

# WAR: The Lethal Custom

*by Ed O'Rourke*

Gwynne Dyer has written a book, *War: The Lethal Custom*, which is a gem for both peace activists and military officers. He describes war's evolution, soldiers' training, phalanx fighting, the limited war period (1648-1789), Rousseau's mistaken "Noble Savage" notion, the case for scrapping nuclear weapons and the abolition of war.

Gwynne Dyer served in the Canadian, British and American navies and has a Ph.D. in military history from the University of London. He did not start life as a pacifist. His main conclusion, that human beings have to abolish war or continue business as usual and let war wipe out all that we know, may find credibility in military circles. "[T]he human race has to figure out a way of running our affairs that dispenses with war altogether." "It is no longer possible for the major powers to achieve anything useful against each other by means of war, but both their institutions and their mentalities still pressure that military action is an option." "...[W]e have reached a point where our moral imagination must expand again to embrace the whole of mankind, or else we will perish."

Drill instructors in all countries convey the impression that basic training is an extraordinary challenge and that those who finish are a breed apart, like triathlon champions. There are tremendous physical and mental challenges, but the mundane truth is that the armed forces in every country can train nearly every young male civilian within three months with correct reflexes and attitudes. Anyone's son will do.

Few soldiers are born killers. In the US Air Force less than one percent of its fighter pilots become “aces” – knocking down five or more enemy aircraft. The aces account for 30 to 40% of all enemy aircraft destroyed in the air, while most fighter pilots never shoot down a single plane. During the Second World War, 25% of German submarines accounted for 75% of the sinkings.

Phalanx fighting was the most important military formation from about 500 BC to sometime after the American Civil War. Phalanx fighting was effective against traditional armies but not useful against barbarian invaders. It was good for fighting unorganized mobs that may have ten times the number of the phalanx soldiers. The drills and training were designed to keep the soldiers in step, in rank, allowing no gaps in the lines. Finding level ground was important for both armies. It took much effort for enemies to line up against each other. Although attacking the enemy’s rear or flank would have been more effective, such efforts were so complicated, they almost never happened. These armies moved slowly. If one army did not want to fight, it was difficult to force a battle. Both sides almost always sought a prompt and decisive outcome. A few hours struggle in a small space “could determine the future of whole peoples.” “Hundreds or thousands of men would die in half an hour in an area no bigger than a couple football fields”.

Generals used modified phalanx fighting a long time after firearms became common. During the Napoleonic Wars, soldiers had brightly colored uniforms and battle flags to avoid friendly fire through the smoke. They fought in mass formations.

Absolute monarchs did not want to build a mass army. They preferred war using military elites and standing armies, “leaving the mass of the citizenry unarmed, untrained and politically inert.” Military tactics changed little over the centuries. Until Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus introduced new tactics for his army during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), Alexander the Great would have been comfortable in commanding any army from 500 BC to about 1618.

The 1648-1789 era was a limited war period. The bigger armies fought bigger battles and fought each other. Wars were constant but political consequences in Europe were small, gaining or losing a province, a few fortresses or overseas colonies. A different candidate would gain a throne. There seems to have been an unspoken rule among the nobles to let each dynasty survive its losses. Meanwhile, population growth and prosperity increased in most places. During this period, Europe’s absolute monarchs seemed to have a deliberate policy to exclude the masses from the war effort just as they excluded them from determining domestic policy. The monarchs

maintained small standing armies and did not seek civilian support in a military crisis. They certainly did not want to pull several hundred thousand citizens from agricultural and commercial work, and get independent thoughts about the country's political structure.

This changed with the mass armies during the French Revolution and Napoleon. After the Napoleonic Wars ended, only Prussia continued conscription.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced the Noble Savage model to project how humans lived before kings and priests subjected the society. Rousseau knew little about hunter-gatherers. For Gwynne Dyer, archeological and anthropological evidence shows that there has always been violence and genocide. An opposite opinion is that war only came about 3000 BC with civilization. The author feels that humans loaded available space with low population density. Since there was no technology, they used the available game. Primitive man took much space for game. Although the world was almost empty by modern standards, there was little space to move to and conflict over resources has been around since human beings. Progress is a recent term. Due to piracy, bandits, enslavement, looting and destruction, organized violence was not the exception but the rule. Most humans in most periods would have probably agreed with Thomas Hobbes that life was "nasty, brutish and short." They did not see history as progress but a decline from a golden age. This idea is reflected in the Garden of Eden. Mircea Eliade in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* shows that the golden age concept was common in many cultures.

Warfare history is Eurocentric, since Europeans conquered everyone else with few exceptions. Weapons and tactics devised by Europeans still are dominant.

After World War II, the armies became small again. Modern weapons' high cost today means that countries can afford only a few and they are destroyed or disabled quickly after the war starts. An example is the British Spitfire which cost £ 5,000 around 1940. The 2004 equivalent (when Gwynne Dyer wrote his book) was the Tornado which cost £ 17,000,000.

I have the idea that Gwynne Dyer will be updating his book as long as he lives. He wrote a new edition in 2009. Since 2004, some hardliners have agreed with him at least on nuclear weapons. Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry and George Schultz have advocated abolishing nuclear weapons.

In future writings, I am hoping that he will give the environmental argument for ending war. Climate change, as documented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and umpteen other groups, is wiping out life on earth. All our tanks, rifles, bullets, aircraft carriers and atom bombs will do nothing to save us and other living creatures. In fact, only by putting resources into environmental solutions, education, life style change and poverty abolition will save the planet.

There is no reason for fatalism. War has been around for longer than I want to admit. Human sacrifice, infanticide, racial segregation, dueling, wife beating and slavery have all been around for a long time too. Most people saw these customs as normal behavior. They only exist today as outlaw institutions. Nations have to use much effort, beating the war drums hot and heavy to declare war. These are not just feelings expressed by the usual peaceniks. General Douglas MacArthur, who led more than a million troops in the Pacific Theater during the Second World War, told the US Congress in his April 19, 1951 farewell speech that humans must abolish war or war would abolish humans.

Remembering Isaiah, it is time to beat swords into plowshares.

Main Source: Gwynne Dyer, *War: the Lethal Custom*, Carroll & Graf, New York, 2004, 484 pages.

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