Book Reviews

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Van Creveld, M. (2008). *The Culture of War*. New York: Presidio Press.
Potts, M., & Hayden, T. (2008). *Sex and War: How Biology Explains Warfare and Terrorism and Offers a Path to a Safer World.* Dallas, TX: Benbella Books.

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"What causes war?" is an impossibly seductive question to which there is no definitive answer. The proof: no one yet has come up with a universally acceptable explanation for this "activity" that has been with us since we either crawled down from the trees or planted our first crops, depending on whose version of prehistory you prefer. Small wonder, then, that publishers continue to show an interest in the subject—as if, finally, suddenly, someone will have discovered something novel and insightful to say about the nature of nature or the nature of nurture as raisons d'être for war. Meanwhile, the sheer number of volumes devoted to the topic helps underscore one of Martin Van Creveld's central points in his new book, *The Culture of War:* war fascinates.

Mercifully, Van Creveld does not take us all the way back to our chimpanzee past to connect the dots between demonic males and war. Nor does he pay much attention to evolutionary psychology or to inclusive fitness arguments as the source material for war's origins. Instead, he makes use of military history and finds plenty of examples from the Old Testament through 9/11 to illustrate how tantalized we are by war's trappings. In fact, his first chapter begins with a discussion about uniforms and sets up the gist of his broader argument: "At all times and places, the fact that those who put them on were preparing to look death in the face tended to make uniforms, armor, and war paint more gaudy and elaborate than anything people wore while going about their 'ordinary' occupations" (p. 26).

There are echoes of Freud in this, and Van Creveld does at least cite him on occasion, but even stronger reminders of Arnold Van Gennep (*Rites of Passage*), whom Van Creveld never mentions.[1] This is unfortunate since Van Creveld's descriptions of war have liminality and communitas written all over them. One reason war is so alluring, in Van Creveld's view, is that normalcy is suspended. Not only does war represent the ultimate contest in which few of the usual rules apply, but everything gets heightened. All man's "qualities" are mobilized. He means this not only in terms of "all the participants' intellectual, moral, and physical qualities" but also in terms of *all men*—or at least all males who deserve to be called "men." According to Van Creveld, nothing else offers men the same "combination of concentration with lightheartedness and freedom," a kind of freedom he repeatedly reminds us "perhaps not found anywhere else" (p. 110).

From Van Creveld's perspective, war affords men the joy of living in the "now" and "pits us against the most powerful, most intelligent, and most fearsome opponent of all, another man" (p. 109). Dopamine and adrenaline are contributing factors; why, just reading about war gets biochemical juices flowing. Yet if biology matters, so do group-induced sentiments. It is hard to read *The Culture of War* without scribbling "Durkheim!" in the margins or wondering why Van Creveld fails to reference Lionel Tiger's seminal work on men in groups and the ineffable appeal of "belonging."[2] It is perhaps forgivable, given the breadth of this topic, that Van Creveld does not do sufficient justice to others' scholarship. After all, there are entire literatures devoted to each of his topics: weaponry, writing, art, film, monuments, and so on, though he exhibits some curious lapses. Van Creveld ignores the role and impact of television, for instance, and barely touches on video games. He not only gets various culture-related facts about tribal societies, age grades, and counting coup wrong (this seems to be a perennial hazard whenever military historians rifle through just a handful of ethnographies), but he also misses important work that could help him make his points more effectively. For instance, Jonathan Shay (*Achilles in Vietnam*) is far more sophisticated than he is about the "beserker" state.[3] Yet maybe some of these lapses are intentional. For example, Van Creveld pays no attention to those "other" sentiments associated with war, such as terror and fear, or the extent to which the intensity of an experience he keeps describing as enjoyable can also drive men mad.

To be fair to Van Creveld, this book is about war's allure, not its costs: what men find so attractive in and about war and what makes warriors so attractive to women and to each other. Van Creveld's catch theme is that war "has as much or more to do with the heart and the hormones than with the brain and its reasoning" (p. 187). In asserting this he means to prove realists wrong—war is never just about politics. And he intentionally tweaks his readership: "It is useless to pretend that most people do not, or at any rate cannot, delight in destruction independently of any practical benefits that it may bring" (p. 112).

In *Sex and War: How Biology Explains Warfare and Terrorism and Offers a Path to a Safer World*, Malcolm Potts and Thomas Hayden echo many of Van Creveld's assessments of man. However, unlike him, they look to chimpanzees as our analogs and, by making an inclusive fitness "it's-all-about-our-genes" argument for male aggression, get caught in too many familiar logic traps. Sometimes they treat genes as the unit of account. Yet they also invoke "our very survival *as a species*" (emphasis added). In addition to plying readers with the same old overused examples (e.g., the Yanomamo), they indulge in a stunning number of sweeping generalizations. For instance, take the generalization at the heart of their argument:Men are evolved to be territorial and competitive, and to engage in team aggression. Women usually lived in territories men carved out, and benefited more through ingroup [*sic*] cooperation and social stability than through out-group hostility and aggression (p. 370). Even if we accept their sociobiological premises, Potts and Hayden neglect the ways in which women might compete on behalf of *their* genes or what the implications might be

if competition itself is "hardwired." This is unfortunate because there are hints of a potentially provocative argument in this book.

Potts, who is a professor of population and family planning at Berkeley (and is a trained obstetrician) served as the first medical director of the International Planned Parenthood Foundation. He and Hayden (a journalist) single out Margaret Sanger for linking family planning and peace. Of course, Malthus might also concur with them that "there are good reasons to believe that the competition for scarce resources is at the heart of a great many wars . . . and the larger our population, the more intense the resource competition will be" (p. 143). The solution? Potts and Hayden take current conventional wisdom—that greater economic development will lead families to have fewer children—and flip this on its head, contending that if women were granted access to better family planning *now*, smaller families would lead to greater economic development sooner.

One problem with unfolding this family planning argument so late in the book (in the thirteenth of fifteen chapters) is that Potts and Hayden do not then have time to fully flesh it out. As they make clear, the rate of population growth is a variable open to change. But if that is so, then surely something might be done about the sex ratio, too. After all, their own arguments about team aggression and resource scarcity suggest that this may be where the real shift needs to occur since with fewer males to begin with, more males could become responsible and productive heads of household sooner, team aggression would become a much less attractive prospect, and older men would have a much harder time manipulating younger men to go to war.

Maybe. But there is another dimension to male competition worth considering beyond sheer numbers. Or to borrow one of their examples (Genghis Khan), if all males, most males, or even some males strive to father as many children as Genghis Khan did, then (re)aligning population growth to match resources at the macro level still leaves us with "spoilers"—especially when ambitious individuals (e.g., Genghis Khan) discover that *creating* rather than correcting imbalances holds incomparable reward.

In *The Culture of War*, Van Creveld is never quite so reductive as to make this point. But his thesis certainly implies that males who excel at war favor war and war favors them, while one of his aims is clearly to convince us that all societies need some such men if they do not want to be dominated by those with more (or better) such men. In fact, while Van Creveld claims in the book's final sentences that he will have achieved his goal if readers agree with him that the culture of war is as "worthy of being studied as any other subject," this is actually fatuous. What he really wants is that we (in the West) recognize that we had better retain the culture of war, or else—or else we will be defeated by those who do find joy in war.

Van Creveld specifically identifies four threats that can cause the culture (read: joy) of war to be taken too far or to become atrophied. First, no discipline and no cohesion yield out-of-control wild hordes. Second, militaries can lose heart, in which case

men will perform like soulless robots rather than men (his example—the modern Bundeswehr). Next come men who can not or will not defend themselves when the need arises; these are "men without chests" (his example—pre-Zionist Jews). The fourth threat and the one he seems to deem most pressing is feminism.

However, if feminism is an Achilles' heel for Western militaries, it is also Van Creveld's. This is because in trying to prove how much weaker women are than men, he makes too many bizarre assertions. For instance, he claims "women's weaker anatomy means they are less resistant to infection, hence dirt and life in the field, than men are" (p. 401), as if women in villages the world over do not work in the fields. Or, there are women's "sensitive breasts" to consider, as if men's genitalia are made of cast iron! Then comes the claim that "uneasy about being regarded as women, men are compelled to spend a considerable part of their energies making sure women do not outclass them" (p. 404). But why—one can not help but wonder—would men worry that women might outclass them if women are so obviously weak and so clearly inferior?This is one kink in his logic. But there is another. Consider, if men have to be socialized to fight and have to be inculcated with the culture of war, as the book avers—"It is to prepare men for sacrifice, as well as reward them for the risks they have taken that much of the culture of war was first invented and has continued to develop across the ages" (p. 407)—then maleness per se must not be much of a driver, and certainly not as strong a driver as is the all-too-*human* desire to live.

Ironically, it may be less Van Creveld's take on "sex and war" than his conception of culture that bollixes him up, preventing him from being able to close his own nature-drives-nurture, nurture-builds-on-nature argument. "Culture" in his book refers to what is cultivated (art, literature, film, etc.), what is enculturated (e.g., practices), what is inculcated (emotions), what people make with their hands (e.g., weapons), and what they think in their heads—and it changes. Even in the snippets of military history he relates, Van Creveld catalogs changes in uniforms, weaponry, forms of commemoration, and so on. In doing so he reveals that styles of warfare (to include styles of thinking about war) shift even if, in his view, the substance of war does not. Without necessarily meaning to, Van Creveld thus points to a potentially profound paradox. On one hand, there are certain constants required to succeed in war (any war), such as force. Yet style—and ensuring people remain attracted *to* war—is also crucial. The implication? Getting the style "right" really can matter, which begs at least two questions: What exactly composes, or should compose, a culture of war in the twenty-first century? And, more specifically, what should constitute *our* culture of war, assuming we do not want others to dictate the terms of either war—or culture—to us? These may not be the questions Van Creveld wants us to ask, but suggesting a double helix effect involving style and substance (or form and function) makes *The Culture of War* a quintessential Van Creveld book—provocative, even as it provokes. In turn, that should make it an ideal work to teach. Less ideal is if readers accept Van Creveld's history as definitive, which it is not. In this regard, *Sex and War* is even more troubling since it offers even more pages of footnotes and will thus seem authoritative to many. Unfortunately, its sourcing reflects a different kind of substance-as-

style problem and is one that (alas) plagues more than just the study of war these days.

Notes

1. Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960).
2. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1997) and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965); Lionel Tiger, *Men in Groups* (New York: Random House, 1969).
3. Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

Allen, M. J. (2009). *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

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In January of 1973, 591 American prisoners of war held by North Vietnam were returned to American soil as part of Operation Homecoming. Unfortunately, approximately 100 Americans expected to return at Operation Homecoming did not. Some of these men were known to have been taken captive. Others were known only to have survived their incidents while still others were thought to be still alive. Although it was expected that the North Vietnamese would account for these men as either alive or dead, they did not. As a result, the POW/MIA controversy was born.

In *Until the Last Man Comes Home,* Michael J. Allen examines the POW/MIA experience through the comprehensive and exhaustive research of Congressional records, memoirs, histories, declassified files, and interviews. Allen sorts through the archives and chronicles the political wrangling and infighting that emerged as a result of the Vietnam POW and MIA situation. His use of internal documents, especially the unpublished sources of MIA activist groups, produces an amazing picture of politics involved in the issue.

Except for one chapter examining the recovery of war dead dating back to the Mexican and Civil Wars, the book devotes its energy to tracing the Vietnam POW/MIA issue from the early days of Lyndon B. Johnson to the current policies of Barack Obama. Allen focuses most of his attention on advocacy groups such as the National League of Families (the creators of the ubiquitous POW flag) and the Victory in Vietnam Association (the originators of the POW/MIA bracelets). He offers extensive evidence that POW/MIA activists intentionally and unintentionally manipulated politicians, society, and international policy in their quest for a full accounting of America's warriors.