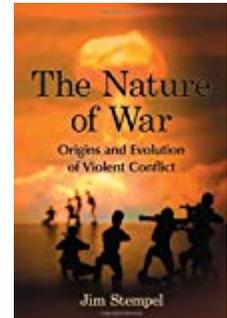




Jim Stempel. *The Nature of War: Origins and Evolution of Violent Conflict.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2012. v + 213 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-6837-9.



Reviewed by Nathan Albright

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

From the beginning of this work, Jim Stempel makes it obvious that he owes an intellectual debt to eminent scholars of warfare before him (especially Robert O'Connell and John Keegan) and that he has ambitious aims. In eighteen chapters organized chronologically and covering twelve thousand years of warfare, he thoughtfully moves from the origins of known warfare in the Middle East to the desire of present-day theorists (including the author) for world peace. Given the ambitious temporal scope of the work and the rather modest size of the book, it is clear that the tour of warfare is not exhaustive but is carefully selected from aspects of warfare throughout history that are most significant to the author.

Starting with the preface, Stempel seeks to draw important insights into the origins of warfare by pointing to evidence that civilization (specifically cities and politics), agriculture, and warfare developed contemporaneously. After examining flaws of existing theories on the origins of warfare in the absence of empirical support, he also claims that warfare is due to psychology

rather than to genetics or conflicts over resources. The book takes a clear stand on the side of developmental psychology and supports reason against romanticism, which makes this work a polemic of rationality that wrestles with the tension inherent in its effort to demonstrate a lack of emotional maturity of the world at large while pointing to its own advanced understanding and hard-won capacity to truly grasp the world. This work will strike some readers as having a presentist teleological bias.

Given this book's ambition to cover the origin and evolution of war, this work is immensely selective. After spending a quarter or a third of its length dealing with developmental psychology, Assyrian monarchs, and the romantic myth of Eden, Stempel jumps to the Homeric myth of the hero and its apotheosis in Alexander of Macedon. Then, he leaps to the revolutionary egalitarianism of the American Revolution, spends an entire chapter looking at Martin Luther as the start of mature and logical thinking within Europe, and returns at length to the American Revolution and

its consequences. After this the author includes two chapters on the American Civil War (one dealing with Abraham Lincoln's writings), and then proceeds to World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.

This very selective approach can be judged as being somewhat at odds with his argument. After all, Stempel claims to seek universal applicability of the evolution of mankind and war, but chooses examples almost entirely from ancient Near East history and American history to make these points. It is possible to justify some of this selection bias with the author's expertise on the American Civil War; unsurprisingly, he is most familiar with his own culture and national history. Nonetheless, making the claim that Western civilization (the author and his intended audience specifically) has largely moved beyond ethnocentricity is at odds with his focus on that particular culture, pointing to tensions between cosmopolitan aims and an approach that focuses on "Western" cultures. The fact that the book deliberately criticizes the immaturity of political correctness even while appreciating idealism in general will offend those looking for more broad-minded and inclusive examples of the author's points, even if Stempel does manage to provide a way out of our culture wars by looking beyond the politics of victimhood toward a more balanced approach, before closing *The Nature of War* with an examination of weapons and a call for peace and efforts for global development.

Overall, this book, dealing with serious matters, is far more a book about politics and psychology than a book about military history. In examining the superiority of democracy and equality, the author takes some pains to note the tension between the universal belief in equality and the fact that many peoples of the world still appear morally and psychologically insufficiently developed to handle freedom or maturity. However, for Stempel, the need for peace is acute, for *The Nature of War* makes plain that with the coming of nuclear

warfare "the choice was stark but simple: mature or perish" (p. 162).

Despite the book's flaws in selection bias and approach, this work demonstrates well the psychopathology inherent in warfare, showing the common link between sociopathic tendencies, arrested development, and aggression and power seeking in general. This is a powerful observation that links the fate of failed states and institutions to failure in moral (not only economic) development within those institutions and states. Small wonder, then, that the author spends about a third of this short book dealing with the psychological questions of the origin of war before briefly and selectively examining their course throughout history. This book will particularly appeal to readers who share the author's expertise in specific military subjects, who are not bothered by the selection of familiar Western conflicts to demonstrate his points, and who appreciate his combination of high-minded idealism with the realism to know that peace depends on the maturation of a world that is still deeply immature and as a result deeply committed to warfare predatory governments, even if it will offend potential readers with its smug sense of superiority and its tendency to offend both conservatives and liberals in our culture wars.

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