

War: The Lethal Custom

Gwynne Dyer

Reviewed by Justin Kelly

Gwynne Dyer's book on war is a revision of his earlier 1986 work of similar main title, which was itself a spin-off from an eponymous television series. It is in some ways a curious book with two quite contradictory elements which, to my mind, the author does not quite resolve. The result is that one is left with the impression of having read two books simultaneously.

The first of these books is a summary description of the evolution of war from pre-history to the present. In this endeavour the book still displays its origins as a television series. The discussion and analysis read like a script with lots of little tactical vignettes proposed as exemplars of what are considered to be more expansive and important trends. In his development of this theme Dyer produces a lively and readable history which is more than superficial but somewhat short of complete – not unlike a television documentary series in fact.

There is not sufficient space here to do full justice to Dyer's history of war and, to some extent, there was insufficient space in the book for Dyer to do justice to the history of war together with his other project. *War: The Lethal Custom* is strong in its examination of the human aspects of war but weaker on the evolution of tactics and the interplay of tactics with culture and technology. I found no errors of fact but, in the crush for space, a number of propositions emerge without sufficient qualification or discussion. For example, Dyer argues that 'modern armies talk of winning or losing ground' but that 'for all the armies of earlier times the ground is merely the stage across which the formations move'. Go tell it to the Spartans at Thermopylae (or the Macedonians at Guagemala, or the Athenians, or King Offa of Mercia ...).

The other 'book' within this book is a more thoughtful articulation of the emergence of total war and a discussion of what that means for humanity. The original, 1986, version opened with the proposition that, as a result of the emergence of nuclear-armed total war, we were then living in the 'Indian summer' of human history and that unless we did something we would be forced to face up to the reality of nuclear winter and the elimination of our civilisation. From the perspective of 2005 this proposition seems as dated as flared trousers, body shirts and disco music – but Dyer argues (although not in those terms) that like these artifacts of the 1980s, the threat of the annihilation of humanity has never really gone away – it has just been hiding at the back of the wardrobe.

There is a sustainable argument that as long as nuclear-armed states exist and flourish, the prospect and consequences of miscalculation will not go away. Dyer accepts that humanity has proven itself to be a quarrelsome species – so far – but argues against this as biological or social inevitability. He makes the proposition that the compelling threat of nuclear

destruction and the emergence of more egalitarian societies should lead to a more general and influential questioning 'about the usefulness and inevitability of war'.

It is here that this reviewer is led to part company with Dyer. He wishes for a better world without providing a convincing argument that one is actually likely. As such he is philosophically inclined towards the 'end of history' thesis but, faced with incontrovertible evidence of history's continued march, he merely ignores it. This is perhaps exemplified by the positioning of the chapter on guerrillas and terrorists which is placed, almost as an afterthought, after the chapter describing how soldiers and the military-industrial complex have conspired to keep conventional war alive, and before the chapter on the reforms to the international system that would mark the end of war.

Arguably this shows the extent to which Dyer, although content to quote Clausewitz, doesn't really understand war as a subset of politics – but rather as a subset of policy. If policy ruled our world things would be much better: the distribution of resources would be more even, humanity's advance on problems like resource depletion and global warming would be better co-ordinated and wars would seldom, if ever, occur. If wars did occur they would be carefully limited with both sides communicating to ensure that the rational balancing of means and ends shaped all operations. Unfortunately, war is ruled by politics and, as a result, will constantly seek – mostly successfully – to escape human control. Dyer is looking for a world that does not and, from this soldier's point of view, cannot exist.

War: The Lethal Custom is an ambitious book. It is an entertaining and engaging read best suited to a general audience and those new to the study of history. I would not recommend it, and do not believe it was intended, for more serious readers. ♦

Gwynne Dyer, *War: The Lethal Custom*, Scribe, Carlton North, Victoria, 2005, Softback, 496pp., RRP \$445.00.

