

Conclusion

'WHAT IS WAR?' was the question with which I began this book. Now that I have finished it, and if the reader has followed me to the end, I hope I have called into doubt the belief that there is a simple answer to that question or that war has any one nature. I hope, too, that I have cast doubt on the idea that man is doomed to make war or that the affairs of the world must ultimately be settled by violence. The written history of the world is largely a history of warfare, because the states within which we live came into existence largely through conquest, civil strife or struggles for independence. The great statesmen of written history, moreover, have generally been men of violence for, if not warriors themselves, though many were, they understood the use of violence and did not shrink to use it for their ends.

In this century the frequency and intensity of warmaking have also distorted the outlook of ordinary men and women. In western Europe, the United States, Russia and China, the demands of warfare have touched a majority of families over two, three or four generations. The call to arms has taken sons, husbands, fathers and brothers in their millions away to the battlefield and millions have not returned. War has scarred the gentler emotions of whole peoples and left them inured to the expectation that the lives of their children and grandchildren might go untouched by the ordeals they themselves have suffered. Yet, in their everyday lives, people know little of violence or even of cruelty or harsh feeling. It is the spirit of cooperativeness, not confrontation, that makes the world go round. Most people pass most of their days in a spirit of fellowship and seek by almost every means to avoid discord and to diffuse disagreement. Neighbourliness is thought the best of common virtues, and kindness the most welcome trait of character.

Neighbourliness flourishes, we must recognise, inside firm bounds of restraint. The civilised societies in which we best like to live are governed by law, which means that they are policed, and policing is a form of coercion. In our acceptance of policing we silently concede that man has a darker side to his nature which must be constrained by fear of superior force. Punishment is the sanction against those who will not be constrained and superior force is its instrument. Yet, despite a potentiality for violence, we also have an ability to limit its effects even when no superior force stands ready to spare us from the worst of which we are capable. It is for that

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reason that the phenomenon of 'primitive' war, with a study of which this book began, is so instructive. Because the wars of this century have taken such an extreme and ruthless form, it has become all too easy for modern man to slip into the supposition that the trend to extremity in warfare is an inevitable one. Modern war has given moderation or self-restraint a bad name; humanitarian intermissions or mediations are cynically seen as a means by which the intolerable is palliated or disguised. Yet warmaking man, as the 'primitives' show, does have a capacity to limit the nature and effects of his actions. Primitives have recourse to all sorts of devices which spare both themselves and their enemies from the worst of what might be inflicted. Exemption is one, the exemption of specified members of society – women, children, the unfit, the old – from combat and its consequences. Convention is another, particularly the conventions of choice of time, place and season of conflict, and of pretext for it. Most important of such devices is that of ritual, which defines the nature of combat itself and requires that, once defined rituals have been performed, the contestants shall recognise the fact of their satisfaction and have recourse to conciliation, arbitration and peacemaking.

It is important, as has been said, not to idealise primitive warfare. It may take a very violent turn, in which exemptions, conventions and rituals are discarded and violence rises to a high level. It may, even when constraints are observed, have material effects undesired by those who suffer them. The most important is the progressive displacement of the weaker party from familiar territory to worse land. Such displacement may eventually damage or even destroy the culture which the cultural constraints on warmaking normally protect. Cultures are not infinitely self-sustaining. They have fragilities which are vulnerable to hostile influences, and among those influences warmaking is one of the more potent.

Culture is, nevertheless, a prime determinant of the nature of warfare, as the history of its development in Asia clearly demonstrates. Oriental warmaking, if we may so identify and denominate it as something different and apart from European warfare, is characterised by traits peculiar to itself. Foremost among these are evasion, delay and indirectness. Given the extraordinary dynamism and ruthlessness of the campaigns of Attila, Genghis and Tamerlane, such a characterisation may seem wholly inappropriate. Those excursions, however, must be seen in context. Over the 3000-year span in which the riding-horse was a principal instrument of warmaking, they appear as quite widely spaced interruptions rather than as a constant and regular feature in the military history of Eurasia. The threat posed by the horse warrior was, of course, a constant in those millennia; but it was normally containable, not least because of his preferred style of

fighting. That was, indeed, one in which evasion, delay and indirectness were paramount. The horse warrior chose to fight at a distance, to use missiles rather than edged weapons, to withdraw when confronted with determination and to count upon wearing down an enemy to defeat rather than by overthrowing him in a single test of arms.

For that reason, mounted warmaking could usually be successfully checked by a defender who had recourse to fixed defences built at the perimeter of terrain where the horseman had his home. Off that terrain he found the management of his large horse herds difficult in any case; if free movement were further impeded by obstacles – the Great Wall of China, the Russian *cherta* – his ability to campaign might be altogether nullified. Nevertheless, some horse warriors did eventually succeed in penetrating the settled lands and establishing themselves as rulers in permanency. Notable among them were the Moghuls of India and the Ottoman Turks, together with the bodies of Mamelukes who, at various times, wielded power within the Arab lands. Yet, as we have seen, even these successful horse conquerors did not succeed in transforming the conquering impulse into a creative and constructive style of government. They remained wedded to the culture of the camp, the horse and the bow, living still as nomad chiefs even when luxuriously accommodated in the capitals of the empires they had overthrown. When eventually confronted by new powers which had adapted to real technological change in warfare, their cultural rigidity denied them the opportunity to respond effectively to the challenge and they were eventually extinguished.

Yet, paradoxically, there was a dimension to Oriental warmaking, which came only later to the West, that invested it with formidable but self-limiting purpose. That dimension was ideological and intellectual. Long before any Western society had arrived at a philosophy of war, the Chinese had devised one. The Confucian ideal of rationality, continuity and maintenance of institutions led them to seek means of subordinating the warrior impulse to the constraints of law and custom. The ideal could not be and was not always maintained. Internal disorder and irruptions from the steppe, the latter often the cause of the former, prevented that. Nevertheless, the most persistent feature of Chinese military life was moderation, designed to preserve cultural forms rather than serve imperatives of foreign conquest or internal revolution. Among the greatest of Chinese achievements was the sinicisation of successful steppe intruders and the subordination of their destructive traits to the civilisation's central values.

Restraint in warmaking was also a feature of the other dominant

civilisation of Asia, that of Islam. The perception is contrary. Islam is widely seen as a religion of conquest and one of its most widely known tenets is that of the obligation to wage holy war against the unbeliever. The history of Islamic conquest and the exact nature of the doctrine of holy warmaking are both misunderstood outside the Muslim community. The era of conquest was comparatively short-lived and came to an end not simply because Islam's opponents learnt how to mobilise opposition to it but also because Islam itself became divided over the morality of warmaking. Riven by internal disputes which set Muslim against Muslim, in defiance of the doctrine that they should not fight each other, its supreme authority chose the solution of devolving the warmaking role on to a specialist and subordinate class of warriors recruited for the purpose, thus freeing the majority from military obligation and allowing the pious to emphasise in their personal lives the 'greater' rather than the 'lesser' aspect of the injunction to wage holy war, 'the war against self'. As the specialists chosen by Islam to wage war in its name were chiefly recruited from steppe horsemen who refused to adapt their military culture to changed circumstances even when their monopoly of arms brought them to power, Islamic warmaking eventually became almost as circumscribed as within Chinese civilisation. Within the culture the effects were widely beneficial. Once that culture encountered the full force of another, which recognised none of the constraints the Oriental tradition had imposed upon itself, it succumbed to a ruthlessness it was not prepared or able to mobilise even in self-defence.

That culture was Western. It comprised three elements, one derived from within itself, one borrowed from Orientalism and a third brought to it by its own potentiality for adaptation and experiment. The three elements are respectively moral, intellectual and technological. The moral element is owed to the Greeks of the classical age. It was they who, in the fifth century BC, cut loose from the constraints of the primitive style, with its respect above all for ritual in war, and adopted the practice of the face-to-face battle to the death. This departure, confined initially to warfare among the Greeks themselves, was deeply shocking to those outside the Greek world who were first exposed to it. The story of Alexander the Great's encounter with Persia, an empire whose style of warmaking contained elements both of primitive ritual and of the horse warrior's evasiveness, is both real history, as narrated by Arrian, and a paradigm of cultural difference. The emperor Darius is a genuinely tragic figure, for the civilisation that he represented was quite unprepared to contend with enemies who could not be bought or talked off after they had won

an advantage, who sought always to bring the issue to the test of battle and who fought in battle as if its immediate outcome took precedence over all other considerations, including that of personal survival. The death of Darius at the hands of his entourage, who hoped that by leaving his body to be found by Alexander they might save their own skins, perfectly epitomises the cultural clash between expediency and honour in these two different ethics of warmaking.

The ethic of the battle to the death on foot – we must say on foot for it is associated with infantry rather than cavalry fighting – then made its way from the Greek to the Roman world via the presence in southern Italy of Greek colonists. How it was transmitted, as it certainly must have been, to the Teutonic peoples with whom Rome fought its conclusive and eventually unsuccessful battles for survival has not been, and perhaps never will be reconstructed. The Teutonic invaders were, nevertheless, face-to-face warriors without doubt; but for that they would surely not have defeated Roman armies even of the debilitated state to which they descended in the last century of the western empire. A peculiar achievement of the Teutonic successor kingdoms was to assimilate the face-to-face style with combat on horseback, so that the Western knight, unlike the steppe nomad, pressed home his charge against the main body of the enemy, rather than skirmishing against it at a distance. Against the Arab and Mameluke opponents they eventually encountered in the Crusading campaigns for the Holy Land the face-to-face style often foundered; charging home could not be made to work against an enemy who saw no dishonour in avoiding contact. There was, nevertheless, a cultural exchange of great importance that resulted from the conflict of Muslim and Christian in the Middle East. The conflict resolved the inherent Christian dilemma over the morality of warmaking by transmitting to the West the ethic of holy war, which was thereafter to invest Western military culture with an ideological and intellectual dimension it had hitherto lacked.

The combination of the face-to-face style – in which the ethic of personal honour was embedded – with that ideological dimension then only awaited the addition of the technological element to produce the final Western manner of warmaking. By the eighteenth century, when the gunpowder revolution had been accepted and gunpowder weapons perfected, it had arrived. Why Western culture should have been open to the changes that technology offered, while Asian was not (and primitivism, of its nature, not at all), is a question that belongs elsewhere; we should, however, recognise that a major factor closing Asian culture to such adaptation was its adherence to a concept of military restraint that

required its élites to persist in the use and monopoly of traditional weapons, however obsolete by comparison with those coming into fashion elsewhere, and that this persistence was a perfectly rational form of arms control. The Western world, by forsaking arms control, embarked on a different course, which resulted in the form of warfare that Clausewitz said was war itself: a continuation of politics, which he saw as intellectual and ideological, by means of combat, which he took to be face-to-face, with the instruments of the Western technological revolution, which he took for granted.

The Western way of warfare was to carry all before it in the years after Clausewitz died. During the nineteenth century all Asian peoples, with the exception of the Chinese, Japanese, Thais and the subjects of the Ottoman Turks, came under Western rule; the primitives of the Americas, Africa and the Pacific stood no chance at all. A few peoples of remote and inaccessible regions – Tibet, Nepal, Ethiopia – alone proved too difficult to bring under the sway of empire, though all experienced Western invasions. During the first half of the twentieth century even China succumbed, at the hands of the Westernised Japanese, while most of the Ottoman lands were overrun by Western armies also. Only the Turks of Turkey, that tough, intelligent and resourceful warrior race, who had taught their enemies so many harsh military lessons even through the unsatisfactory medium of the horse and the bow, remained unsubdued to emerge in mid-century as an independent nation.

The triumph of the Western way of warfare was, however, delusive. Directed against other military cultures it had proved irresistible. Turned in on itself it brought disaster and threatened catastrophe. The First World War, fought almost exclusively between European states, terminated European dominance of the world and, through the suffering it inflicted on the participant populations, corrupted what was best in their civilisation – its liberalism and hopefulness – and conferred on militarists and totalitarians the role of proclaiming the future. The future they wanted brought about the Second World War which completed the ruin initiated by the First. It also brought about the development of nuclear weapons, the logical culmination of the technological trend in the Western way of warfare, and the ultimate denial of the proposition that war was, or might be, a continuation of politics by other means.

Politics must continue; war cannot. That is not to say that the role of the warrior is over. The world community needs, more than it has ever done, skilful and disciplined warriors who are ready to put themselves at the service of its authority. Such warriors must properly be seen as the protectors of civilisation, not its enemies. The style in which they fight for

civilisation – against ethnic bigots, regional warlords, ideological intransigents, common pillagers and organised international criminals – cannot derive from the Western model of warmaking alone. Future peacekeepers and peacemakers have much to learn from alternative military cultures, not only that of the Orient but of the primitive world also. There is a wisdom in the principles of intellectual restraint and even of symbolic ritual that needs to be rediscovered. There is an even greater wisdom in the denial that politics and war belong within the same continuum. Unless we insist on denying it, our future, like that of the last Easter Islanders, may belong to the men with bloodied hands.

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