



## 'The End of War' charts a path for eliminating combat

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The End of War

By John Horgan

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Reviewed by Michael C. Horowitz

John Horgan is a science writer and peace advocate who has brought both of his passions together in his latest work, *The End of War*. Horgan, now director of the Center for Science Writings at the Stevens Institute of Technology, seeks to begin a conversation with those he calls "war pessimists," who think war is an inevitable part of the human condition.

For Horgan, war is less a human inevitability than it is like a Shakespearean tragedy, something we could avoid if only we had the collective wisdom and perspective each individual character lacks. In a sweeping but concise book both based in evidence and engaged in advocacy, Horgan attempts to show not just that war is on the decline, but also that we can eliminate it in our lifetimes through the hard work of advocating for peace.

Horgan's book complements other recent books arguing that war is on the decline by authors including political scientist John Mueller (*The Remnants of War*) and psychologist Steven Pinker (*The Better Angels of Our Nature*). Horgan's contribution stands out for his strong advocacy of nonviolence as a principle and his suggestions for American foreign policy.

*The End of War* is a work in three parts. The first sets out to demonstrate that war is not an innate part of human nature. Horgan cites a wealth of facts, including abundant evidence of learned cooperation among primates, the failure of archaeologists to find evidence of warfare among the oldest human remains, and the fact that there does not appear to be a "warrior" gene. Horgan also criticizes those who draw "the pessimistic conclusion that resource scarcity and war are inevitably or inextricably connected."

What, then, explains humanity's constant resort to warfare throughout recorded history? This is the second part of Horgan's story. He suggests that

warfare is not biological, but rather is a learned behavior. Like anthropologist Margaret Mead, Horgan believes that warfare is a cultural phenomenon. We learn young that violence is a useful way to resolve problems. Horgan then invokes "the essential mystery of war," saying that no particular theory of the origins of war is persuasive.

In this section, I found myself wishing Horgan had dug deeper. In focusing so much on the false idols of biological determinism and resource scarcity, Horgan underplays the very real political conditions that make war more likely. After all, regardless of whether war is innately biological, competition most certainly is. And while resource scarcity itself may not cause wars, failures by governments to provide for their people, and the fear of resource shortages, can play important roles in generating instability and violence, a point Horgan acknowledges but could have discussed more.

Governments doing their best to ensure the well-being of their citizens must be able to protect them if some other country does not share the values of peace and cooperation. This is the essence of what political scientists call the "security dilemma." Actions to improve your own security, even if you perceive them as defensive and meant to encourage peace, can appear to someone else as dangerous provocations. It is hard for nations to demonstrate their peaceful intentions in a way that does not open themselves up to coercion from those less enlightened.

How do we escape this dilemma? Horgan points out one important development over the last half-century: the spread of democracy. While democracies themselves are not inherently peaceful, especially in their early stages, established democracies rarely, if ever, fight each other. No matter how much the United States and France disagreed about the 2003 invasion of Iraq, for example, no one thought the two states would end up in a war over the issue.

Horgan's third act looks forward to a world without war. His preferred solutions take place at the personal and political levels. As for the personal, he states that "the crucial first step toward peace is for people to reject war." Individual advocacy and education can help transform society one person at a time. As for the political, Horgan argues we should "start by slashing our bloated military, abolishing arms sales to other countries, and getting rid of our nuclear arsenal." By following the Hippocratic principle of "Do no harm," he hopes that the United States will stop dirtying its hands and become a beacon of peace for the world.

Herein lies the problem. What if pursuing this ideal world actually makes reaching it less likely? After all, the problem with trying to avoid dirtying your hands in the rough-and-tumble of world politics, to paraphrase Harvard University professor Joseph Nye, is that you are likely to end up with no hands at all; someone will chop them off. My fear is that Horgan's proposed solution would lead to the very sort of Shakespearean tragedies he seeks to avoid. For every stout advocate of peace, there might be an insecure King Richard III, a conquering Julius Caesar, or a plotting Iago waiting in the

wings to take advantage of an American withdrawal from the world. Countries around the world count on the American military and nuclear umbrella to protect them and ensure their security. Removing that protection could both embolden potential adversaries and cause American allies such as Japan and South Korea to reconsider their decisions not to seek their own nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers, and the like.

An additional problem is that if powerful states reject all uses of warfare, they would also reject the use of force for humanitarian intervention. Less than 20 years ago, the world bemoaned the failure of the United States to intervene to stop mass killings in Rwanda. Is Horgan really ready to commit to a world totally without humanitarian uses of force? To be sure, he theoretically leaves open the possibility of occasionally using force, but he places such stringent conditions on it as to make the use of force — even for good — nearly impossible.

Does this mean we should give up hope of a world without war? Of course not. But it does suggest, at least to me, that we should proceed carefully, lest efforts to make war less likely have the opposite effect. I also applaud Horgan's final suggestion: That we reject defeatism. We should not resign ourselves to the belief that war is inevitable, nor convince ourselves that radical activism is the only path to that end. Rather, we should keep talking. Dialogue like that Horgan has opened here, in my opinion, is where the best pragmatic solutions are likely to emerge.

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