
Book Review

To make teens killers, you have to crush human nature

by Anton Chaitkin

On Killing—The Psychological Cost of Learning To Kill in War and Society

by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman

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In this gripping and uniquely valuable book, psychologist Dave Grossman presents the historical evidence that a soldier's deepest humanity has always worked to block his ability to kill enemies in war. Grossman's story of the recent military efforts to overcome this reticence by essentially brainwashing teenaged recruits, and the application of these techniques to teenagers in civil society, through video games and other such instruments, paradoxically evokes powerful optimism about man's inner nature.

Lt. Col. Grossman retired from a distinguished 24-year U.S. Army career, going from paratrooper, to training sergeant, to infantry company commander, to teaching psychology at West Point, to chairman of the Military Sciences Department at Arkansas State University.

Grossman, the military professional, asserts that the Bible sanctions killing—as in a just war—but not murder. Yet his comprehensive analysis of the combat factors which may serve to overcome the stubborn aversion to killing—such as leadership, group involvement, and, especially, psychological or physical distance from the human target—provides negative proof supporting what has been, throughout history, the most elevated humanist perspective on this crucial question.

To kill, or not to kill

This book has come into particular national prominence since the April 20, 1999 massacre at Littleton's Columbine High School. The concluding section, "Killing in America: What Are We Doing to Our Children?" metaphorically draws on the entire documentation in the book, to show that increasingly violent popular culture perverts human nature to generate dehumanized young murderers.

U.S. military historian S.L.A. Marshall demonstrated that

in World War II, only about 15-20% of American soldiers actually fired their weapons at the enemy. This non-firing phenomenon, observed retrospectively in earlier conflicts as well, was used to justify a new boot-camp training drill: a constant verbal "deification of killing," to wash away the human image from the recruits' mind. Killing is the soldiers' purpose, not bravery or fighting well. As Grossman describes it, you march and chant "Iwanna RAPE, KILL, PILLAGE 'n BURN, annnn' EAT dead BAAA-bies, Iwanna RAPE, KILL . . ."

This is coupled with the use of psychological "conditioning techniques to develop a reflexive 'quick shoot' ability." Today's soldier stands for hours in full battle dress in a fox-hole. "At periodic intervals . . . olive-drab, man-shaped targets at varying ranges will pop up in front of him for a brief time, and the soldier must instantly aim and shoot. . . . When he hits a target it provides immediate feedback by . . . very satisfyingly dropping backward—just as a living target would." Even more lifelike special effects are used, with fake blood, and targets' heads blowing up when they are shot. The result appeared in Vietnam, where the American soldier's firing rate was up to about 95%. Paradoxically, the United States was the clear moral victor in World War II, yet suffered an ignoble defeat in the Vietnam conflict, which scarred the national morale for decades.

Grossman explores the reasons for the soldier's reluctance at shooting the enemy, which has led to the change in his training. Exploring the history of combat, examining hundreds of individual case studies, he shows that fear of death or harm to oneself is not a primary factor; a soldier will often even put himself in mortal danger to avoid having to kill another. And almost all soldiers will crack psychologically if held in constant combat for an extraordinary length of time. Yet, a tiny minority of troops seem predisposed to suffer no such harm, and actually to thrive on killing others. These are described as psychopathic personalities or, as Grossman puts it, alternatively, sheepdog-guardians for their fellow troops.

There are scientifically definable factors, according to Grossman, deciding whether an average soldier will be disposed to shoot the enemy. "By manipulating [these] variables, modern armies direct the flow of violence, turning killing on

and off like a faucet. But this is a delicate and dangerous process. Too much, and you end up with a My Lai [when U.S. forces razed an entire village in Vietnam, which has become a synonym for massacre], which can undermine your efforts. Too little, and your soldiers will be defeated and killed by someone who is more aggressively trained.”

Some of Grossman’s cited variables are:

- The demand to fire, from an authority figure; the proximity of the authority to the subject; the soldier’s respect for the authority; and the intensity and the legitimacy of the demand.
- Group absolution from killing guilt; the subject’s identification with the group; and the group’s proximity, number, intensity, and legitimacy (Grossman compares the military unit to a lynch mob, in this respect).
- Physical distance from the victim—ranging from the emotional ease of killing by aerial bombardment, to the horror of hand-to-hand combat.
- Emotional distance from the victim; the enemy dehumanized as a despised class, race, or culture, or as a moral inferior or object of revenge.
- Mechanical distance, as provided by night vision scopes and radar screens, where the enemy is not apparently a person, but a silhouette or a bright light on an unreal monocolored screen.

‘A virus of violence’

Grossman begins his final section with a chart of certain U.S. crime rates from 1957 through 1994. Assault with intent to kill zoomed from about 65 to 440 per 100,000. In that same period, the murder rate rose from 5 to about 10 per 100,000 by about 1975, then it held almost steady. Grossman explains this by noting that imprisonment rose from about 200,000 to about 800,000 Americans between 1975 and 1992, and medical technology saved a vastly higher percentage of assault victims. Otherwise, he says, the murder rate would have exploded as has the rate of aggravated assaults. Nevertheless, between 1985 and 1991 alone, the homicide rate for males ages 15 to 19 increased 154%.

The question is, Grossman says, “Are the same processes the military used so effectively to enable killing in our adolescent, draftee soldiers in Vietnam being indiscriminately applied to the civilian population of this nation?” Grossman shows that the answer is yes, and he probes the means being employed to bring this about.

Grossman quotes a U.S. Navy psychiatrist who, in 1975, described “techniques he was developing for the U.S. government . . . to permit military assassins to overcome their resistance to killing.” Subjects were exposed to “films specially designed to show people being killed or injured in violent ways.” The assassins would “eventually become able to disassociate their emotions from such a situation. . . . Men are shown a series of gruesome films, which get progressively more horrific. The trainee is forced to watch by having his

head bolted in a clamp so he cannot turn away, and a special device keeps his eyelids open.” Grossman calls this “systematic desensitization.”

Given such important societal developments as drugs, criminal gangs and their access to guns, and the absence of fathers in the breakup of the nuclear family, Grossman zeroes in on the *deliberate, programmed dehumanization* of current generations.

We are taken on a tour of the movies, which provide “killing empowerment to an entire generation of Americans. Producers, directors, and actors are handsomely rewarded for creating the most violent, gruesome and horrifying films imaginable . . . [depicting] stabbing, shooting, abuse, and torture of innocent men, women, and children . . . in intimate detail. Make these films entertaining as well as violent, and then simultaneously provide the (usually) adolescent viewers with candy, soft drinks, group companionship, and the intimate physical contact of a boyfriend or girlfriend. Then understand that these adolescent viewers are learning to associate these rewards with what they are watching.” When a villain murders and dismembers an innocent young victim these days, “the audience cheers.”

There is a sequence to this programmed mayhem, from movie role models who killed lawfully, as a policeman or soldier in the line of duty; to a hero who goes outside the law to kill those who “deserved to die”; to “vicarious role models who killed in retribution for adolescent social slights”; to “role models who kill without provocation or purpose.”

Finally, since the early 1990s, millions—like Littleton’s Eric Harris, whose rampage took place after this book was published—are becoming addicted to computerized point-and-shoot, satanically decorated video games, in which fear and excitement move the player to kill variously dehumanized human beings in a world of virtual reality.

Grossman concludes with a call to action, to refuse to tolerate the producers and purveyors of these murder instruments. He cuts through the hypocrisy of TV executives who claim that they cannot influence viewers’ behavior: “To sponsors, media executives claim that just a few well-placed seconds can control how America will spend its hard-earned money.”

He says that we must act in self defense. “Throughout history nations, corporations, and individuals have used noble-sounding concepts such as states’ rights, *lebensraum*, free-market economics, and First or Second Amendment rights to mask their actions, but ultimately what they are doing is for their own personal gain and the result—intentional or not—is killing innocent men, women, and children.”

To fail to act, the author says, “leaves us with only two possible results: to go the route of the Mongols and Third Reich, or the route of Lebanon and Yugoslavia”—that is, civil conflict and social collapse. Now, in the wake of Littleton, perhaps our cultural Pearl Harbor, Grossman’s work is a fine contribution to our strategy for action and survival.