"Enthralling . . . One closes this book wishing that its final verdict was as well known as more familiar tenets of Greek wisdom."

—**Christopher Hitchens, *Newsday*, on *The Western Way of War***

"Vivid . . . Ambitious . . . Challenges readers to broaden their horizons and examine their assumptions . . . [Hanson] more than makes his case."

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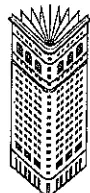
—Washington Post Book World* on *Ripples of Battle

THE FATHER OF US ALL

War and History, Ancient and Modern

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

Co-director, the Group on Military History and Contemporary Conflict, the Hoover Institution, Stanford University



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To the soldiers
of the American military—
for all that they do.

CHAPTER 8

The End of Decisive Battle—For Now

*Have the RPG and AK-47 trumped tanks and bombers?**

Late, Great Battle

HAVE WE SEEN in our time the end of decisive battles between conventional armies and navies in the long tradition of Cunaxa, Lepanto, and Okinawa? Will any nation at war continue to marshal huge forces, determined to settle the issue head-to-head, in an overt contest of massed arms against like kind that has characterized Western warfare since Marathon?

John Keegan, in his classic *Face of Battle* (1976), suggested more than thirty years ago that it would be increasingly hard for the modern European state to engage in the slugfests on land that resulted in something like the infantry holocaust at the battle of the Somme. "The

* This essay was written in spring 2009, and a version appeared in a fall 2009 issue of *City Journal*.

suspicion grows," Keegan argued of a new cohort of affluent and leisured European youth—rebellious in spirit and reluctant to give over the good life to mass conscription—"that battle has already abolished itself."

Two decades ago I concluded *The Western Way of War* with the suggestion that since Western decisive battle had become so lethal, and had raised the specter of nuclear escalation, I thought it doubtful that two Western states could any longer engage in large head-to-head conventional battles: "Have we not seen, then, in our lifetime the end of the Western way of war?"

Events of the past half century seem to have confirmed the notion that decisive battles between two large, highly trained Westernized armies clashing openly, with sophisticated arms, whether on land or sea, have become increasingly rare. War planners at the Pentagon now talk more about counterinsurgency training, winning the hearts and minds of civilian populations, and "smart" interrogation techniques—and less about old-fashion "blow 'em up" hardware like the Crusader artillery platform and the F-22 Raptor interceptor jet that has proven so advantageous to winning a conventional set battle.

While perhaps the most stunning manifestation of combat and the prominently mentioned events of military history, set-piece engagements, it should be said at the outset, were never quite the norm of war. More often, armed conflict was less dramatic, intermittent, and played out in landscapes not conducive to conventionally marshaled armies and navies, and it involved civilians. We associate the battles of Granicus, Issus, and Guagamela and the fight on the Hydaspes River with the military genius of Alexander the Great, but he spent far more time fighting irregular forces in counterinsurgency efforts throughout the Balkans, the Hindu Kush, and Bactria.

Nevertheless big battles—or so generals dreamed—could sometimes change entire conflicts in a matter of hours, which in turn might alter politics and the fate of millions for decades. It is with history's rare

battle, not the more common dirty war, insurgency, or street fighting, that we typically associate war poetry, commemoration, and, for good or evil, radical changes of fortune and the martial notions of glory and honor. Winston Churchill supposedly said Admiral John Jellicoe, commander of the British Grand Fleet in the First World War, who alone ensured the British expeditionary army could be supplied and the homeland kept alive with imports, was "the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon." Had Jellicoe lost the Battle of Jutland, Churchill might well have been proven right.

Had the Greeks lost their fleet in an afternoon at "Holy" Salamis (480 B.C.), the history of the polis may well have come to an end, and with it a vulnerable Western civilization in its infancy. Had the Confederates broken the Union lines at the epic battle of Gettysburg, and swept behind Washington, D.C., Abraham Lincoln would have faced enormous pressures to settle the Civil War according to the recognized status quo ante bellum. If the "band of brothers" had been repulsed at Normandy Beach on the morning of June 6, 1944, it is difficult to envision them replaying an enormous amphibious invasion soon after—but easier to imagine the Red Army within a year or two at the Atlantic Coast.

So there is something dramatic, frightening even, about two opposing forces intent on dueling each other with a sizable percentage of their aggregate strength, determined to plow through an adversary and crush its will to resist—and, with such victory, often end the ability of an enemy culture at the rear to retain its independence. We forget that powerful nations, and even empires, so often depend, in both a real and a psychological sense, on their far-distant armies to keep them safe at home. Should such forces abroad fail in a day, then there may be no other ramparts or reserves to keep the oncoming enemy at bay. It is indeed no wonder that we do not have a genre of books with titles like "The 100 Great Insurgencies of All Time," "History's Landmark Urban Fights," or "Fifteen Decisive Terrorist Acts of the World."

Wars Without Battle

THE RARE PERIODS of big battles—such as the bloodletting years between 1799 and 1815, the carnage of 1861–65, the Great War of 1914–18, or the six-year nightmare of 1939 to 1945—seem long distant in our modern era. Except for the daring American landing at Incheon (September 1950) and the subsequent first liberation of Seoul, not many battles of the past seven decades were anything like Jutland and the Somme of the First World War or the Second World War's Battle of the Bulge and Kursk.

Amid the murderous fighting between well-organized armies during the Vietnam War, North Vietnamese forces as a matter of practice did not attempt to engage Western forces in formal set engagements. The sieges at Khe Sahn and, earlier, against the French at Dien Bien Phu were the exceptions rather than the rule, and themselves not quite traditional collisions of infantry.

The Soviet army may have killed more than a million Afghans in its failed attempt in the 1980s to take over Afghanistan—without once engaging in a set collision with tens of thousands of jihadist insurgents. In two Chechen wars, the Russians all but leveled Grozny—and yet never met in pitched battle the forces of their Islamic enemy. We still do not know all the gory details of that horrific Iran-Iraq war (1980–89), in which more than a million combatants and civilians on both sides perished. And despite the brutality and bloodshed that characterized that existential struggle between Saddam Hussein and the Ayatollah Khomeini—especially in murderous confrontations over the Iraqi city of Basra—there were rarely set engagements between two massed armies across the battlefield. At least we know of no particular name associated with such a putative showdown of massed forces.

Even the "Mother of all Battles" in the 1991 Gulf War was largely a rout. The tank battle at Medina Ridge involved hundreds of armored

vehicles but lasted little more than an hour—the Americans suffering neither casualties to enemy fire nor the loss of a single Abrams tank while obliterating 186 Iraqi tanks. Most of Saddam's army disintegrated before advancing American armor rather than fought—as was commonly the case during the three-week war of 2003. Today only a handful of Americans even know what the Medina Ridge was.

Given the open terrain and conventional forces involved, there was some decisive fighting on the ground between British and Argentine units during the Falklands War of 1982, but on a minuscule scale in comparison to the twentieth-century's other bloody engagements. Tank battles raged in the Golan Heights in the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973. And for a few days the Israelis and the Egyptian Third Army fought quite openly in the desert expanse of the Sinai Peninsula—in contrast to the sixty years of terrorism, intifadas, bombings, and missile strikes that have characterized the inconclusive Israeli-Arab conflicts.

Far more common in the modern world are the insurgencies that characterize the present Afghan and Iraq wars, as well as rapid surprise takeovers, such as Grenada and Panama; bombing campaigns, such as those against Mu'ammar Gadhafi and the sustained air assault that forced Slobodan Milošević out of Serbia; and messy police actions, like those in Somalia or Haiti.

This is not to say that hundreds of thousands do not die violently in these often vicious insurgencies, air campaigns, civil strife, genocides, and shellings of our age. The spring 1994 bloodletting in Rwanda saw five hundred thousand Tutsis butchered, and three hundred thousand Chechnyans and Russians perished in their two wars of the 1990s. Nor is the return of set-piece battles impossible. The U.S. military still prepares for the possibility of all sorts of conventional challenges. We hold thousands of tanks and artillery pieces in constant readiness, along with close-ground support missiles and planes, in fear that Kim Song Il's People's Army of Korea might someday quite brazenly try to swarm

across the demilitarized zone into Seoul, or that conventional forces of the Chinese Red Army might storm the beaches of Taiwan.

Conventional clashes can be a part of every war. But again, decisive, sustained collisions, involving thousands of like combatants in relatively open terrain, are not. Sometimes entire wars are decided in theaters outside decisive battle. The present absence of set battles is hardly novel in the cyclical course of military history. The twenty-seven-year-long Peloponnesian War saw only two major ground engagements, at Delium (424 B.C.) and Mantinea (418 B.C.), and a few smaller infantry clashes at Solygeia and outside Syracuse. In such an asymmetrical struggle between Athenian naval power and premier Spartan infantry, far more common were hit-and-run attacks, terrorism, sieges, a constant ravaging of agriculture, and amphibious assaults, along with some large sea battles off the coast of Asia Minor.

During the murderous Roman Civil War (49–31 B.C.) frequent and savage battles at Dyrrhacium, Pharsalus, Utica, Ruspina, Thapsus, Munda, Mutina, Philippi, and Actium claimed more than a quarter-million Roman lives. Yet after the creation of the Principate by the new emperor Augustus—except for the occasional frontier disasters such at Teutoberg Wald (A.D. 9) or Adrianople (A.D. 378), or the periodic internecine battles for imperial succession—much of the Mediterranean world was relatively united, and thus relatively free of major battles for nearly half a millennium.

After the fall of Roman Empire, the more impoverished Middle Ages saw mostly sieges and low-intensity conflict, not larger campaigns like the famous engagements at Poitiers (732), Hattin (1187), or Crécy (1346). The eminent military historian Russell Weigley writes of an "Age of Battles." He argues that there was a uniquely murderous two centuries of pitched battles—between Gustavus Adolphus's victory at Breitenfeld (1631) and Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo (1815)—in which European armies of multifarious rivals sought, often in vain, to decide entire wars in a few hours of head-to-head fighting. Scholars as diverse as David Bell and Frederick W. Kagan have chronicled the new age of battle in which Napoleon fought more decisive engagements in his twenty-year career than would transpire in Europe over the subsequent century.

Indeed, the agreements following the Congress of Vienna and military deterrence kept a widespread peace in Europe for nearly a century, which might explain why something like Sedan (1870) was the exception rather than the rule. In general, set battles of the era, on land or sea, were more a colonial experience (Tel el-Kebir, Omdurman) and more common in Asia (Tsushima) and the Americas (the decisive battles of the Mexican-American, Spanish-American, and American Civil War).

The era from the beginning of the First World War to end of the Second saw the most destructive battles in the history of arms. The details of Iwo Jima, Kursk, Marne, Meuse-Argonne, Okinawa, Passchendale, the Somme, Stalingrad, and Verdun are still chilling. Most Westerners know little of the horror of the battles of the Huaihai campaign (late 1948 to early 1949), in which the Nationalist Chinese lost an entire army of six hundred thousand to the Communists in mostly conventional fighting.

Why—Why Not—Decisive Battle?

WHY IN THE long cycles of military history, does the frequency of decisive battles wax and wane? The political landscape certainly explains much. The establishment of empire of any sort can lessen the incidence of regional warring in general. Unified, central political control transmogrifies the usual ethnic, tribal, racial, and religious strife into more-internal and less-violent rivalries for state representation and influence.

Sometimes repression of nationalist chauvinism, which so often

leads to war, is accomplished violently and in authoritarian fashion, as in the case of the unification of Russia and its surrounding republics into the Soviet Union. On other occasions, such unification is mostly consensual, such as the American frontier expansion of settler movements that turned Western territories of provincials into mostly brotherly states. Either way, the resulting enormous confederation makes major battles in the region less likely. The contemporary European Union for now lacks the interstate rivalry that plunged Europe into battles for much of the first half of the twentieth century. Once Philip unified Greece under a Macedonian hegemony after Chaeronea (338 B.C.), engagements like the prior fourth-century B.C. set battles between the city-states—Coronea, Haliartos, Leuctra, Mantinea, Nemea, and Tegyra—became a rarity.

True, when the world is divided into such larger blocs that have sizable, competent conventional forces—such as the Soviet and American spheres during the Cold War—there is the risk that confrontation can turn catastrophic, given the vast resources available to each side. Yet there is also the likelihood that frequent battling along nationalist lines among a variety of state players will be less frequent. No nation of the Warsaw Pact fought a Soviet republic; and nominal American allies like Iran did not threaten American allies like Israel. Tito and Yugoslavian communism for a while kept Bosnians, Croats, Kosovars, Macedonians, and Serbs from killing each other. There were no more Punic Wars once the Romans established a "Roman peace" and Carthago Nova as the capital of the new Latin-speaking province of Africa. The constant tribal fighting so common in Caesar's Gallic Wars largely quieted down once the Romans annexed the entire region as the Roman province of Gaul.

In the current age, many of the most powerful economies in the world are united under the loose rubric "the West," which includes the former nations of much of the British Commonwealth (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, etc.), the transatlantic NATO alliance (most of

the European Union and the United States), and democratic nations of the Pacific (Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, etc.), along with miscellaneous kindred allies that are capitalist and democratic such as India and Israel. At present there is virtually no likelihood that we will see decisive battles between any of these similarly minded states, even though a mere seventy years ago most of them squared off in various temporary alliances against one another in terrible battles at places like the Ardennes, Arnheim, the Falaise Gap, Leyte Gulf, and Okinawa.

While consensual states such as ancient Athens, the mercantile Venetian Republic, and the contemporary United States proved to be both ferocious and relentless warmakers, these democratically inclined states rarely fought like kind. The Athenian attack on democratic Syracuse was an anomaly. The periodic Venetian rivalry against the Florentine Republic and the War of 1812 were the exceptions rather than the rule. There now are more democratic states in existence than at any time in civilization's history, suggesting that while they may continue to attack nondemocratic rivals with some frequency, they are less likely to turn on one another.

The Future of Battle

IN THE IMMEDIATE present, we can imagine two scenarios for decisive, conventional battle. One is between rival nations that have formidable armored and infantry forces of roughly the same size and that are in rough proximity to one another—India and Pakistan, North and South Korea, Taiwan and the Peoples' Republic of China. Such matchups, however, are rare in the scope of contemporary world rivalries. More important, those states most likely to engage in such conventional battles are precisely the same contestants that might be deterred by fears of an escalation of their fights into a nuclear confrontation.

The world at large—but especially the immediate neighbors of

India and Pakistan—has an interest in ensuring that sudden flare-ups along the Kashmir borderlands do not evolve into monstrous conventional set battles that themselves evolve into a nuclear exchange. If North Korean armored divisions, under a protective volley of supporting missile and artillery fire, cross into South Korea, the vastly outnumbered American forces might consider the option of tactical nuclear weapons to save the prosperous and democratic south. All these nightmarish scenarios are known to interested regional parties, and may explain the recent absence of conventional battles between such bitter rivals.

A second scenario is perhaps more common, but still does not quite constitute reciprocal conventional battle as we have know it: the asymmetrical wars between large westernized militaries and poorer, less-organized terrorists, insurgents, and piratical forces. The list of such "half battle" theaters where conventional forces have battled unconventional guerrillas is almost endless—Afghanistan, Grozny, Iraq, Kashmir, Mogadishu, and the Somali coast, to name a few. Yet they all share one trait: No indigenous force dares to come out in the open, marshal its resources, and test head-on the firepower and discipline of a westernized force. History's record on that account—from Tenochtitlán to Omdurman—is not encouraging for those who might try.

True, insurgent groups sometimes fight one another, such as the Shiite-Kurdish-Sunni sectarian violence in Iraq, or the Tutsi-Hutu killing spree in Rwanda. But in those instances—while the ongoing, relentless violence in the aggregate can be every bit as lethal as a the one-day toll of an Austerlitz or Gettysburg—neither side has the resource, logistics, or organization to commit to or sustain a set battle.

On very rare occasions a weak state has either foolishly challenged in conventional fashion the United States or its allies or has been the subject of a surprise invasion. And while there has often loomed the specter of an old-fashion collision of arms, the obvious imbalance in conventional resources ensured that the result was relatively brief, one-sided, and mostly a rout—as we saw in the "Mother of All Battles" in January

1991, the NATO air assault against Slobodan Milošević (1999), the bombing of Tripoli (1986), the earlier British-Argentine showdown at Goose Green, Falklands Islands (1982), and the American invasions of Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989).

Those who have successfully attacked the United States—in Lebanon (1983), at the Khobar Towers, Saudi Arabia (1996), the American East African embassies (1999), the U.S.S. *Cole* (2000), and on September 11, 2001—did so as terrorists. And if nation-states other than Afghanistan sponsored such radical Islamist groups, they were careful to offer a deniability of culpability, preventing an all-out conventional war with the United States that they would inevitably lose.

Just as important as the nature of the combatants and the world political landscape in explaining the decline of conventional battles are other factors such as technology and the globalized communications of the twenty-first century. The conventional battlefield can now be seen and mapped to the smallest pebble. Aerial photography and second-by-second updated video-carrying drones ensure that surprise is rare. Potential combatants know far better the odds in advance. They can download minute information about their potential adversary from the Internet. Generals can see streaming videos of his pre-battle preparations and calculate to some degree the subsequent cost.

Uncertainty and the unknown were often essential to the course of decisive battle, since each opposing force usually felt it had some chance of operational success. If the British had satellite reconnaissance about the German lines in the days before and during the Somme, they might have curtailed their suicidal assaults. If the Americans had live streaming video of Japanese forces fortifying bunkers on Okinawa, they might not have chosen to assault frontally the Shuri Line. Pickett's Charge up Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg was predicated on an erroneous assumption that there was an especially weak spot in the Union army's line—a conjecture that would have been easily disproved if General Robert E. Lee had a Predator drone at his disposal. We live in an age of successful

surveillance when the counterresponse—jamming video feeds, destroying satellites, or short-circuiting electronic devices on a massive scale—has not yet caught up.

Weaponry likewise is not static. It also resides within a constant challenge-and-response cycle between offense and defense, armor and arms, surveillance and the maintenance of secrecy—a tension in which one periodically but temporarily trumps the other. Body armor may soon advance to the point of offering, if for a brief period only, protection against the bullet, which centuries ago rendered chain and plate mail useless. The satellite may become nonoperational by the satellite killer. The aerial drone soon may be forced down by more sophisticated electronic jamming.

Yet for now the arts of information gathering about an enemy trump his ability to maintain secrecy—and that too lessens the chance that thousands of soldiers will be willing to ride out to horrific battle, especially if they know they are being watched continuously on video by their adversaries. The conditions to enter decisive battle involve risk, delusions of grandeur, megalomania even—it's the irrational who thrive on ignorance and misinformation.

Just as important are the controversies concerning lethality and cost of the new munitions. To wage a single decisive battle between tens of thousands of combatants along the lines of a Gaugamela or a Verdun would cost hundreds of billions of dollars and is beyond the resources of most belligerents. A single B-2 bomber on patrol overhead represents nearly a one-billion-dollar investment. Abrams tanks cost more than four million dollars. Single cruise missiles are at least a million dollars. One GPS-guided artillery shell may cost one hundred and fifty thousand dollars; an artillery platform could expend over ten million dollars in ordnance in a few hours. Even a solder's M-4 assault rifle runs well over a thousand dollars. The result is that very few states can afford to outfit an army of, say, one hundred thousand infantry, supported by high-tech air, naval, and artillery fire—much less to keep it

well supplied for the duration of battle. There is less likelihood, then, that Colombia or Venezuela would have the capital to deploy for very long two hundred thousand infantry soldiers in a vast collision of sophisticated arms.

Even in the smaller decisive battles of the 1973 Yom Kippur war, when armies were not huge and the weapons were cheap in comparison with today's models, both Israel and Egypt had to have the Soviet Union and the United States send in massive amounts of new weaponry shortly after the commencement of fighting. Arab and Israeli arsenals were near depletion within hours. Neither side had the resources to buy and transport replacement munitions without wealthier patrons—who themselves soon complained of the cost and difficulty of such resupply.

We have not seen a repeat of the Sinai battles of 1973 for various reasons—growing common regional interests between Israel and Egypt, satellite surveillance, the absence of an Arab nuclear patron to provide backup should an Egyptian gambit fail. But prominent among them is the cost of any such engagement, and the difficulty of finding an industrial big brother willing and able to budget billions for such efforts. Take away Iranian money, and terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas might have no missiles at their disposal.

In some cases, one belligerent may have the resources to offer a challenge to decisive battle, but it's unlikely that an enemy could be found with a similar hope to win through a head-on confrontation. Again, the frontline Arab states have for more than thirty years given up such a dream, as has Iran in its various aggressions against U.S. allies in Iraq and Lebanon.

The current ascendant anthropological notion in the West that war may well be unnatural, preventable, and the result of rational grievances—that can, with proper training and education, be eliminated or at least curtailed—perhaps has also made battle less tenable among the general public. To the millions of teachers, social workers,

academics, medical professionals, and politicians in the West who are invested in such laudable notions, battle is seen as retrograde, a Neanderthal rejection of the entire promise of higher education itself. And so a sizable population of influential professionals in Europe and the United States actively opposes military action of any sort—and especially the prospect of a traditional slugfest in which repellently high casualties on one side would be inevitable. Such makers of public and often government opinion may likewise have played an indirect role in temporarily discouraging even the semblance of major conventional military confrontations.

The bombing of fleeing Iraqi bandit brigades from Kuwait on the so-called Highway of Death in the first Gulf War (1991) was halted by popular outrage because of the televised carnage. The argument that such enemies who had just committed pillage and rapine in Kuwait should be punished or preempted, given that they were likely to regroup back in Iraq to slaughter Kurdish and Shiite innocents, could hardly trump the Western abhorrence at the images of death on millions of television screens. Russia's shelling and destruction of Grozny escaped world condemnation only because a news blackout ensured Westerners would see little of mass death—and nuclear, oil-rich, and unpredictable strongman Vladimir Putin would have cared little if they had.

To suggest that Hezbollah and Israel, Hamas and Israel, or Syria and Israel, when the next Middle East war breaks out, be allowed to fight each other until one side wins and the other loses, and thus the source of their conflict be adjudicated by the verdict of the battlefield, is now seen not only as passé but also as amoral altogether. Who would wish a no-holds-barred showdown? And would not the loser simply try to reconstitute his forces for a second round?

We should remember that both victory and clear-cut defeat often put an end to a power's struggles in a way armistices and time-outs do not. Nazis, Fascists, and most Baathists have presently disappeared from the governments of the world. Military defeat ended

not only their power but also discredited their ideologies to the extent that they have not resurfaced in any real strength in Germany, Italy, or Iraq.

A decisive end to war does not necessarily mean greater violence and human losses than what totalitarian governments are capable of in times of peace. Far more perished during Stalin's collectivization, the Holocaust, and the murdering and starvation brought about by Mao's various revolutions—mass genocides outside of formal military engagements—than in all the decisive battles of the twentieth century, which suggests that, at least in Hitler's case, they should have been stopped through force before they were allowed to kill millions more.

Again, modern scientific pacifism that tries to "prove" that bloody war is unnatural and has no utility in solving conflicts also tends to discourage the reappearance of decisive battle by inculcating such ideas among influential elements of the population. We certainly have no more Homers who sing of the *aristeia* of battling heroes, or Tennysons eager to write of another gloriously foolhardy charge by the Light Brigade. To read of gargantuan clashes of arms, replete with nobility in pursuit of exalted aims, is today to read fantasy—Tolkien's grand battle between orcs and men before the gates of Gondor.

Finally, globalization, through instant cell-phoning and text-messaging, use of the Internet, access to DVDs and satellite television, has created a world culture that depends on uninterrupted communications. It expects convenient airline flights, international banking, and easy access to imported consumer goods. The result is not quite a new worldwide pacifism or exalted humanity—one need only examine the membership of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to see that there is no such thing as an evolving transnational morality outside the West.

Instead, electronic togetherness hinges on our shared appetites—and a growing communal comfort factor. After it invaded Georgia,

Russia's oil buyers became upset. As did its own aristocratic grandees, who saw international capital flee Moscow.

European states worry about oil shortages should the U.S. bomb Iran; China worries about its vital American export market should it invade Taiwan. We need not assume that "soft power" and the potential loss of easy twenty-first-century consumerism will always prevent set battles. After all, in the past, such a belief that global interreliance would prevent ruinous battle was clearly erroneous. Norman Angells's *The Great Illusion* (1909) argued that pre–First World War Europe simply had achieved too great an interdependence of financial credit, economic integration, and prosperity to throw it away on nihilistic warmaking. The Somme, Passchendale, and Verdun shortly followed.

Yet in a world in which an American can call his brother in the morning in Kenya, check his European 401(k) stocks over coffee, watch Japanese wrestling in the afternoon, and chat with Chinese Facebook friends in the evening, it is more difficult for a particular nation to marshal conventional forces, systematically seek out the enemy, encounter a like rival with similar hopes of success, and unleash a terrible fury of munitions—all under the instantaneous gaze of six billion. In the future, economic and cultural globalization increasingly may emulate old Roman imperium, becoming a superstructure that turns Africans, Asians, Americans, Europeans, and Latin Americans into a one-world province.

We are not yet facing the "end of history," with a final and total elimination of decisive set battles—and a united and harmonious world agreeing on the general protocols of globalized capitalism and consensual government. Armed struggles that at times result in horrific collisions of forces are as old as civilization itself, and a collective reflection of the constant and unchanging deep-seated elements in the human psyche. Tribalism, affinity for like kind, desire for honor, reckless exuberance—these expressions of our reptilian brains stay embedded within peoples.

The Return of Battle?

For the foreseeable future, we will remain in an age without decisive battle, in which bloody war is unlikely to be played out with swarms of Abrams tanks, rows of artillery pieces, a storm of F-22s and B-1s overhead, and hundreds of thousands of infantry soldiers advancing to mass carnage against a like-minded enemy. Yet will big battles haunt us once more?

Should the European Union dissolve and return to a twentieth-century landscape of rival proud nations, should the former Soviet republics form a collective resistance to an aggrandizing Russia similar to that in the nineteenth century, should the North Koreans, Pakistanis, or Chinese choose to gamble on an agenda of sudden aggression in the belief that a political objective could be obtained at a tolerable cost, then we may well see a return of decisive battles.

New Waterloos or Verduns may revisit us, especially if constant military innovation reduces the cost of war or relegates battle to the domain of massed waves of robotics and drones, or sees a sudden technological shift back to the defensive that would nullify the tyranny of present-day horrifically lethal munitions. New technology may make all sorts of deadly arms as accessible as iPods and more lethal than M-16s, while creating uniforms impervious to small-arms fire—and therefore making battle itself cheap, unpredictable, and thus once more to be tried.

Scenarios for battle's return are endless. Should a few reckless states feel that nuclear war in an age of antiballistic missiles might be winnable, or that the consequences of mass death might be offset in perpetuity in a glorious collective paradise—an apocalyptic vision that sometimes seems almost welcome in theocratic Iran—and therefore worth risk of a launching of ballistic missiles, then even the once unimaginable nuclear showdown becomes imaginable.

When the conducive political, economic, and cultural requisites for set battles realign, as they have periodically over the centuries, we will see our own modernist return of a Cannae or a Shiloh. And these collisions will be frightening as never before. In the words of Matthew Arnold,

> We are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggles and flight
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

CHAPTER 9

"Men Make a City, Not Walls or Ships Empty of Men"

*When high-tech is not always so high**

Cycles of Military Innovation

IF THE PRINCIPLES of war stay the same across the centuries, one reason that we of the present age sometimes doubt such continuity is the recent radical change in military technology, especially given the twenty-first-century advances in informational science and its applications. We forget sometimes that transformation in arms has always been a hallmark of warfare, even if not as radical as what we have witnessed in the past half century. As a rule, militaries usually begin wars

*The quote is from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (7.77.7). Parts of this essay, incorporate a review of Frederick W. Kagan's *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy* (New York: Encounter, 2006) and Max Boot's *War Made New: Technology, Warfare, and the Course of History, 1500 to Today* (New York: Gotham, 2006), from the December 2006 *Commentary* magazine—as well as some material from the January–February 2008 *American*.