

Ask A Genius 47 – War 1
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Scott: War is a perennial human activity. How will war affect the future durability of nations? How will this change in the future in general?

Rick: When you mentioned that we'd be talking about the future of war, I realized that I don't know what I'm talking about when I'm talking about war, and most people don't know what they're talking about. When you talk about sex, sex is pretty specific in its meaning. Although, it has a lot of related activities and behaviours, but sex is pretty pin-downable. Even though, it is fairly central to the human landscape.

War is very nebulous and hard to think about clearly. If you go to Wikipedia and look at the list of wars by death tolls, you haven't heard of most of these wars. And if you ask most Americans what the longest American war has been, most will say WWII. Some will say the Vietnam War. Some will say the Iraq War. It is pretty much the Afghan War, which has been going on for 15 years. We still have troops over there.

Even though, peace has been declared at various times. When Americans think about war, the model they have in their heads is, or Canadians or anyone in North America: what is the longest war?

Scott: If just wars, then The Hundred Years War comes to mind, or more typical ones like the Gulf War or the Korean War.

Rick: When you ask people to describe or name a big war, typically, it is WWII. It is the war on the tip of most people's minds in America as being a big typical war. The kind we don't want, the kind we fear, and the kind that typifies war. It was America's last war. Vietnam, Korea, the Gulf, and Afghanistan and Iraq, none of these were declared by an act of Congress. I believe Congress has been asked to help the President declare war in some of these instances, but he pushed out. They were in support of the Iraq War, but that backfired on a bunch of people.

But WWII has aspects that make it clearly a war, war. An evil enemy, nations as enemies, nations fighting with each other, a clear beginning for us, at least, with Pearl Harbor, a clear end for us with the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. A Triumph for us. One we can feel good about; a triumph over evil. Then there are subsequent wars, we don't like thinking about them. Korea, most people don't know what was accomplished, if anything.

Vietnam, it seems like a loss. Iraq seems like a bummer. In that, most people feel, at least, vaguely that we shouldn't have gone in there. Or if they support the war, they support it for bullshit reasons. The Afghan War seems like something we should've done to the extent that people think we should have done it, but most people don't even realize that it's still going on and may not realize that it is even a war. Even though, you can argue that it is the longest war in American history.

It has only killed about 1,800 Americans in combat compared to WWII, which killed about 300,000 Americans. Vietnam killed 53,000 Americans in combat. So, our most recent wars like Iraq have killed only a few thousand. Our more recent wars have been more nebulous, haven't required the level of national sacrifice WWII did. When George Bush said, when went to war against the people that did 9/11, he told people to go shopping and support the American economy.

(Laugh)

Even though WWII is the one that we most like thinking about, and with WWI it isn't clear what we accomplished, WWII is our preferred war, but is atypical in its clarity. Most wars are messier. So, we have the wrong model for war when we look to WWII. So, we don't really know what we're thinking about when we're thinking about the future of war because we've been at war since 9/11, but most people don't feel as if we're at war, though they do feel that things are terrible in the world because of terrorist attacks.

They feel like things are in some ways worse than ever, or can be convinced into that, but when you look at the number of casualties due to terrorism to the number of casualties due to the big wars in the 21st century. We're doing pretty well. Terrorism functions to create terror and also a lack of clarity. I don't know how sophisticated terrorists are when they do acts of terror, but I don't know if they are aware how their actions affect people's thinking. But terrorism causes confusion and makes people misunderstand the world via horrors.

One guy, recently, was dressed in a Santa outfit and killing dozens of people. So, we need to pin down what war means a little bit before we can talk about the future of it. We can see some trends, which may or may not be actual trends. You haven't had a big world war since the last one ended more than 71 years ago. Unless, you count the Cold War, which was a different kind of world war. But we haven't had one with a bunch of battlefronts, combat, planes, bombs, hundreds of thousands and millions of troops and casualties.

But you look at the timeline, and I mentioned this before, of huge world conflicts, 71 years doesn't necessarily mean the end of big wars altogether because according to some ways of classifying wars, then big worldwide conflicts happen every 150 years. If you haven't had a war in 71 years, or if you haven't had an earthquake in 71 years, and earthquakes happen on average every 150 years, it doesn't mean earthquakes are over. But if you look at the 71 years since WWII, you can see trends, which like I said can or can not be trends.

Fewer casualties in wars. Unless, you count the genocidal wars in Africa. More mechanization and remote fighting of wars. Different means of fighting wars. For the first time in American history, the American president was elected, in part, because of an act of cyberwar by Russia.



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