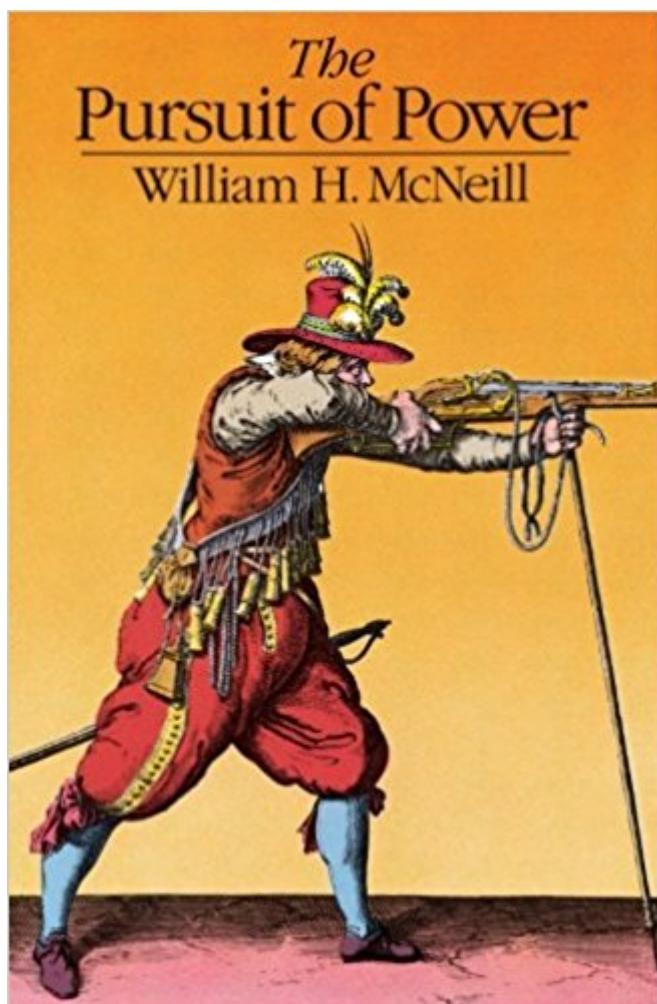


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The Pursuit Of Power: Technology, Armed Force, And Society Since A.D. 1000



Synopsis

In this magnificent synthesis of military, technological, and social history, William H. McNeill explores a whole millennium of human upheaval and traces the path by which we have arrived at the frightening dilemmas that now confront us. McNeill moves with equal mastery from the crossbow—banned by the Church in 1139 as too lethal for Christians to use against one another—to the nuclear missile, from the sociological consequences of drill in the seventeenth century to the emergence of the military-industrial complex in the twentieth. His central argument is that a commercial transformation of world society in the eleventh century caused military activity to respond increasingly to market forces as well as to the commands of rulers. Only in our own time, suggests McNeill, are command economies replacing the market control of large-scale human effort. The Pursuit of Power does not solve the problems of the present, but its discoveries, hypotheses, and sheer breadth of learning do offer a perspective on our current fears and, as McNeill hopes, "a ground for wiser action." Δ

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Customer Reviews

William H. McNeill is the Robert A. Millikan Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus in the Department of History and the College at the University of Chicago. His many books include *The Pursuit of Power*, *The Rise of the West*, and *Mythistory and Other Essays*, all published by the University of Chicago Press.

Professor McNeill describes this 1982 book as a "footnote" to his famous 1963 Δ *The Rise of the*

West: A History of the Human Community, and as a companion to his even more famous 1976 *Plagues and Peoples*. The subject of "The Pursuit of Power" is warfare rather than disease, as in "Plagues and People", but Prof. McNeill's conceptual approach is the same. In fact, in the introduction to this book he describes armed force as "micro-parasitism" of the human race. This is a densely-written and tremendously erudite book. It has 540 footnotes, all pertinent, in 387 pages. There are 21 very interesting illustrations, including a beautiful etching by Violet le Duc showing the use of the 16th century "trace italienne" in defensive siege warfare, Maurice of Orange's 1607 manual of arms for musketeers, and tank photographs from Heinz Guderian's "Panzer Leader". Every page is filled with interest for the general historian as well as the specialist in military affairs, but it is not light reading. He elaborates on a few broad themes as drivers of historical change, echoing his previous work: Population growth, the development of markets, and the evolution of military technology. He states: "Indeed all humankind is still reeling from the impact of the democratic and industrial revolutions, triggered so unexpectedly in the last decade of the eighteenth century." He elaborates on these changes as they play out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The last chapter, "The Arms Race and Command Economies since 1945" is by far the weakest. He is rather naive in his assessment of Stalin, and curiously equated the Soviet and Western systems under the rubric "command economy". He was myopic about the power of free market behavior in his own time and society, while being quite enthusiastic about it in medieval China. This leads to a discordant "Conclusion", in which he describes the default political and economic state of the human race as being a despotic command economy. He believed that a "global sovereign power" was the only solution to the threat of nuclear war, the alternative being the "sudden and total annihilation of the human species." I think of the ideal state described by Socrates in Plato's "Republic" as he writes, "Political management, having monopolized the overt organization of armed force, resumed its primacy over human behavior. Self-interest and the pursuit of private profit through buying and selling sank towards the margins of daily life, operating within limits and according to rules laid down by the holders of political-military power. Human society, in short, returned to normal." Like most who have envisioned a world government, he doesn't describe how such a power could possibly evolve, other than through brute force. "Even Homer nods", and Prof. McNeill makes a couple of bloopers. He uses the term "hand gun" where most people would use the term "small arms". He attributes the bellicosity of Northern Europeans to their carnivorous eating habits, which required the shedding of much animal blood, and cites the Viking sagas for support, which I think is ridiculous. Plenty of non-Northern Europeans are carnivorous as well as bellicose, and there are plenty of bellicose peoples who eat little or no meat. But these are minor

quibbles. This book is important to everyone with an interest in history, especially the history of warfare. The future may hold some unpleasant surprises for the human species, perhaps including extinction through epidemic disease, nuclear war, or catastrophic climate change. The future is also, however, unknowable and may hold some surprises for us on the upside, despite Prof. McNeill's pessimistic vision. Highly recommended.

This is a sweeping history of the interplay between technology, society and war by one of the preeminent historians of our generation. Moreover, it is, in this reviewer's opinion, even more relevant today than it was when first published in 1982. McNeill, quite naturally, observed the events of the past millennium through the lens of the Cold War and came to the conclusion that the current epoch was wholly unprecedented - weapons so powerful that they made their possessors weak because of their inability to flex any power - and that the global ideological confrontation would continue on as the defining feature of the twenty-first century. To the author's credit, he concludes the volume with these sage words: "But the study of [the] past may reduce the discrepancy between expectation and reality, if only by encouraging us to expect surprises - among them, a breakdown of the pattern of the future suggested in this conclusion." The near future of 2007 does indeed look a lot different than anyone could have imagined in 1982 - but McNeill's themes are no less germane to the radically altered international environment that we currently find ourselves in. Two bear specific mention and consideration. First, McNeill emphasizes the power of market forces and the incredibly stimulating effect the early markets of Western Europe had on technological development. By the time he wrote "Pursuit of Power," McNeill had come to see the return of command innovation where technological change is driven by the direction and investment of sprawling state bureaucracies, much as the feudal lords of Medieval Europe controlled military technology. But, if anything, the last quarter-century has witnessed the resurgence of market-driven innovation, mostly spurred on by the Internet and global communication networks, while the Cold War era military industrial complex has shriveled to a shell of its former self in the US and all but evaporated in the states of the former communist bloc. As huge chunks of humanity join the global market for goods and services - most notably China and India, but Brazil and other rapidly developing economies as well - one can and should expect robust growth and innovation around the world to flourish. The hallmark of such a system, as McNeill explains, is the rapid adoption and improvement of anything that works better than the existing model. Only now, rather than having the growth and innovation confined to Western Europe, it will become a much more (but not entirely) global phenomenon. Second, McNeill sees improvements in transportation as the critical enabler to economic growth in Western Europe.

At one point, he anticipates the rise of globalization and outsourcing in commenting on how the sudden growth of steam power threatened the wholesale destruction of British agriculture. Over the course of just a few years in the late 19th century, steam-powered ships became so fast and efficient that it was cheaper to import grain to London from the US, Argentina and even Australia than to raise it on local British farms. Thus, over the course of just a decade, a great number of English farmers were effectively "outsourced." We see the same phenomenon at work today, only it is the rapid efficiency in shipping information owing to cheap and reliable high-bandwidth Internet connections to India and other countries that make a number of American jobs suddenly cost ineffective and thus insecure. In closing, this is a fantastic book and not just for military history buffs. It says as much about society, organizational methods, international economics, the process of innovation, and how technology shapes worldviews as it does about the impact of new weapons on war.

Two insights to me (1) Wars made arms, arms made capitalism and the industrial revolution, (2) WW I and II were twin wars or one intermittent war -- what we think normal in today's society are just made through these wars. A star lost because the sentences are too long and words are too difficult. But they were worth being challenged ;-)

A friend of mine once suggested the United States have a 'Historian Laureate,' and recommended William McNeill for the position. I could not agree more. On the first page alone I marked 3 passages to make sure I could find them in the future, and tracked down my son to point out how important they were for an understanding of mankind (he tolerated the interruption but didn't seem to catch the fever). OK, every page thereafter does not live up to this standard, but as is usual McNeill synthesizes history into comprehensible themes that withstand the test of time. He never panders to the reader, but leaves one wondering why the book is not required reading for everyone seeking public office. If, that is, any of them have actually read a book? If you are just looking for a list of cool military toys this book isn't for you, by the way. But if you want to understand human history, it is one of the basics.

Nice book

An essential and thorough look at military history in the last several centuries. The beginning chapters can seem tedious, but this is a book that comes alive for any lover of history.

The book was filled with a lot of information; very tedious to study with the main focus being the evolution of war: weaponry, tactics, army sizes, and leaders all played a major role Great War book

A great book if you want to learn about the effect of economy and technology on military.

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