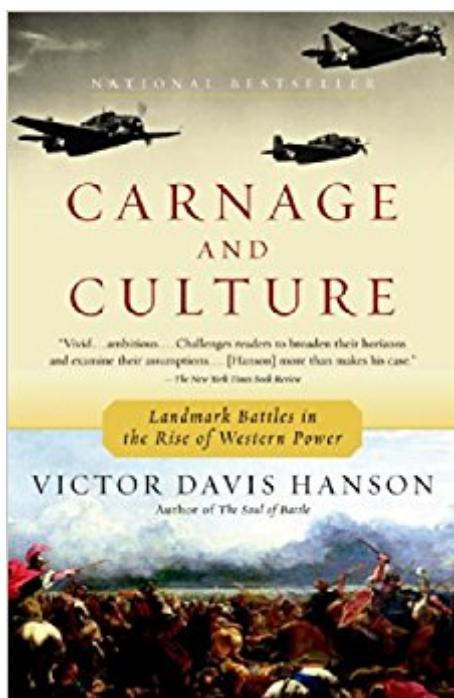


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Carnage And Culture: Landmark Battles In The Rise To Western Power



Synopsis

Examining nine landmark battles from ancient to modern times--from Salamis, where outnumbered Greeks devastated the slave army of Xerxes, to Cortes' conquest of Mexico to the Tet offensive--Victor Davis Hanson explains why the armies of the West have been the most lethal and effective of any fighting forces in the world. Looking beyond popular explanations such as geography or superior technology, Hanson argues that it is in fact Western culture and values--the tradition of dissent, the value placed on inventiveness and adaptation, the concept of citizenship--which have consistently produced superior arms and soldiers. Offering riveting battle narratives and a balanced perspective that avoids simple triumphalism, *Carnage and Culture* demonstrates how armies cannot be separated from the cultures that produce them and explains why an army produced by a free culture will always have the advantage.

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Customer Reviews

Many theories have been offered regarding why Western culture has spread so successfully across the world, with arguments ranging from genetics to superior technology to the creation of enlightened economic, moral, and political systems. In *Carnage and Culture*, military historian Victor Hanson takes all of these factors into account in making a bold, and sure to be controversial, argument: Westerners are more effective killers. Focusing specifically on military power rather than the nature of Western civilization in general, Hanson views war as the ultimate reflection of a society's character: "There is a cultural crystallization in battle, in which the insidious and

more subtle institutions that heretofore are murky and undefined became stark and unforgiving in the finality of organized killing." Though technological advances and superior weapons have certainly played a role in Western military dominance, Hanson posits that cultural distinctions are the most significant factors. By bringing personal freedom, discipline, and organization to the battlefield, powerful "marching democracies" were more apt to defeat non-Western nations hampered by unstable governments, limited funding, and intolerance of open discussion. These crucial differences often ensured victory even against long odds. Greek armies, for instance, who elected their own generals and freely debated strategy were able to win wars even when far outnumbered and deep within enemy territory. Hanson further argues that granting warriors control of their own destinies results in the kind of glorification of horrific hand-to-hand combat necessary for true domination. The nine battles Hanson examines include the Greek naval victory against the Persians at Salamis in 480 B.C., Cortes's march on Mexico City in 1521, the battle of Midway in 1942, and the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam. In the book's fascinating final chapter, he then looks forward and ponders the consequences of a complete cultural victory, challenging the widespread belief that democratic nations do not wage war against one another: "We may well be all Westerners in the millennium to come, and that could be a very dangerous thing indeed," he writes. It seems the West will always seek an enemy, even if it must come from within. --Shawn Carkonen

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"The Western way of war is so lethal precisely because it is so amoral shackled rarely by concerns of ritual, tradition, religion, or ethics, by anything other than military necessity." Ranging from Salamis in 480 B.C. to the Tet offensive in Vietnam, Hanson, a California State at Fresno classics professor, expands the scope of his *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, offering a provocative look at occidental aggression as illustrated by nine paradigmatic battles between Western and non-Western armies. Hanson sheds the overly romanticized view of battles as nationalist or ethnic honorifics and vividly portrays the deadly killing machines Western powers evolved for the destruction of non-Western opponents. Throughout, Hanson stresses the technology based lethality of Western warfare, and the role of individual initiative as opposed to the more collectivist strategies of the Persians, Carthaginians, Arabs, Turks, Aztecs, Zulus, Japanese and Vietnamese opponents who get a chapter apiece. The single Western defeat chronicled in these pages, of the Romans in Cannae in 216 B.C., shows a victorious Hannibal unable to capitalize on his win. (The idea of the citizen/soldier, the role of civic militarism and the republican ideals of Rome seem to be the reasons why not.) A number of Hanson's conclusions will engender debate, such as

his claim that America won in Vietnam, but failed to recognize it, as well as the larger claim that "free markets, free elections, and free speech" have led directly to superior forces. The book's last few chapters are fairly driven by that idea, which, along with precise, forceful writing, sets it apart from the season's secondary-sourced, battle-based military histories. (Aug.) Forecast: Hanson's direct, literate style and his evenhandedness should appeal to the liberalist middle of the left and right alike. By isolating the ingredients of military success via elaborate examples, the book can potentially draw on two separate military-history readerships: those looking for theory and those for action. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. -- This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Hanson is at once one of our most learned historians of world conflict and also one of its sharpest writers on its many small conflicts. This equips him well to address their meaning and significance. Those who flinch at the very idea of American (or most to the point Western) exceptionalism, will find their views powerfully challenged in Mr. Hanson's pages. The most fragile among them may find his book akin to a "trigger," for the delicate sensibilities of cultural relativists, who tend to be innocent of the experience of actual armed conflict, aren't prepared either to tender or critically evaluate claims that a nation's record in war, its military history, can be any kind of proxy for that nation's cultural merit. But that's what Hanson attempts here. That attempt is audacious -- and also successful. By surveying battles from Salamis to Tet, with a stopover in the Zulu War and WWII's Battle of Midway, Hanson makes a convincing case that cultural norms such as consensual government, personal freedom, and independent intellectual inquiry, as they relate to a nation's ability to innovate, pay a dividend in history's vast colosseum of warfare. The results stand as a verdict on the merits of a culture. As technologized style of warfare becomes more deadly, the threat Hanson sees as most dangerous is not the primitive reprobates of ISIS blowing up cafes, but a wider war between powerful Western nations. Short of that, if our "rationalist tradition" can hold a peace (in the larger picture), we can hope that Western nations' talent for war will serve civilization rather than endanger it. On the whole an thoughtful, stimulating, eye-opening, conversation-starting book.

I have been reading VDH political opinions for years and listen to him on talk radio whenever I can. I think he has an awesome intellect and his views on the current political issues match up with mine. So not surprisingly I thought this book was a well written, well argued and engaging text about the western way of waging war, what has made western armed forces generally more successful when

engaging in military actions against other cultures. He highlights 10 decisive battles in which in most cases, although outnumbered, on foreign ground with extended supply lines, western expeditionary forces from Alexander the Great to the British in South Africa to Cortez in Mexico were able to successfully rout the enemy. The standard answer for why the western way of war is so lethal and in the most part triumphant against other cultures is "superior technology". VDH digs deeper than that offering up the western liberal ethos of political freedoms, capitalism, individuality etc as underlying factors in western military campaigns.

Hanson presented a view of how democracies go to war using ordinary average people that clearly explain a bunch of things like why did a war based culture like the Spartans or the Nazi's in WW II lost. His writing is clear and easy to follow, although he knows more big words than I do and so I read this one with a dictionary (a big one) beside me. Obviously this is a specialty interest of mine, but if it is yours, reading Hanson is an excellent place to start. I suggest that you start with his Soul of Battle that talks about three successful generals and then go to this one as this is a more wide spread coverage.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. A captivating way to propose and defend the theory that culture plays a large part in the successes of the Western armies over the past few millennium. Each chapter is sort of a case study that progresses the theory from the Greeks war with the Persians up to modern-day wars. The only complaint was the over-sensitive parts that had the author apparently frantic to deny he was being racist. Some of these went on for pages and it was basically him saying the same thing over and over again: there is no inherently superior qualities between people of different races, but the Western military power is in fact due to its culture and the roots that culture came from. If I thought the book was racist I would have decided that in the first part of the book and stopped reading. After that, it should be understood that I accept his argument and don't need to be reminded of it each time he compares Western warfare to anything other style. Other than that recurring hiccup that had me struggling through tens of pages at a time, it was a great book and I highly recommend it for anyone interested in military history.

An unashamed spin on world history "proving" the superiority of the western culture over all others, at least in the field of conquest and domination. For a contrary point of view, see Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs and Steel" (I may have title a little wrong). Repetitive and overly detailed in parts, but well worth the read.

I always know I've read a classic when I have to pause and think a great deal at the end of each chapter. Victor delivers in this book. As a student of Military History I have read of all of the battles prior to reading Carnage and Culture, however I was never able to consider the repeating patterns of western military behavior until now. Although I greatly enjoyed Jarrod Diamond's Gun's Germs and Steel, there were many parts that I felt Jarrod was really reaching with his hypothesis on why the west came to dominate the world. I feel Carnage and Culture does a great job explaining the impact of culture and why it can be a far more powerful factor than technology, geography or any other perceived advantage a civilization might possess. Fantastic book.

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