

*by Victor Davis Hanson, Distinguished Fellow in History, Hillsdale College, adapted from a lecture delivered at Hillsdale College on October 1, 2009, during the author's four-week teaching residency.*

I want to talk about the Western way of war and about the particular challenges that face the West today. But the first point I want to make is that war is a human enterprise that will always be with us. Unless we submit to genetic engineering, or unless video games have somehow reprogrammed our brains, or unless we are fundamentally changed by eating different nutrients—these are possibilities brought up by so-called peace and conflict resolution theorists—human nature will not change. And if human nature will not change—and I submit to you that human nature is a constant—then war will always be with us. Its methods or delivery systems—which can be traced through time from clubs to catapults and from flintlocks to nuclear weapons—will of course change. In this sense war is like water. You can pump water at 60 gallons per minute with a small gasoline engine or at 5000 gallons per minute with a gigantic turbine pump. But water is water—the same today as in 1880 or 500 B.C. Likewise war, because the essence of war is human nature.

Second, in talking about the Western way of war, what do we mean by the West? Roughly speaking, we refer to the culture that originated in Greece, spread to Rome, permeated Northern Europe, was incorporated by the Anglo-Saxon tradition, spread through British expansionism, and is associated today primarily with Europe, the United States, and the former commonwealth countries of Britain—as well as, to some extent, nations like Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, which have incorporated some Western ideas. And what are Western ideas? This question is disputed, but I think we know them when we see them. They include a commitment to constitutional or limited government, freedom of the individual, religious freedom in a sense that precludes religious tyranny, respect for property rights, faith in free markets, and an openness to rationalism or to the explanation of natural phenomena through reason. These ideas were combined in various ways through Western history, and eventually brought us to where we are today. The resultant system creates more prosperity and affluence than any other. And of course, I don't mean to suggest that there was Jeffersonian democracy in 13th century England or in the Swiss cantons. But the blueprint for free government always existed in the West, in a way that it didn't elsewhere.

Just as this system afforded more prosperity in times of peace, it led to a superior fighting and defense capability in times of war. This is what I call the Western way of war, and there are several factors at play.

First, constitutional government was conducive to civilian input when it came to war. We see this in ancient Athens, where civilians oversaw a board of generals, and we see it in civilian control of the military in the United States. And at crucial times in Western history, civilian overseers have enriched military planning. Second, Western culture gave birth to a new definition of courage. In Hellenic culture, the prowess of a hero was not recognized by the number of heads on his belt. As Aristotle noted in the *Politics*, Greek warriors didn't wear trophies of individual killings. Likewise, Victoria Crosses and Medals of Honor are awarded today for deeds such as staying in rank, protecting the integrity of the line, advancing and retreating on orders, or rescuing a comrade. This reflects a quite different understanding of heroism.

A third factor underlies our association of Western war with advanced technology. When reason and capitalism are applied to the battlefield, powerful innovations come about. Flints, percussion caps, rifle barrels and mini balls, to cite just a few examples, were all Western inventions. Related to this, Western armies—going back to Alexander the Great's army at the Indus—have a better logistics capability. A recent example is that the Americans invading Iraq were better supplied with water than the native Iraqis. This results from the application of capitalism to military affairs—uniting private self-interest and patriotism to provide armies with food, supplies, and munitions in a way that is much more efficient than the state-run command-and-control alternatives.

Yet another factor is that Western armies are impatient. They tend to want to seek out and destroy the enemy quickly and then go home. Of course, this can be both an advantage and a disadvantage, as we see today in Afghanistan, where the enemy is not so eager for decisive battle. And connected to this tradition is dissent. Today the U.S. military is a completely volunteer force, and its members' behavior on the battlefield largely reflects how they conduct themselves in civil society. One can trace this characteristic of Western armies back to Xenophon's ten thousand, who marched from Northern Iraq to the Black Sea and behaved essentially as a traveling city-state, voting and arguing in a constitutional manner. And their ability to do that is what saved them, not just their traditional discipline.

Now, I would not want to suggest that the West has always been victorious in war. It hasn't. But consider the fact that Europe had a very small population and territory, and yet by 1870 the British Empire controlled 75 percent of the world. What the Western way of war achieved, on any given day, was to give its practitioners—whether Cortez in the Americas, the British in Zululand, or the Greeks in Thrace—a greater advantage over their enemies. There are occasional defeats such as the battles of Cannae, Isandlwana, and Little Big Horn. Over a long period of time, however, the Western way of war will lead us to where we are today.

But where exactly are we today? There have been two developments over the last 20 years that have placed the West in a new cycle. They have not marked the end of the Western way of war, but they have brought about a significant change. The first is the rapid electronic dissemination of knowledge—such that someone in the Hindu Kush tonight can download a sophisticated article on how to make an IED. And the second is that non-Western nations now have leverage, given how global economies work today, through large quantities of strategic materials that Western societies need, such as natural gas, oil, uranium, and bauxite. Correspondingly, these materials produce tremendous amounts of unearned capital in non-Western countries—and by "unearned," I mean that the long process of civilization required to create, for example, a petroleum engineer has not occurred in these countries, yet they find themselves in possession of the monetary fruits of this process. So the West's enemies now have instant access to knowledge and tremendous capital.

In addition to these new developments, there are five traditional checks on the Western way of war that are intensified today. One of these checks is the Western tendency to limit the ferocity of war through rules and regulations. The Greeks tried to outlaw arrows and catapults. Romans had restrictions on the export of breast plates. In World War II, we had regulations against poison gas. Continuing this tradition today, we are trying to achieve nuclear non-proliferation. Unfortunately, the idea that Western countries can adjudicate how the rest of the world makes war isn't applicable anymore. As we see clearly in Iran, we are dealing with countries that have the wealth of Western nations (for the reasons just mentioned), but are anything but constitutional democracies. In fact, these nations find the idea of limiting their war-making capabilities laughable. Even more importantly, they know that many in the West sympathize with them—that many Westerners feel guilty about their wealth, prosperity, and leisure, and take psychological comfort in letting tyrants like Ahmadinejad provoke them.

The second check on the Western way of war is the fact that there is no monolithic West. For one thing, Western countries have frequently fought one another. Most people killed in war have been Europeans killing other Europeans, due to religious differences and political rivalries. And consider, in this light, how fractured the West is today. The U.S. and its allies can't even agree on sanctions against Iran. Everyone knows that once Iran obtains nuclear weapons—in addition to its intention to threaten Israel and to support terrorists—it will begin to aim its rockets at Frankfurt, Munich, and Paris, and to ask for further trade concessions and seek regional hegemony. And in this case, unlike when we deterred Soviet leaders during the Cold War, Westerners will be dealing with theocratic zealots who claim that they do not care about living, making them all the more dangerous. Yet despite all this, to repeat, the Western democracies can't agree on sanctions or even on a prohibition against selling technology and arms.

The third check is what I call "parasitism." It is very difficult to invent and fabricate weapons, but it is very easy to use them. Looking back in history, we have examples of Aztecs killing

Conquistadors using steel breast plates and crossbows and of Native Americans using rifles against the U.S. Cavalry. Similarly today, nobody in Hezbollah can manufacture an AK-47—which is built by Russians and made possible by Western design principles—but its members can make deadly use of them. Nor is there anything in the tradition of Shiite Islam that would allow a Shiite nation to create centrifuges, which require Western physics. Yet centrifuges are hard at work in Iran. And this parasitism has real consequences. When the Israelis went into Lebanon in 2006, they were surprised that young Hezbollah fighters had laptop computers with sophisticated intelligence programs; that Hezbollah intelligence agents were sending out doctored photos, making it seem as if Israel was targeting civilians, to Reuters and the AP; and that Hezbollah had obtained sophisticated anti-tank weapons on the international market using Iranian funds. At that point it didn't matter that the Israelis had a sophisticated Western culture, and so it could not win the war.

A fourth check is the ever-present anti-war movement in the West, stemming from the fact that Westerners are free to dissent. And by "ever-present" I mean that long before Michael Moore appeared on the scene, we had Euripides' *Trojan Women* and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. Of course, today's anti-war movement is much more virulent than in Euripides' and Aristophanes' time. This is in part because people like Michael Moore do not feel they are in any real danger from their countries' enemies. They know that if push comes to shove, the 101st Airborne will ultimately ensure their safety. That is why Moore can say right after 9/11 that Osama Bin Laden should have attacked a red state rather than a blue state. And since Western wars tend to be fought far from home, rather than as a defense against invasions, there is always the possibility that anti-war sentiment will win out and that armies will be called home. Our enemies know this, and often their words and actions are aimed at encouraging and aiding Western anti-war forces.

Finally and most seriously, I think, there is what I call, for want of a better term, "asymmetry." Western culture creates citizens who are affluent, leisured, free, and protected. Human nature being what it is, we citizens of the West often want to enjoy our bounty and retreat into private lives—to go home, eat pizza, and watch television. This is nothing new. I would refer you to Petronius's *Satyricon*, a banquet scene written around 60 A.D. about affluent Romans who make fun of the soldiers who are up on the Rhine protecting them. This is what Rome had become. And it's not easy to convince someone who has the good life to fight against someone who doesn't.

To put this in contemporary terms, what we are asking today is for a young man with a \$250,000 education from West Point to climb into an Apache helicopter—after emailing back and forth with his wife and kids about what went on at a PTA meeting back in Bethesda, Maryland—and fly over Anbar province or up to the Hindu Kush and risk being shot down by a young man from a family of 15, none of whom will ever live nearly as well as the poorest citizens of the United States, using a weapon whose design he doesn't even understand. In a

moral sense, the lives of these two young men are of equal value. But in reality, our society values the lives of our young men much more than Afghan societies value the lives of theirs. And it is very difficult to sustain a protracted war with asymmetrical losses under those conditions.

My point here is that all of the usual checks on the tradition of Western warfare are magnified in our time. And I will end with this disturbing thought: We who created the Western way of war are very reluctant to resort to it due to post-modern cynicism, while those who didn't create it are very eager to apply it due to pre-modern zealotry. And that's a very lethal combination.

---

---

**VICTOR DAVIS HANSON**, the Wayne and Marcia Buske Distinguished Fellow in History at Hillsdale College, is also a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and a professor of classics emeritus at California State University, Fresno. He earned his B.A. at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and his Ph.D. in Classics from Stanford University. He is a columnist for *National Review Online* and for Tribune Media Services, and has published in several journals and newspapers, including *Commentary*, the *Claremont Review of Books*, *The New Criterion*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Dr. Hanson has written or edited numerous books, including *The Soul of Battle*, *Carnage and Culture*, and *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War*.

Reprinted by permission from *Imprimis*, a publication of Hillsdale College. Copyright 2009 Hillsdale College. In this monthly publication, the College distributes an edited version of a

significant speech delivered on-campus. It is available online at:  
<http://www.hillsdale.edu/news/imprimis.asp>

You may also request a free subscription to the print version at the same online address.