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*War is what makes us human* (p. 20).

Driving recently with my daughter, a young adult deeply into “techno” music, I overheard on her smart phone an annoying zombie drone overlain with a spoken lyric: “How can a man die better than facing fearful odds,” Thomas Babington Macauley’s evocative words, which undoubtedly helped send a generation of English lads “over the top” long ago in the Great War.[1] Christopher Coker, a British scholar from the London School of Economics, joins some eminent historians of the past in drilling down through the sedimentary layers of history and humanity to ask the fundamental question: why do homo sapiens incessantly fight?[2] In search of the answer that baffled Leo Tolstoy, Coker leaves no stone unturned. As Tolstoy asked in *War and Peace*, “What does it all mean? Why did it happen? What made these people burn down houses and kill their own kind?”[3]

“You may not be interested in war,” Leon Trotsky famously remarked, “but war is interested in you”—a grim fate for too many people, woven through far too much of our history (p. 26). Coker systematically (and tersely) approaches his question from five perspectives, in as many chapters. He begins in the first chapter, “Origins,” with biology and evolution: “The trouble is that *Homo sapiens* is a contradictory species—it is good at making love and good at making war, as both the threat of overpopulation and the threat of nuclear extinction illustrate all too vividly today” (pp. 47-48). Coker does not eschew the counterintuitive: “violence is the cause of social inequality; it is not the symptom” (p. 46). He likewise favors us in the early pages with a glimpse of his ultimate conclusion. “We will never escape war because there are limits to how far we can put our origins behind us” (p. 43).

The next chapter, “Cultural Mechanisms,” is about literature, with *The Iliad* of Homer as the first great touchstone. Citing the critic Thomas Havel, Coker reminds us that “there is no fixed boundary between the real and the fictional” (p. 88). Achilles lives on in our collective memory, de-
fying the efforts of contemporary war veterans like Tim O’Brien to dissociate themselves from that heroic tradition. It is extraordinarily difficult to excise that tradition from our psyche: “Remember that we too live largely fictional lives” (p. 84).

“Ontogeny,” the third chapter, is about evolution as history, the grand sweep of human time paralleling, in a sense, individual human growth—from cooperation (most of the time) in preschool and kindergarten to either blissful friendship and love, on the one hand, or murderous rivalry, on the other, whether as cutthroat adult business rivals or violent competitors, hopefully in virtual worlds like Grand Theft Auto or Call of Duty and the plethora of civilization-building and military wargames, rather than the real thing. But virtual or real, life usually pits us against each other. Coker quotes primatologist Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson (biographer of Jane Goodall), reminding us that we are “the dazed survivors of a continuous five-million year habit of lethal aggression” (pp. 130-31).

Chapter 4, “Functions,” revisits culture through the multitude of purposes served by war, first and foremost to the individual, not surprising, when you think about it, as Coker observes. “The deep friendships that soldiers forge with one another is one of war’s minor keys of grace” (p. 49). We also see a plethora of rationales arising within larger groups, ranging from extended families in our species’ hunter-gatherer days up to the nation-states in our post-Westphalian era that resort to organized industrial warfare for a distressing variety of reasons. At the micro level, “young men and now women are still lured in by the search for something larger than themselves”—yes, women as well as men (p. 170). “What might be called the de-gendering of war is now far advanced” (p. 60). He also postulates religious faith as a “meme” of sorts: “Religion can indeed be a source of comfort, it can even steady nerves and allow people to find inner resources they never imagined they possessed” (p. 172). Coker is not wrong about this.

The final chapter, “On the Edge of Tomorrow,” leaps into a speculative future that is, of course, inextricably linked to technology. Coker dwells at some length on the question of to what degree artificial intelligence (AI) will take over the human dimension of warfare, but, refreshingly, he finds room for a marginal degree of optimism: “Because machines are governed by logic, they are remarkably good at learning competitive tasks with binary outcomes, but they would struggle if asked to make judgment calls” (p. 212). Predator drones notwithstanding, human beings will, for the time being, have a place in the decision loop.

So, when all is said and done, why war? By leaving no stone unturned, Coker is surely pointing us toward “all of the above.” There are too many compulsions—genetic, evolutionary, historical, cultural, and technological—crowding out the alternatives, all driving us to justify organized violence against others. He leaves us, therefore, rather abruptly: “Will we ever see the end of war? Perhaps one day, but for now just recall the long story of war that is woven into the deepest textures of human life” (p. 217).

This book is a marvelous tutorial for any aspiring historian, military or otherwise. The depth and reach of Coker’s interdisciplinary research is staggering, with a multitude of pithy quotations sourced to a bibliography that fills twenty pages. He reaches a depressing conclusion, a counterpoint to the optimism many of us surely felt so many years ago upon reading Francis Fukuyama’s essay “The End of History.”[4] It really did seem like we were turning a corner. But when I recall my own willingness to embrace the wholly delusional Cold War consensus and the trail of mistaken policy decisions that took me to Vietnam so many decades ago, I must admit that Coker has done us all a valuable service in bringing that sort of irrational optimism back down to earth. His book is commendably brief and highly readable,
offering a deep and varied perspective on what threatens Homo sapiens’ place at the apex of the food chain.

Notes

[1]. Thomas Babington Macaulay, Lays of Ancient Rome, XXVII (London, MacMillan, 1897), 55. (The song is “Faith,” performed by Neurotic Fish.)


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