

Black, Jeremy. *War: Past, Present and Future*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000.

Military historian Jeremy Black's wide-ranging objective for his book, *War: Past, Present and Future*, is to make plain the Eurocentric, pro-Western assumptions that characterize both military history and policy-making. These assumptions are evident in analytical biases toward technological determinism and inter-state, rather than intra-state, conflict. War, in total, is meant to expand analysis beyond realism's stress on international material factors alone by considering organizational and cultural determinants that also, for Black, affect warfare and change.

In order to redirect attention toward "less advanced" practices and peoples dating from the fifteenth century to the present, *War's* strategy is twofold. First, through analysis of interactions between Westerners and other groups, *War* contends that Western military successes are frequently overplayed and those of others have been downplayed or at least not readily recognized. As well, though Europeans eventually dominated other parts of the world through their social, economic, and military practices, for Black this had less to do with military technological superiority than it did with the cultural and institutional impetuses driving imperialism. Moreover, the acceptance of these practices was uneven and subject to a society's own particular socio-political dynamics. From this perspective, Black can assert that while many militaries today look the same from the outside, their *raison d'être* may not be directed solely (or even) toward warwinning, but rather toward objectives within a society both informal, such as social mobility, and instrumental, such as policing.

Second, *War* identifies examples of the limitations of Western military activity largely in isolation from interactions with "the other." The (limited) merits of technological development in the early modern period are discussed as is the current Western obsession, especially for the United States, with the Revolution of Military Affairs (RMA). On this latter point, Black argues that while the RMA is demonstrative of American technological advances, it is also a function of American culture. The RMA can be viewed as part of the American cultural affinity to promote technological prowess and to employ overwhelming force while at the same time trying to minimize risk. Even though the book was published before the quick triumph of the American coalition over Iraqi forces in 2003 and the subsequent difficulties the occupiers faced, quoting an extended passage of the text is appropriate and carries an ominous ring:

. . . there is a danger that the RMA serves as an apparent substitute for a political willingness to commit troops, and also as a cover for the failure, first, to develop effective counterinsurgency doctrine and practice, second, to conceive of a strategy for successful long-term expeditionary operations, and third, to work within the difficult context of alliance policy-making and strategic control. (p. 286)

A valuable lesson from *War* is that technology, and a belief in the merits of technology, may help to win conflicts in the Western mindset, but they are of limited utility, and may even prevent political and military leaders from understanding how to win the peace on the ground.

While Black has set the bar high, given the scope of his analysis, there are ways he might have cleared it much more easily. Despite its goal of revealing the nature of non-Western war, the book's consideration of warfare in isolation from European actors is minimal. Examples of conflicts of this type from earlier times are only dealt with in a cursory manner. Similarly, in contemporary times, analysis of intra-state conflict in the developing world/weak state context is also fleeting. Yet, there are many compelling examples, some such as the conflicts in Western Africa and the Great Lakes Region, which even go beyond the common civil war characteristics of succession or seizing state control and possess elements of warlordism as well. Hence, it is odd that notwithstanding the possibilities for investigation and Black's own lament that military historians have largely ignored intra-state conflicts, *War* examines in-depth only the English and American Civil Wars, the two intra-state cases that have been largely examined elsewhere and are Western in nature.

In sum, while a different selection of evidence would have strengthened its arguments, *War* is nevertheless an important contribution to warfare studies. Put differently, though the choice of answers might have been more convincing, the book asks the right questions needed to reveal how the Western way of war and the purpose for the military have come to dominate intellectual and policy pursuits at the expense of understanding the merits and differences of other traditions and approaches.

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