are in our human condition and that successfully educating the world's population to resolve differences peacefully is an exercise in futility. He also makes good points talking about the successes of more free democratic forms of government against more autocratic regimes. The advantage is that the free mindset will more quickly adjust as the war progresses to correct errors and anticipate enemy's tactics. However, the military is more subject to popular opinion in a more democratic form of government. At present, the people will support a quick war that devastates the opposition into surrender but finds a more typical, drawn-out war with heavy sacrifices (like Viet Nam, Korea, or the current overall war on terror) distasteful and it takes a lot to get the buy-in of the public. The autocratic regime has no such problem as the support of the public is not necessary as long as the leader(s) support the effort. That scenario is where the West is most vulnerable now.

Insights like these made the book worth reading and it enhanced my understanding. I am glad I read it. It was worth the effort, even if the reading was rather piecemeal.

Jonathan says

I would recommend this book to any of my progressive friends who want a look behind "enemy lines" at some of the philosophical underpinnings of the right and our views of the world & human nature as relates to conflict.

Joseph Raborg says

Hanson is one of the best scholars on war we have, and this book proves it. Hanson draws upon Classical history and the wars of Europe and America in order to show the importance of understanding war in modern times. Despite the progress the West has made in preventing bloody conflicts, we still have to deal with them. Hanson offers an accurate critique of the modern mindset to war, and some great books for studying the causes, effects, and reality of war.

I hope to read his "The Western Way of War" next.

Bikewriter says

Amazing in scope and analysis, a thorough review of the world's major conflicts among nations, this book is NOT advocacy for war. It IS an acknowledgment of war's apparent inevitability in the affairs of mankind because of mankind's bellicose nature -- unchanged over millenia. "Wars happen because the ones who start them think they can win."

The author observes the cultural, moral, and socio-political trends that drive various nations' and people groups' views of warfare -- its purposes, strategies and desired outcomes and, in doing so, lays out the fundamental differences in the ever-changing views among nations and regions.

"What can be done about our [American] impatience, historical amnesia, and utopian demands for perfection?"

"Globalization creates new wealth that lifts millions out of poverty and thereby mitigates conflict -- but it does so in inequitable fashion, encouraging unfairness, resentments, and reactionary envy, the age-old catalysts for war."

This volume is, in my opinion, a MUST-READ if we are to assimilate the lessons of wars in the history of mankind, improve national and world security, interface with other nations -- especially belligerents -- and effectively deal with armed conflict.

Jay Hinman says

I've never had an easy time crafting a coherent, ideologically consistent set of foreign policy positions. As a

mostly small-l libertarian, or "classic liberal" (something like that), I'm supposed to be inherently suspicious of the State in all its forms and therefore devoted to small government in all its forms - including that devourer of enormous portions of our GNP, the military. My liberal tendencies have me sometimes making common cause on matters of war & peace with those on the Left whom I otherwise disdain for their utter cluelessness on economic matters, where my own ideology is what I'd like to call "rigidly informed", and in which my mind was made up a long, long time ago. Yet my devotion to the American ideal and for Western Civilization's values in general have led me to realize, on occasion, that war truly is the answer sometimes.

I remember reading Brian Doherty's excellent history of libertarianism "RADICALS FOR CAPITALISM" a few years ago and coming across a strong and very vocal subsection of American libertarians during World War II who were fully and totally against it. Our war was one of imperialism, in their eyes. I tried to come to grips with this view on many levels, rather than look at Hitler's rampage through Europe and Japan's through Asia with the benefit of hindsight. Couldn't do it. Try as I might, I kept coming back to the question, "If that war wasn't worth fighting to the bloody end, then what was?". Hence my suspicion at the reflexively anti-war position. Not because a few ideological Puritans were against fighting Hitler seventy years ago, but because the anti-war left has always had that naive view of humanity, and believes in imagined utopias that will never exist - the ones in which we don't fight, don't compete for resources nor have base, all-too-human instincts for power and dominion.

I'm also the confused and sometimes weak-kneed guy who was gung-ho for the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq upon their commencement, and who, when the going got tough in both, argued for them to be wound down. I still want them wound down - though I'll admit, after reading "THE FATHER OF US ALL: WAR AND HISTORY, ANCIENT AND MODERN" by Victor Davis Hanson, I haven't had my thinking cap turned so backwards by a book in a great while. I can't recommend it highly enough. I came into it with an idea that I might need a stiffening of my ideological spine, because even I was confused by my schizophrenic positions on how to confront "terror" and what particular battles might be worth investing American blood & treasure in to win. I came away from this fairly determined to look at war differently than I had before. Please allow me to explain.

Pure conservatives, like pure liberals, have the luxury of looking at these matters through an all-or-nothing lens. "Might makes right" - "Peace through strength" - "Project power across the globe" etc. It's easy to caricature, isn't it? Particularly when us "elites" see these words mouthed by toxic Republican politicians with Christianity in their foregrounds. Step away from that for a second. If anything, Hanson's book lays out for me, in a series of essays on man's inherently warlike nature and the importance of taking the "long view" in matters of war & security, why it's important to listen to the simplistic conservative approach to military matters.

There's a reason why every liberal Democrat president we've elected, even successful or would-be economic radicals like Roosevelt and Obama, ends up taking the same philosophically consistent approach as Republican presidents do on matters of security. These men are truly defending Western Civilization, and the values we hold dear. This becomes crystal clear once in office and off the campaign trail. They recognize that war is rarely the first option, and is often simply the least-worst of many bad options. This last point is hammered home repeatedly throughout this book.

Hanson argues with much success that the best war, with the best long-term outcome, is the one that is waged decisively and ends with the enemy's humiliation. This is not to say that he is not and cannot be critical of American military and political blunders - he takes the Bush administration to task for many costly errors in the war in Iraq, all the while arguing that comfortable Americans (like me) are so squeamish and short-sighted that they lose their stomachs at setbacks that previous generations would have taken as a reason

to redouble efforts.

This book is not about the 20th and 21st century - Hanson reaches well back to Athens vs. Sparta, Rome vs. Carthage and to Crusaders and Ottomans to underscore his points. He's a university professor of history, and his opening essay in this book, "Why Study War?" is one of the best. It makes me think that instead of taking multiple sociology courses from avowed Marxists at my school in the 80s, I'd have done well to add to true open-minded learning and take in a perspective that intelligently looked at war over the continuum of history and as part of our collective DNA, not as simple-minded excuses for "resistance" by pampered American college kids.

I think every war needs to be picked apart and argued before it begins. I am still quite sympathetic to reasonable views about a more "isolationist" America. I'd rather we hadn't started our wars in Iraq and Libya - though I'm open to taking in a longer view on their success or failure once we see what it does to the Arab world and to the longer-term defense of the West, which I support (there are values very much worth fighting for, I'm sure you'd agree). Yet this excellent book is the most intelligent and convincing voice I've ever heard for what we'd probably call the "conservative" approach to foreign policy. My personal politics just became that much muddier, and I have to admit that it might have to be a lifelong project to figure it all out.

Zinger says

I received my copy of "The Father Of Us All" from Goodreads. It took me awhile to get through because there were so many events in history that I was not familiar with, that I would put the book down and do some Internet searches on those topics. Some of these searches would lead to hours at a time on the Internet.

I thought Hanson did a great job of laying out the reasons that the study of warfare is an important area to study today. It is a very broad subject including topics of politics, leadership, geography, supplies, weather, tactics, sociology and cultures, ...

It motivated me to obtain a big box of Military History magazines, which I will now start going through. Hanson also recommended numerous books that cover many aspects of military science and history. Combining his reading list with the list I generated while reading his book generated an impressive book list that will take me years to get through.

While I agreed with many of his points there were some I did not. Some points of disagreement might be due to a brief mention of something where I needed more information to come to his conclusion, or wishing that my concern would have been addressed. There is much to cover from Ancient Rome all the way to our modern day conflicts.

Where I most wanted a discussion on warfare would have been to address some of the issues mentioned in Edward Griffin's "The Creature From Jekyll Island" and the influence of world bankers, and corrupt governments "good cop bad cop" conspiracies. Antony Sutton wrote several books documenting how U.S. foreign aid has subsidized the Soviet Union all through the Cold War. We were subsidizing the "other" side during the Korea and Vietnam. If Americans was not so betrayed by their own governments in supporting both sides of the war, maybe they wouldn't have had to happen. America hasn't constitutionally declared war since WWII, and we haven't won a war since. I wish this book discussed some of this.

It was a good book to read and think about and I would read some of his other books.

Gary Brecht says

Victor Davis Hanson, a historian with a background in Greek literature, has created a compendium of essays touching upon the importance of military history and its relevance to the conflicts of today. He asserts that in spite of the diminished popularity of military history in today's college curricula, the study of past wars prepares us for the potential outcomes of future armed hostilities. Moreover, the past can enlighten us as to means of preventing the spread of such conflicts. This does not mean that Hanson is utopian in his views; on the contrary, he believes that bellicosity is intrinsic to human nature and will always be thus. To a great extent he blames our softening of resolve on the complacency inherent in an affluent society. This critique he extends to all Western democracies. Therefore, he asserts, it is incumbent upon Western democracies to avoid the danger of appeasing tyrannical rulers.

Although he seems to condone the recent American incursions into Iraq and Afghanistan, he is critical of our nation's lack of proper preparation and follow-up.

In spite of the pedantic style in which a number of these essays are written, the theory posited by Hanson is worth examining.

Dale says

Excellent Series of Essays

Victor Davis Hanson's *The Father of Us All* is an excellent series of essays about war - why we fight, how we fight, the compromises societies make with themselves as they fight, what causes some countries to keep fighting while others grow weary of it, what types of societies deal best with the stresses of war, the future of war and a look at the American way of waging war.

Many of these essays have been previously published (or substantial parts of them) in magazines but Hanson has re-worked and amplified them. I only recognized one essay and the new version was longer and more substantive.

Hanson is a brilliant essayist - he expands the reader's point of view without talking down to him. Instead, in plain language he discusses large ideas and, happily, he includes plenty of references to other authors and other books that he has found interesting and informative. Reading Hanson is like talking to an old friend who not only informs, he also entertains and brings along a list of fascinating books, authors and topics and quotes for you to enjoy as well...

Read more at: <http://dwdsreviews.blogspot.com/2010/...>

Thorwald Franke says

Understanding the Logic of War on the basis of our Ancient Heritage

Victor Davis Hanson's book "The Father of Us All" is one of those books explaining an important aspect of our present world in a timeless and groundbreaking manner, so that this book can be recommended to everybody. On the basis of our ancient heritage he examines the development of war and discovers basic insights into the logic of war. With these insights it is much easier to understand what is really going on in this world concerning all those troubling wars and conflicts instead of following mainstream media opinions or weird conspiracy theories.

Especially everybody who tries to oppose the "logic of war" should learn first how this logic works before deciding to oppose it. Because: Logic cannot be overturned - you only can use it in the right or wrong way. If you try to overturn something that cannot be overturned the result will be unpredictable and mostly unwanted. So first, you have to understand how the "logic of war" works. Then you will know how to make and keep peace. Victor Davis Hanson supports you in this.
