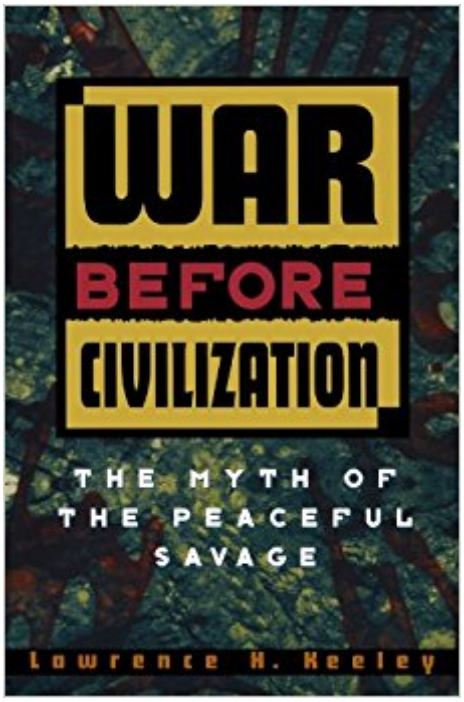
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War Before Civilization: The Myth Of The Peaceful Savage



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Synopsis

The myth of the peace-loving "noble savage" is persistent and pernicious. Indeed, for the last fifty years, most popular and scholarly works have agreed that prehistoric warfare was rare, harmless, unimportant, and, like smallpox, a disease of civilized societies alone. Prehistoric warfare, according to this view, was little more than a ritualized game, where casualties were limited and the effects of aggression relatively mild. Lawrence Keeley's groundbreaking War Before Civilization offers a devastating rebuttal to such comfortable myths and debunks the notion that warfare was introduced to primitive societies through contact with civilization (an idea he denounces as "the pacification of the past"). Building on much fascinating archeological and historical research and offering an astute comparison of warfare in civilized and prehistoric societies, from modern European states to the Plains Indians of North America, War Before Civilization convincingly demonstrates that prehistoric warfare was in fact more deadly, more frequent, and more ruthless than modern war. To support this point, Keeley provides a wide-ranging look at warfare and brutality in the prehistoric world. He reveals, for instance, that prehistorical tactics favoring raids and ambushes, as opposed to formal battles, often yielded a high death-rate; that adult males falling into the hands of their enemies were almost universally killed; and that surprise raids seldom spared even women and children. Keeley cites evidence of ancient massacres in many areas of the world, including the discovery in South Dakota of a prehistoric mass grave containing the remains of over 500 scalped and mutilated men, women, and children (a slaughter that took place a century and a half before the arrival of Columbus). In addition, Keeley surveys the prevalence of looting, destruction, and trophy-taking in all kinds of warfare and again finds little moral distinction between ancient warriors and civilized armies. Finally, and perhaps most controversially, he examines the evidence of cannibalism among some preliterate peoples. Keeley is a seasoned writer and his book is packed with vivid, eye-opening details (for instance, that the homicide rate of prehistoric Illinois villagers may have exceeded that of the modern United States by some 70 times). But he also goes beyond grisly facts to address the larger moral and philosophical issues raised by his work. What are the causes of war? Are human beings inherently violent? How can we ensure peace in our own time? Challenging some of our most dearly held beliefs, Keeley's conclusions are bound to stir controversy.

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Customer Reviews

Throughout much of this century the notion has been gaining ground, bolstered by genocide and Holocaust, that modern warfare is more barbaric than war has ever been. Alongside this view has grown a romantic impression that primitive cultures were, and are, more peaceful. Lawrence Keeley, an anthropologist at the University of Illinois, aims to dispel this inversion of the connotations of "civilization." He cites the historical evidence that humans have always been just as bloodthirsty as they are today, and that indeed in the days when death was less clinical it was often nastier. War, it seems, has always been with us. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"The evidence that Mr. Keeley marshals is vivid, varied, and often complex."--The New York Times Book Review

Keeley provides the best available book on the nature of war in primitive societies. The scholarship cited is extraordinarily detailed and yet very readably presented. It would do an injustice to the balance and knowledge of the author to attempt to inadequately summarize many of his conclusions in this review, but the main one may be attempted: devastating levels of chronic warfare were present in the vast majority of primitive societies on which data is available from archeological and ethnographic analysis. Warfare was actually, adjusted for population size, more destructive of life in many primitive societies than even such horrible events in modern societies as the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. The peaceful savage is indeed a myth. Mankind’s propensity for war seems deeply embedded in human nature, but so too is the desire for peace. War is not invariably inevitable. Keeley offers thoughts on factors that may predispose to warfare and possible mechanisms for reducing its occurrence, but there are no simple answers to one of the greatest of human challenges - the avoidance or mitigation of war.

The book has a simple premise - primitive societies, far from being peaceful and cooperative tend to be highly violent. The perception of peace derives from the fact that "they" fight wars differently from "us" and are much smaller. He also describes the evasions that scholars use to "hide" the casualty figures of primitive warfare - namely counting war dead as "murders" because they didn't die in a good old fashioned battle the way westerners would fight.Keely deals with the different types of combat these societies tend to engage in and highlights how a society based on raids and ambushes can be as, if not more, deadly (in relative terms)than full scale modern warfare based around huge armies. In basic sum if two tribes with 50 people each fight a war and kill 10 people over a year that is a catastrophically high casualty rate for those tribes but it won't register as much for a state of 200 million people.Keely marshals an impressive array of evidence and examples and offers explanations that will make sense to people who are not anthropologists. The book is well organized and makes the solid point that "primitive" warfare isn't "inferior" warfare. It can be very effective (horribly effective in some cases) and fits the needs of these societies.

This is one of the most important (and frankly bravest) anthropological works I've encountered in recent years. The history of "primitive" peoples has been an academic battleground for several centuries, pitting Hobbesian and Rousseaun (sic) thinkers against one-another for longer than the science of anthropology has existed.In brief, the camp of Hobbesian thinkers believed that technologically advanced societies were superior, and had a duty (construed sometimes as "the White Man's Burden") to civilize and Christianize unfortunate, less developed people. This reasoning many times became a self-serving excuse to enslave, colonize, and exploit Native Americans and Sub-Saharan Africans.On the other hand, adherents to Rousseau believed in the idea of the "noble savage" (a term, incidentally, not coined by Rousseau), and these academics slowly gained ground, especially in a post-World War Two environment. This strand of thought held basically that the people Eurocentrics regarded as inferior were actually superior, and that Sub-Saharan Africans and Native Americans existed basically in a state of grace, enjoying a near-Utopian existence before ravenous Europeans introduced greed and pestilence into their midst.Lawrence H. Keeley's "War Before Civilization" destroys the myths cherished by both camps with a lucid and even-handed investigation that shows that "primitive" people were more than capable of killing each other in acts of mass genocide, as well as hunting animals to extirpation, well before the White Man showed up with his vast fleet of ships. But Keeley also dispels the Eurocentric notion that superior military tactics and sophistication allowed Europeans to conquer the Red and

Black Man; this wasn't the case at all, according to the convincing arguments elucidated in this book. In fact, the opposite was many times the case, and the only reason the White Man won was frankly due not to his vast military expertise, but rather due more prosaically to the vast numbers in which he arrived and the germs he carried in his immune system.This was an incredibly informative, brilliant read, bound no doubt to anger anyone with an agenda, bound also to satisfy anyone eager to learn.

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