

War: How Conflict Shaped Us

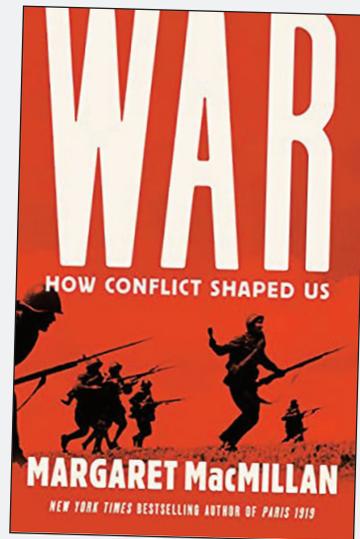
By Margaret MacMillan
Random House, 2020
312 pp \$18.19
ISBN: 978-1984856135

Reviewed by Bryon Greenwald

The evolution of human society and its capacity to make war are so intertwined, so symbiotic, as to be inseparable. To study one without the other is an exercise in incomplete scholarship. For, as Margaret MacMillan exclaims early in her insightful study of war and its influence on Western society, “we have to include war in our study of human history if we are to make any sense of it.”

War: How Conflict Shaped Us, is an elegantly written examination of the subject, initially delivered by MacMillan as part of BBC Four’s Reith Lecture series in 2018. In it, MacMillan delivers on her promise to analyze the evolution of war and society and how one influenced the other. She does so across nine chapters that combine the best of Quincy Wright’s *A Study of War*, Clausewitz’s *On War*, and Sun Tzu’s (or as she notes *Sunzi*) *The Art of War*, along with a healthy dose of war and warfare in the Western World, and incisive chapters on “Making the Warrior,” “Fighting,” “Civilians,” and “Controlling the Uncontrollable.” She closes with a crisp chapter on how we remember conflicts, which is a master class in how society has viewed its sacrifices in war over time.

The book is an excellent 270-page summary of war as a phenomenon. Following an opening chapter on the relationship between war and



humanity, MacMillan presents the reader with a series of nested expositions on the social, political, technological, and cultural evolution in the conduct of war from the 18th century through the end of the 20th century; how and why men (and some women) and societies fight; the act of fighting or combat as recorded by participants; the expansion of conflict to include attacks on civilians; the largely fruitless efforts to control conflict; and how humans have tried to trivialize, capitalize on, and memorialize war. As such, the book should be mandatory reading for staff and war college students and civilians in security studies programs. Indeed, the bibliography of mostly memoirs and secondary sources represents a reading list worthy of an Oxford professor, which of course, she was.

MacMillan is the author of several best-selling books including *The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* and *Paris, 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*. In *War: How Conflict Shaped Us*, she focuses heavily on Western Europe and those nations’ involvement in both world wars. As the great granddaughter of WWI British Prime Minister

Dr. Bryon Greenwald is a Professor of History at the Joint Advanced Warfighting School, Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University.

David Lloyd George, perhaps that focus is only natural. Still, her historical breadth allows her easy inclusion of examples in the text from Thucydides, Alexander, the Romans, the Thirty Years War, the Age of Napoleon, the American Civil War, and even America's post-1945 wars. Unfortunately, she largely refrains from examining the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, which witnessed an acceleration of warfare into the digital age and occurred concurrently with the next phase of societal, technological, ethical, and military evolution (possibly revolution). This period offers such rich territory for examination that it seems to be a lost opportunity for someone of MacMillan's caliber. A major exception occurs in chapter 2, "Reasons for War," where she eviscerates the planning for Iraq (2003) as evidence that "those making decisions for war" assumed "that, somehow, victory will magically sort out all the problems," colloquially satirized by security professionals as the "ding-dong the witch is dead" strategy and a direct reference to the Defense Department winning the tactical battle, but losing both the war and the peace to follow, if that condition can realistically be said to exist in Iraq today.

While panoramic in scope, *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* is a book of synthesis and reflection. It is less than half the length of *Paris, 1919* and though peppered with historical examples to illustrate her analysis, it contains none of the detailed treatment of the subject seen in her earlier books. As most historians do, MacMillan looks backward. Only in the conclusion does she attempt to go beyond historical analysis and offer some prognostication on the future, specifically the likely bifurcation of war into two levels: one fought by professional forces with high technology, and another fought by loosely organized forces with low-cost weapons. As history suggests, however, these two levels will not remain separate. Instead, like the modernized British Army that pulverized the much larger, but poorly equipped Mahdi Army at the Battle of Omdurman

(September 2, 1898), the forces at MacMillan's two levels will often clash in the same arena with horrific results. Even more ominously, security analysts expect these loosely organized forces to gain ever-increasing access to much of the easily trafficable high technology now used by the militaries of the major and medium-weight powers.

A historian and author of MacMillan's stature is rarely off the mark. She is eminently qualified to lecture and write on virtually any historical topic. Most authors would be happy to achieve a tenth of her acclaim and literary success. That said, readers should remember that *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* is not comprehensive nor foolproof. It relies on secondary sources, some of which are considered classics and others that are "general knowledge" texts (for example, Heuser's *The Evolution of Strategy*, Paret's *Makers of Modern Strategy*, and Parker's *Cambridge History of Warfare*, to name a few). As is common in some publishing circles when producing books in this genre, it lacks the citations to give it the gravitas that elbow patch-wearing academics might desire. This situation creates problems when one runs across sections that seem to disagree with or shortchange the historical record, something that MacMillan's other works rarely do.

For example, the section on Iraq (pp. 46–47) conflates two different historical events and leaves the reader with the impression that they are directly related when they were not. The first event was the planning for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the second U.S. Marine Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper's participation in Exercise *Millennium Challenge*, a \$250 million joint concept experiment (wargame) run by the U.S. Joint Forces Command in late summer 2002. In the latter event, Van Riper commanded the lesser-equipped opposing Red force, which had seized some disputed islands. But instead of waiting for the Blue force to attack with an overwhelming air and missile bombardment as was done in the Persian Gulf War, Van Riper struck unexpectedly with a

barrage of rockets, missiles, and suicide speedboats as soon as the Blue force was within range. In seizing the initiative, he managed to destroy almost two dozen capital ships and desynchronize the Blue force to the point that the umpires stopped the wargame and “reset” or restored the friendly force to full strength. Van Riper quit in disgust.

Unfortunately, MacMillan’s linking of the two events together in her text suggests that Van Riper’s decimation of the Blue force (20,000 casualties in 25 minutes—less time than it took to deliver a pizza, according to one account) foreshadowed the asymmetric tactics the U.S. faced in Iraq and Afghanistan and that somehow the military should have known better. In fact, she writes that the experiment’s “demonstration of asymmetric war . . . was a warning of what was going to happen to coalition forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq”

Perhaps she is correct at the conceptual or macro level, *U.S. forces should always know better*. In real life, and at the operational and tactical levels of war, the two events were unrelated; they were two wholly different incidents, separate in time, place, and effect. Millennium Challenge was not a wargame to prepare for the invasion of Iraq; it was mandated by Congress and planned years in advance to test emerging warfighting concepts. In it, Van Riper surprised Blue forces with his unexpected use of regular military forces, conventional tactics (with a nod to WWII history), heavy artillery, and suicide speedboats. In Iraq, religious militias and insurgents backed by Iran fought an unconventional (guerrilla, if you will) campaign, planted improvised explosive devices in roads, and detonated them with garage door openers. While surprise existed in both, there are significant differences between the two events. Finally, in attempting to verify her research, this reviewer searched her chapter and book bibliographies and found only one source on the Iraq war, Tom Ricks’ *Fiasco*, which does not mention Millennium Challenge at all.

There are other small examples, such as MacMillan calling British General Bernard Montgomery and General of the Army Douglas MacArthur “great commanders” who had the “ability of great actors to reach out and make their men feel that their commanders knew them, cared about them and were speaking directly to them” that indicate a limited exposure to some of the historical record. Both men had erratic records in World War II and neither were loved by their men. Monty was indeed the “hero of El Alamein” in North Africa in 1942, but a failure when he reached the Continent (for example, Caen, the Falaise Pocket, Antwerp, and Operation *Market Garden*). While Montgomery maintained that his “beret was worth three divisions,” his men frequently turned their backs on him as he drove by. If forced to choose a British commander to include in the list, Horatio Nelson (of Trafalgar) or William Slim (of Burma) would have been better choices based on their combat records and ability to motivate their forces.

That MacMillan would succumb to the MacArthur myth, but not include Patton on her list of great actors, is just as puzzling. MacArthur lost the entire Far East Air Force to the Japanese air attack on December 8, 1941, despite the attack occurring 8 hours after the assault on Pearl Harbor. He also ordered the ill-considered movement of supplies and men forward on Luzon to await a Japanese landing only to lose all his supplies as his forces fell back in disarray into Bataan, where they held on for 4 months on starvation rations before surrendering. After not seeing their commander for several months, MacArthur’s beleaguered forces on Bataan started calling him “Dugout Doug,” a reference to his exodus to the Malinta Tunnel on the fortress island of Corregidor. His record in the Korean War was no better. The Inchon landings were a success, but his pursuit to the Chinese border and casual dismissal of warnings of Chinese intervention sealed his historical fate. As a coda, President Harry

Truman relieved him for insubordination and failure to follow orders the following year.

Despite these minor flaws *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* is a worthwhile read, especially for political leaders, pundits, and that part of the populace for whom military service is a foreign concept and who have no understanding of war's evolution or its impact on those who fight it or lay in its path. As MacMillan accurately notes, "war is perhaps the most organized of all human activities and in turn it has stimulated further organization of society." It is alive with puzzles and paradoxes. We hate it, but employ it, at times with gusto. It wrecks nations, but rebuilds and remakes them as well. It is the final arbiter of arguments between kings and statesmen until the conditions change and the argument is revisited. As MacMillan argues, we must understand ourselves and our interaction with war, conflict, and organized killing if we, as a species, are to arrest our natural tendencies and turn our organizational and technological abilities to solving a host of other maladies that influence the human condition. **PRISM**