

Countering Students' Fatalism Toward War

By JOHN HORGAN

I taught "War and Human Nature" again this fall. The course ponders the question, as my syllabus puts it, "Is war inevitable, or are peace and even universal disarmament possible?" During the first class, I posed that question to my undergraduate students, most of them engineering and science majors. Thirteen said no, peace is not possible, and four said yes, it is. At least one of those yeses, I'm pretty sure, was telling the teacher what he wanted to hear.

That pessimistic response no longer surprises me. Two years ago, I had my students ask classmates: "Will humans ever stop fighting wars, once and for all? Why or why not?" Of the 205 respondents, 185 — more than 90 percent — replied no. The justifications were diverse: "We're naturally evil people." "People are always going to hate and try to destroy 'inferiors.'" "Monkeys fight with each other and because humans are animals, too, we follow that pattern." "Men are power-crazy and women are not in power." "People would just get bored with no war."

Even more disconcertingly, some of those who answered yes revealed in their explanations that they were actually pessimists: "Yes, because in the future the human species will unite to fight alien species." "Yes, but it will only happen under the same one religion, because one's beliefs are a driving force." "Yes, when someone (Korea) launches their nuclear weapon. Then we'll all stop messing with each other and keep it cool." "Yes. Humanity will end wars once everyone is killed."

"From this survey," one of my students wrote, "we can conclude that most college students have little faith in mankind."

Young people have less faith now than they did decades ago, if previous surveys are any guide. In 1987 the psychologist David Adams, of Wesleyan University, polled 126 students on whether "wars are inevitable because human beings are naturally aggressive." Only 33 percent of the students agreed with that statement, and only 40 percent believed that "war is intrinsic to human nature." The results resemble those obtained in similar surveys of 327 students in Finland in 1984 and of 5,000 students in 18 nations in 1969.

My students' pessimism reflects that of the general population. Over the past few years, I've taken every opportunity — on the Internet, during lectures, at conferences and parties, in restaurants and taxis — to ask people of all ages and backgrounds whether they think war will ever be abolished. More than nine people in 10 give me the same answer: War will never end.

The current wave of fatalism is all too understandable, given September 11 and its bloody sequelae, not to mention conflicts roiling the Middle East, Central Africa, and other troubled regions. As an old-fashioned liberal peacenik, however, I find fatalism toward warfare — especially among young people — disturbing, because it has the potential to become a self-fulfilling belief. If you believe wars are inevitable, you are more likely to support hawkish politicians and policies. So, in my course, I try to get my pessimistic students to reconsider their views by exposing them to continuing investigations into warfare by anthropologists, archaeologists, political scientists, biologists, and others.

That research seems, at first glance, to support a fatalistic view of warfare. As far back as scientists have looked into human prehistory, they have found evidence of lethal fighting. The anthropologist Lawrence Keeley, of the University of Illinois at Chicago, estimates that more than 90 percent of pre-state, tribal societies engaged in at least occasional warfare, and that many fought constantly. Tribal combat usually involved skirmishes and ambushes rather than pitched battles, but over time the fighting could produce mortality rates as high as 50 percent.

Those findings, the Harvard archaeologist Steven LeBlanc contends, demolish the claim of the 18th-

century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau that before civilization, humans were “noble savages” living in harmony with one another and with nature. Primeval warfare, LeBlanc asserts, stemmed from a fierce, Malthusian struggle for food and other resources. “Since the beginning of time,” he writes, “humans have been unable to live in ecological balance. No matter where we happen to live on earth, we eventually outstrip the environment. This has always led to competition as a means of survival, and warfare has been the inevitable consequence of our ecological-demographic propensities.”

Some scientists now trace warfare all the way back to the common ancestor we shared with chimpanzees, our closest genetic relatives. Beginning in the mid-1970s, researchers in Tanzania and elsewhere have observed male chimpanzees from the same troop banding together to patrol their territory; if they encounter a chimp from a different troop, the raiders beat him, often to death. Mortality rates from intergroup violence among chimpanzees, the Harvard anthropologist Richard Wrangham reports, are roughly comparable to rates observed among human hunter-gatherers.

“Chimpanzee-like violence preceded and paved the way for human war,” Wrangham says, “making modern humans the dazed survivors of a continuous, five-million-year habit of lethal aggression.” He contends that male primates “evolved to possess strong appetites for power, because with extraordinary power comes extraordinary reproduction.” As evidence, he notes that many ancient warrior-kings kept harems of hundreds of fertile females.

But significantly, most authorities on the origins of warfare reject the fatalistic notion that war is an inevitable consequence of our biology. The anthropologist Jonathan Haas, of the University of Illinois at Chicago, points out that rates of warfare have always fluctuated both between and within societies, contradicting the “preposterous” notion that warfare is so innate that it is inevitable. “If war is deeply rooted in our biology, then it’s going to be there all the time,” he says. “And it’s just not.” War, he argues, is certainly not innate in the same sense as language, which has been exhibited by all known human societies at all times.

The anthropologists Carol and Melvin Ember agree that biological theories cannot explain patterns of warfare among either pre-state or state societies. The Embers oversee Yale University’s Human Relations Area Files, a database of information on some 360 cultures past and present. More than 90 percent of those societies have engaged in warfare, but some have fought constantly and others rarely, while a few have never been observed fighting. The Embers have found correlations between rates of warfare and environmental factors, notably droughts, floods, and other natural disasters that provoke fears of famine.

Even scientists whose work seems to support fatalism toward war dismiss that attitude themselves. One is the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, of the University of California at Santa Barbara, who is renowned for finding a link between male violence and reproductive success among the Yanomamo, a warlike tribal society in the Amazon that he has studied since the 1960s. According to Chagnon, Yanomamo killers have, on average, twice as many wives and three times as many children as male nonkillers in the tribe.

But Chagnon has always denied that Yanomamo men fight because of a “war gene” or instinct. Truly compulsive, out-of-control killers, he notes, are quickly killed themselves. Successful warriors are usually quite calculating, he says; they fight because that is how a man advances in their society. Moreover, many Yanomamo men have confessed to Chagnon that they loathe war and wish it could be abolished from their culture — and, in fact, rates of violence have recently dropped sharply, as Yanomamo villages have accepted the laws and mores of the outside world.

History offers many other examples of warlike societies that rapidly became peaceful. Vikings were the scourge of Europe during the Middle Ages, but their Scandinavian descendants are among the most peaceful people on earth. Similarly, Germany and Japan, which just 70 years ago were the world’s most militaristic, aggressive nations, have embraced pacifism, albeit after catastrophic defeats.

Primate studies also offer grounds for optimism. The primatologist Frans de Waal, of Emory University,

has demonstrated that shifts in environmental conditions can reduce primate violence. In one of his experiments, rhesus monkeys, which are ordinarily incorrigibly aggressive, grew up to become kinder and gentler when raised by mild-mannered stump-tail monkeys. De Waal has reduced conflicts among monkeys and apes by increasing their interdependence — making them cooperate to obtain food, for example — and ensuring their equal access to food.

He has also drawn attention to the remarkable chimpanzee species *Pan paniscus*. More commonly known as bonobos, they are darker-skinned and slimmer than chimpanzees and have markedly different lifestyles. “No deadly warfare,” de Waal comments, “little hunting, no male dominance, and enormous amounts of sex.” That promiscuity, he speculates, reduces violence both within and between bonobo troops, just as intermarriage does between human tribes.

The Stanford biologist Robert Sapolsky points out that environmental conditions can override biology even among baboons, which are ordinarily extremely aggressive. Since the early 1980s, Sapolsky has traveled to Kenya to spy on what he calls the Forest Troop, a group of baboons living near a garbage dump. Because they had to fight baboons from another troop camped nearby, only the toughest males of Forest Troop frequented the dump. In the mid-1980s, all those males died after contracting tuberculosis from contaminated meat at the dump.

The epidemic left Forest Troop with many more females than males, and with noticeably less-pugnacious males. Conflict within the troop plummeted; Sapolsky even observed males grooming one another, which he says is “nearly as unprecedented as baboons sprouting wings.” This sea change has persisted. “Is a world of peacefully coexisting human Forest Troops possible?” Sapolsky asks. “Anyone who says, ‘No, it is beyond our nature,’ knows too little about primates, including ourselves.”

The message that I hammer home in class is that — contrary to the impression created by news headlines — humanity as a whole is much less warlike than it used to be. In other words: Things are getting better! World Wars I and II and all the other horrific conflicts of the 20th century resulted in the deaths of fewer than 3 percent of the global population. According to Lawrence Keeley, that is an order of magnitude less than the rate of violent death for men in the average primitive society, whose weapons consisted only of clubs and spears rather than machine guns and bombs.

If war is defined as an armed conflict leading to at least 1,000 deaths per year, there have been relatively few international wars since World War II, and civil wars have declined sharply since peaking in the early 1990s. Most conflicts now consist of guerrilla wars, insurgencies, and terrorism — or what the political scientist John Mueller, of Ohio State University, calls the “remnants of war.” He rejects biological explanations for the trend, noting that “testosterone levels seem to be as high as ever.” While acknowledging that many political scientists still consider war to be “an inevitable part of international and domestic life,” Mueller asserts that “a continuing decline in war does seem to be an entirely reasonable prospect.”

The cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker identifies several possible reasons for the recent decline of violence. First, the creation of stable states with effective legal systems and police forces has eliminated the Hobbesian anarchy of all against all. Second, our increased life expectancies make us less willing to risk our lives by engaging in violence. Third, as a result of globalization and communications, we have become increasingly interdependent on, and empathetic toward, others outside of our immediate tribes.

In short, many lines of research contradict the myth that war is a constant of the human condition. Those studies also suggest that — contrary to the myth of the peaceful, noble savage — civilization has not created the problem of warfare; it is helping us solve it. We need more civilization, not less, if we wish to eradicate war. Civilization has given us legal institutions that resolve disputes by establishing laws, negotiating agreements, and enforcing them. Those institutions, which range from local courts to the United Nations, have vastly reduced the risk of violence both within and between nations.

Obviously, our institutions are far from perfect. Nations around the world still maintain huge arsenals, including weapons of mass destruction, and armed conflicts still ravage many regions. So what should we do? The anthropologist and psychiatrist Melvin Konner proposes female education as one key to reducing conflict. Many studies, he notes, have demonstrated that an increase in the education of women leads to a decrease in birth rates. The result is a stabilized population, which decreases demands on governmental and medical services and on natural resources, and hence decreases the likelihood of social unrest. A lower birth rate also reduces what some demographers call “bare branches”: unmarried, unemployed young men, who are associated with higher rates of violent conflict both within and between nations. “Education of girls is by far the best investment you can make in a developing country,” Konner says.

In my course, we discuss many other possible solutions to warfare, such as decreasing severe poverty and ensuring a more equitable distribution of food, water, and other resources; developing cheap, clean, renewable sources of energy; creating a global government with the power to anticipate and quell outbreaks of violence; and promoting the spread of participatory democracy. Chances are that none of those solutions will be sufficient in and of itself. War seems to be overdetermined, springing from many different causes, not all of which are necessary for war to occur. Peace, if it is to last, must be overdetermined, too.

My overarching goal in “War and Human Nature” is to persuade my scientifically oriented students to see war not as a permanent part of the human condition, stemming from our genes or original sin, but as a potentially solvable scientific problem. To be sure, war is a dauntingly complex phenomenon, with political, economic, and social ramifications. But the same could be said of problems such as global warming, overpopulation, and AIDS, all of which are being rigorously addressed by scientists.

Peace is a challenge at least as worthy of pursuit as cheap, clean, renewable sources of energy or cures for AIDS or cancer. War research would be the ultimate multidisciplinary enterprise, drawing upon such diverse fields as game theory, neurobiology, evolutionary psychology, theology, ecology, political science, and economics. The short-term goal of researchers would be to find ways to reduce conflict in the world, wherever it might occur. The long-term goal would be to explore how nations can make the transition toward eliminating or at least greatly reducing armies and arsenals, including weapons of mass destruction.

In a famous 1906 essay, William James acknowledged that war fulfills deep human, especially male, needs. “The plain truth is that people want war,” he wrote. We can eradicate war, he contended, only by finding a substitute, “the moral equivalent of war,” to challenge and engage young men. James proposed enlisting them in a “war against nature,” engaging in perilous occupations such as mining, logging, and fishing. I have a better idea: Make peace the moral equivalent of war for all young people.

John Horgan is a science journalist and director of the Center for Science Writings at the Stevens Institute of Technology.

Source: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 55, Issue 31, Page B10

April 10, 2009