



# War: The Lethal Custom

*Gwynne Dyer*

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## **War: The Lethal Custom** Gwynne Dyer

While modern science ponders whether human beings are programmed toward belligerence and warfare, there is no doubt that war has been humanity's constant companion since the dawn of civilization, and that we have become all too proficient in its conduct. In *War*, noted military historian Gwynne Dyer ranges from the tumbling walls of Jericho to the modern advent of total war in which no one is exempt from the horrors of armed conflict. He shows how the martial instinct has evolved over the human generations and among our close primate relations, such as the chimpanzee. Dyer squarely confronts the reality of war, and the threat of nuclear weapons, but does not despair that war is our eternal legacy. He likes and respects soldiers, even while he knows their job is to kill; he understands the physics and the psychology of battles, but he is no war junkie. Dyer surveys the fiery battlefields of human history, never losing sight of the people caught up in war. He actually believes there is hope that war can be abolished, that human beings are more than just our genes. *War* is an award-winning book that explores the human past to imagine a different future.

## **War: The Lethal Custom Details**

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Author : Gwynne Dyer

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## René says

Although it appears a bit dated in both its initial and final chapters (published in 1985, its focus is understandably on the risks and consequences of a nuclear war, so one of its background thesis is "we change or we all die"), it brings a great angle on how war has evolved - or not - throughout human history. Sadly, nobody could have forecast how terrorism was about to evolve and become not only a significant actor in humankind's love of war, but also a threat to humans' definition of what is acceptable behavior.

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## Shoaib Akhtar says

On whether war is embedded in our culture and are we forever doomed, or is there still some hope.

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## Mike Saad says

Masterful read, a great update to Dyer's 1982 classic. Every voting citizen, and every world politician, should be required to read this book. While providing a (somewhat) hopeful offering by the book's end, Dyer ultimately carries a stark warning to us all - be aware of your world, who's running it, what the REAL challenges our planet faces are, and above all else, understand what nuclear war in the modern age really means (i.e. Spoiler alert - Mutually Assured Destruction, no winners, we all die, either quickly or slowly...). A fascinating and poignant look at the History of War and Warfare from Ancient Times through to today, in Dyer's classic witty and relatable tone. Highly recommended read!

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## Tim says

Written in 1985, Gwynne Dyer's overview of the evolution of military stratagems and the effects executing them had on their societies has shown itself remarkably prescient.

This quote, on the rise of anti-colonial guerrilla warfare and its transition into urban guerrilla warfare (what we now label as "terrorism") is particularly telling:

*By assassination, bank robberies, kidnappings, hijackings, and so on, all calculated to attract maximum publicity in the media and to embarrass the government to the greatest possible extent, the guerrillas sought to provoke the displacement of democratic governments by tough military regimes, or to drive existing military regimes into even stricter and more unpopular security measures. If the regimes resorted to counterterror, torture, "disappearances," and death squads, all the better, for the purpose was to discredit the government and alienate it from the population.*

*"It is necessary to turn political crisis into armed conflict by performing violent actions that will force those in power to transform the political situation of the country into a military situation. That will alienate the masses, who, from then on, will revolt against the army and the police and blame them for the state of*

things." -Carlos Marighetta

*As in the case of rural guerrilla warfare attempted outside the colonial environment, however, the fatal flaw in the urban guerrilla strategy is that it lacks an effective end game. [...]*

*Insurgents of any political color, no matter which specific techniques they are using, are an inherently transient phenomenon. Their goal is to seize control of the state, not to destroy it, and they will end up either in government or in shallow graves. Moreover, the struggle will have the effect of expanding the powers of the state, because the need of both sides to mobilize and regiment popular support in an internal war is just as strong as in the great international wars of this century. Whether the insurgents win or lose in the end, the institution of the state will survive and flourish.*

*And states fight wars.*

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## **Bruce says**

Pass up the first two meandering chapters, whose sole purpose would seem to be to impart that bad things happen in war ergo war is a bad thing, and this becomes a fascinating book. What follows is a fascinating chronological and sociological look at the evolution of institutionalized human aggression, from the stone age to the modern day. Fans of Jared Diamond take note, Dyer takes the long historical view (even recapitulating much of Diamond's thesis at pp. 108-9) to consider not just why we fight, but why we fight the way we do. He then chases this with a sober look at the dire implications of where anything other than multilateral foreign relations will inevitably lead us. (Spoiler alert: world go boom.)

No matter how individually bellicose, people inherently don't want to fight, at least not in any organized way that is likely to assure their deaths. Even through World War II, 25% is the maximum loss-rate of any society's male population from war. Left to his own devices, your average rampaging barbarian will be hit-and-run (mostly run), a tactic not terribly effective in effecting regime change. Deadliness must be ingrained, trained, and schemed for, and even then it is not assured. In fact, so averse to bloodshed is the average human that the killing fields of the Civil War were littered with rifles that had been ramrodded with two or more unshot wads. Absent precision, long-range firearms, concentrated lethality is the way to go. Hence the phalanx (300 fans note), a close-knit grind of infantry with overlapping shields and protruding spears that harkens all the way back to the Akkadian empire of 2250 BCE and was sporadically employed thereafter by various empires and local powers. A phalanx is impervious to your average lone marauder (even horse-riding nomads, as horses are too smart to ride full-speed into a thicket of blades), and the claustrophobic proximity of soldiery helps to keep everyone on task.

Why did phalanxes ever go out of fashion?

The answer is that it requires an extraordinarily high level of commitment from the men who take their places in the phalanx, especially if they are coming from an older and less disciplined fighting tradition. What made it possible for the citizen-soldiers of the early Sumerian cities to fight in phalanxes was precisely their sense of commitment and belonging to the cities they fought for. All their kin were in the city and many were right around them in the phalanx, which undoubtedly helped, but they also felt a deep involvement in the city's fate because their decisions in the assembly shaped (or seemed to shape) its policies. So they turned up unpaid for

the weekly drills, they adapted to a style of fighting that was utterly alien to the old tradition [of melee or ritualized engagement], and when necessary they risked their lives, unpaid, in war in the ranks of the phalanx (p. 136).

The tug-of-war push of phalanx-style infantry fighting remained so successful a tactic, that it ultimately returned in the eighteenth century in the guise of French, Swiss, and Spanish pikemen during the Seven Years War. The bayonet (which lets a rifle be used as a spear) is one of the last links of a martial chain spanning over three thousand years of effective deployment. Yet while a disciplined mass of men with pointed poles will even thwart mounted cavalry, they'd be overrun (literally) by tanks and dropped like tenpins by a single well-placed modern shell. All of which helps explain why contemporary warfare is so futile, and why your average doughboy burrows for the cover of trenches.

All this appears so conventional in the shadow of the H-Bomb, but did you ever stop to think how it was that the term "conventional war" came to be coined? I mean, who really believes that two otherwise equivalently-industrialized states would choose to duke out their dispute while observing a tacit agreement to use slightly less-lethal weaponry than that which they could otherwise bring to bear? Still, there is little question that this is the currently-prevailing concept. According to Dyer, "Professional officers won the argument... because nuclear war reduced all other forms of warfare to irrelevance, and thereby made the efforts and even the existence of the large majority of professional officers who served in non-nuclear branches of the armed forces irrelevant as well. People do not like being irrelevant, and there are few trade unions more powerful than the professional officer corps." (p. 356) Combine these guys with military contractors who stand to make a decent buck producing expensive, tailor-made missiles and fighter jets and oo-rah Congressionals whose districts stand to gain short-term employment, and you have the self-perpetuating military-industrial cancerplex Eisenhower warned us about.

While conflicts among minor powers are constantly flaring up, threatening to ignite terminal global conflict among major (nuclear) powers, the press has promoted terrorists as the bogeyman since 9/11. Dyer disdains nonstate actors, dismissing what he views as the ultimate futility of urban guerilla warfare, "*la politique du pire* (the policy of making things worse, in the hope of provoking a crisis and a decisive break with the status quo)" as an existential threat. Any success is likely to be pyrrhic, the author says, la resistance laughing all the way to their mass graves. Witness General Iberico Saint Jean, governor of Buenos Aires during the Terror of 1976, who said, "First we kill all the subversives; then, their collaborators; later, those who sympathize with them; afterward, those who remain indifferent; and finally, the undecided." (p. 403) Sadly, El General was not kidding, promoting a policy of indiscriminate raids, torture, and killings that purged 15-30,000 Argentine lives.

Dyer isn't wholly contemptuous of guerilla tactics, he just thinks minimal, anticrime measures sufficient to contain any existential risk to the status quo and thereby promote the survival of our present civilization. Thus, at pp. 415-6, he writes:

These attacks can have significant political effect when they are well-timed, like the bombs on Madrid commuter trains three days before the Spanish election of March 2004, which may well have swung the election outcome against the incumbent conservative government that had supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq.... The Japanese sect Aum Shinrikyo actually released sarin-type nerve gas on the Tokyo subway in 1995; only twelve people were killed. The practical problem with both chemical and biological agents is dispersal; the attackers listed above would all have got better results for less effort out of nail bombs.... But a single nuclear weapon is a local disaster, comparable in scale to the Krakatoa volcanic explosion of 1883 or the Tokyo earthquake of 1923. We should obviously strive very hard to prevent it, but even a nuclear detonation in some unhappy city some time in the future... should not stampede the

world into doing what the terrorists want -- and what they almost always want is an over-reaction of some sort.... The point is not to panic, and not to lose patience.

Quoting Stella Rimington, a former director-general of MI5, armed conflict will be with us for as long as "there are people with grievances." The trick is not to eliminate confrontation, but contain the collateral damage. We are in dire straits now that our civilization has succeeded in refining the deadliness of our killing technology; we must not make war on our brothers (and sisters) in arms. Fortunately, as indicated by his surveys of a variety of fighting techniques and technologies, Dyer's grand argument is that war is as much a byproduct of systemic forces as it is ingrained in our primate reflexes. Assuming this to be true (and the author's case is highly compelling), we can take solace in the good news that the cultural forces that undermine trust and impart (false) perceptions of looming existential threat are not only controllable, but reversible. Understanding how the whole mess is wired makes it possible to defuse Doomsday. Therein lies hope for the future of humanity. Serious multilateral efforts to stifle Mars can't come too soon. As of this review, it's now only three minutes to midnight.

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### **Stuart Bobb says**

I actually just read the old edition, published in 1985. I should have tossed the used book sale hardback aside and found the new one, I think. The old edition was written before the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus has a perspective that is quite dated today. This is not a book that glorifies war - quite the contrary. But it is written by a very capable military historian who also served as a military officer. Setting aside the nuclear war discussion (which is still relevant but in a different way now), the author makes some excellent points on a number of topics. Unlike anything else I've read, he addresses the topics of preparing and waging war from a different point of view. His discussion of how a military organization succeeds in training its recruits to kill was something I had never really thought about before. The discussion of how, at the brink of war, the military tail can often wag the political dog as a matter of expediency is well covered. Barbara Tuchman first introduced me to that problem in her discussion of German train schedules in her WW I book "The Guns of August", but Gwynne Dyer underlines the way this replays again and again. In the end, you can deploy on time and be ready to take an immediate military action or you can leave room and time for diplomats to find solutions - but you can almost never do a good job of both. Both MAD and the notion of a "winnable" nuclear war are explored thoroughly. He does a good job of communicating just how uncertain any military action really is. We should all be very afraid of very confident generals or politicians - they clearly don't know what they are getting us into.

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### **Checkman says**

Well written book that provides an overview of the history of warfare as well as a look at how armies make civilians into soldiers and the role of officers. It's a fairly short book at 272 pages and was a book companion to Dyer's PBS series that aired originally in the mid-80's in the United States. The book opens up the documentary series that Dyer wrote and narrated going a little more in depth where time won't allow for a televised episode. It's also has numerous photos in it which I always appreciate. More a series of essays, but nevertheless a well written book that I have held onto for the past thirty years. Though somewhat dated in 2016 (obviously the focus was the threat of nuclear war and the Cold War) it is still applicable in this time. War is as old as human civilization so how can it be all that obsolete?

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### **mike osman says**

Excellent history of war from prehistory to the present. Dyer has a lively and clear writing style. Every chapter has new and fascinating observations about war in each epoch. Dyer takes no prisoners, but he treats the topic with the seriousness it deserves.

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### **Leah Munsky says**

Honestly I didn't finish it, I gave it up as a bad job. It probably would have been a fine history book if he weren't trying to prove that war hasn't changed in thousands of years. It hasn't changed the same way that government hasn't, marriage hasn't, and education hasn't. It hasn't transformed into something else is what he means. All of the institutions of society change and evolve over time, as has war, but they continue to hold their original form, perform their original purpose. If war evolves into something wholly different then it is no longer war. I'm not saying this may not happen someday and I do believe that nuclear disarmament is desirable but I found his argument weak. He never wanted war to change he wants it to cease to be war.

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### **SpaceBear says**

Dyer provides an overview of war in history, seeking to come to an understanding of what war means and why it pervades society. His view of war, however, is from the perspective of Western armies, and the 'Western way of war fighting'. As such, there is little about historical violence pre-Classical Greece, and he only discusses battle formations that revolutionized Western warfighting. His focus on the experiences of Western armies in Korea and Japan betray his narrow view, as does his extended discussion of nuclear strategy (one of the longest chapters in the book), at the expense of trends in war that have occurred across the rest of the world during the Cold War.

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### **Shane Baker says**

I heard about this on the "Hardcore History" podcast. It's a comprehensive history of a universal human activity. Apparently less people per capita die in today's conflicts than in the past.

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### **Courtney says**

This is the second book I've read by Gwynne Dyer and I have to say that I really enjoy him as an author. His writing is clear, he seems extremely knowledgeable, makes a lot of good points and organizes his ideas well. All that makes for some very satisfying reading.

*War: The New Edition* covers the history of human warfare while asking if it's possible to get rid of war

altogether. Dyer clearly shows that humans have always been at least somewhat war-like, but for a while it was almost merely ritual. Things began to change with population growth and the development of agriculture, and continually changed from then on. We are in a place now where, as Dyer suggests, we potentially could see nuclear war or a Third World War, and we still are dealing with more localized conflicts in certain parts of the world and the ongoing threat of terrorism.

Dyer, however, seems optimistic. He does not feel that a Third World War is around the corner and states that most people seem not to think so either - myself included. Nuclear war might be more of a realistic possibility, but again, it seems unlikely. Localized wars are probably not going to spread beyond their borders and terrorism will not spark a massive war or even bring down governments in whichever targeted nation. As I had noticed in *Canada in the Great Power Game, 1914-2014*, Dyer thinks rather positively of the United Nations, but in *War* I think he's a bit more balanced in how he portrays it. Really, it can only be so effective: countries will invade each other whether the UN sanctions it or not, countries can veto what decisions they don't like, and how and to what extent the UN gets involved in crises and wars is a bit on the messy side. Nonetheless, none of the world's 'great powers' have fought each other in quite a long time and countries' citizens attempt to get change through non-violent ways. Things have changed.

I know I won't see the end of warfare during my lifetime and I honestly don't know if it will ever go away. Even though we might be clear of world wars, armed conflict seems pretty prevalent still and I think something like that may persist for a long time to come. Still, it's a nice thought and I don't entirely disagree with Dyer that the possibility to eventually end warfare exists.

All arguments aside, I thought *War* was informative and interesting. Dyer explained the development of war and why it developed the way it did very well. The man also knows how to pick and use great quotes.

Happy the blest ages that knew not the dread fury of those devilish engines of artillery, whose inventor I am persuaded is in hell receiving the reward of his diabolical invention, by which he made it easy for a base and cowardly arm to take the life of a gallant gentleman... - Don Quixote

The chapter on nuclear war, basically covering the Cold War, seemed to never end. I personally don't find the topic that exciting and it felt like it really dragged on. I thought the same thing reading *Canada in the Great Power Game* where Dyer focused a bit too much on the subject for my tastes. Was the world ever actually that close to nuclear war that it warranted what felt like the longest chapter in the book? I don't think so. All in all, however, this was an excellent book.

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## **Ron says**

Very well done overview of the role of war in the history of mankind. He is especially good in regard to ancient war. Why did men stay in a murderous battlefield rather than flee? Dyer makes the point that by the time of the first written records, the customs of warfare were already well established. War was a defining part of every civilization up until today, when the stakes have become so high that total war would be self-destructive.

This reads like a companion essay to a TV series, which it was, but still an excellent read.



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## Caer Glas says

A phenomenal read. Based on the 1982 seven part tv series of the same name, it is a solid, unbiased and riveting examination of how we make war and why. Dyer is as objective as it is possible to be, not pushing any particular agenda, nor sparing feelings. It is a must read for anyone trying to make sense of world events, past and present.

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## Evan says

Back in the days long before *Ken Burns' The Civil War* and, later, *Foyle's War* and *Downton Abbey* made PBS viewing popular *de rigueur* mass media events that your friends and neighbors were talking about, it was a lonely pastime to be a PBS fan, watching shows that nobody else within a 10-mile radius of you had seen or were likely to, and no internet to let you bond with somebody, somewhere, who had.

It was in this circumstance in the early 1980s that I watched in awed solitude the musings of Canadian journalist and war historian, Gwynne Dyer, as he patiently and eruditely revealed the psychology of warfare and patriotism and the making of soldiers in a way that had never been seen on TV before. The Canadian-produced, PBS-aired 7-part series he hosted was titled, simply *War*, or *War, with Gwynne Dyer* -- shortly thereafter turned into this companion book, which more or less reiterates the points made on the show.

When the show first showed up in the newspaper TV schedule, my initial reaction at the time was, "Who the hell is Gwynne Dyer and what makes her such an expert about warfare?"

I soon found that Gwynne was a dude, and not just any dude, but the kind of dude you wished you'd had in history class (though, to be fair, in college in the early '80s we did have a lot of chill, long-haired, polyester-or-corduroy-wearing, post-hippie professor dudes with student chick groupies in tow in the manner no longer tenable). Dyer rocks the beard, the hair, the shades and the earth-tone corduroy in pimplike glory, talking about war in a buttery voice of authority that sounds partly leavened by some off-camera toking.

The show is decidedly a product of its time, ruminating on issues arising in the era of the post-Vietnam War and as the nuclear threats of the Cold War were still acute. Some of the show's rough and ready stylistics and cinema-verite techniques may be easier to engage for those who remember them. Parenthetically, and quite surprisingly, one of the episodes of this *television* series was actually nominated for an Academy Award, which seems a rather rare occurrence.

Instead of battle plans and strategy and tactics and weapons and general politics, Dyer took a refreshing tack in looking at war. He aimed to mine the psychological aspects of war; why we wage it and how we prepare for it; the realpolitik, the propaganda and the dehumanizing training of cannon fodder. Most importantly, Dyer implicates the citizenry themselves for their role in maintaining the military status quo, and posits the conundrum of the necessity of military defence and the parallel desire for peace and demilitarization. It was a great thought-provoking series, and fortunately some fine folks have made it available on Youtube.

Full disclosure: I've only read parts of this book, enough to know it reflects the contents of the show; therefore my rating is conditional. I intend to give it a full read, but you know the problem -- all those books...

KR@KY 2018

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