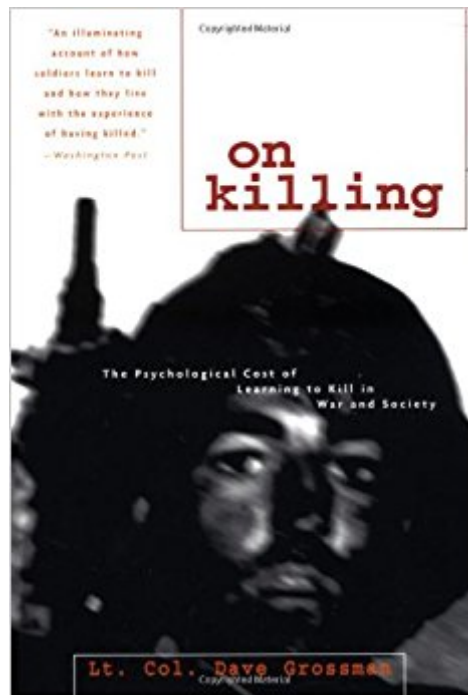


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On Killing: The Psychological Cost Of Learning To Kill In War And Society



Synopsis

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman draws unsettling, even sinister parallels between the psychological conditioning required to make soldiers kill in war and the similar effect that videos, films, games and movies have in civilian society.

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Customer Reviews

ON KILLING is the study of what author Lt. Col. Dave Grossman has termed "killology". This odd term describes, not killing between nations, but the exact circumstances involved when one individual ends the life of another individual, with the primary focus being on combat situations. I've sometimes wondered how I (someone who has never been anywhere near armed conflict) would fare on the frontlines, as killing another human being seems like an almost impossible psychological task. As Grossman casts an eye over historical reports of combat, he found that, apparently, I wasn't alone in thinking that. During the First and Second World Wars, officers estimated that only 15-20 percent of their frontline soldiers actually fired their weapons, and there is evidence to suggest that most of those who did fire aimed their rifles harmless above the heads of their enemy. Grossman's argument is carefully researched and methodically laid out. He begins by filling in some historical details, discussing the statistics for shots fired per soldier killed for the World Wars and the American Civil War. It's a refreshing and enlightening look at war that dispels a lot of misconceptions. An average soldier in those wars was extremely reluctant to take arms against fellow humans, even in cases where his own life (or the lives of his companions) was threatened. Not to say that any of these people are cowards; in fact, many would engage in brave acts such as

rescuing their comrades from behind enemy lines or standing in harm's way while helping a fellow to reload. But the ability to stare down the length of a gun barrel and make a conscious effort to end a life is a quality that is happily rare. The book continues on then, detailing what steps the US Army took to increase the percentage that they could get to actually fire upon their enemy. By studying precisely what the soldier's ordinary reactions were, the officers were able to change the scenario of war in order to avoid the most stressful of situations. The soldier found up-close killing to be abhorrent, so the emphasis was countered by inserting machinery (preferably one manned by multiple soldiers) between the killer and the enemy to increase the physical and emotional distance. Every effort is made to dehumanize the act of killing. Grossman spends a great deal of time discussing the trauma that the soldier who kills faces when he returns to civilian life. Nowhere is this more apparent than in those veterans who returned from Vietnam. Those soldiers had been psychologically trained to kill in a way that no previous army had gone through, and there was no counteragent working to heal their psychological wounds. Grossman takes great pains to discuss how horrifying the act of killing is, and points out how detrimental it is to one's mental health. When the Vietnam veterans returned home to no counseling and the spit and bile of anti-war protestors, the emotional effect was astounding. Most of Grossman's thesis is supported by in-depth interviews and psychological profiles, but it is the story of the Vietnam veterans that comes across as the most disturbing. Much of the chatter about this book seems to revolve around the final section, the discussion about our own civilian society. While this is understandable, I actually preferred reading the earlier portions, simply because they opened my eyes to a lot about the military that I had been previously ignorant of. I think it would be a mistake to concentrate solely on the argument's conclusion as it rests heavily on the case that has been building. In any event, the book eventually develops its final conclusion: the methods that the military uses to desensitize its soldiers to killing are also being used in our media, but without the proper command structure that keeps people from killing indiscriminately. In a military situation, firing a weapon without proper authorization or instruction is a very serious offense, and this is drilled into the mind at the same time as the desensitization. Without this safety, there is nothing to hold back the killing instinct, and this is one of the main reasons why the homicide rate has increased so dramatically. Now, I'll say right off the bat that I was partial to this line of argument before I read the book; I think that children repeatedly exposed to such images would almost certainly become blasé towards extreme violence. But Grossman's book gave me so much more to think about. It isn't just a Pavlovian force at work here; Grossman points out many reasons (both stemming from society and the changing family structure) for why young people of today seem much more able to kill than their parents and grandparents

were. I was honestly surprised at how strong of a writer Grossman is. He manages to put forth his argument without boring the reader. By its very nature, a lot of what he discusses is repetitive and disturbing, but the subject matter is so compelling that I didn't mind. Grossman is very logical in his approach and his argument is a powerful one. I highly recommend this book, especially for people like myself who have never experienced war at close quarters. The summary I (and others here) have given is simply not nearly adequate to capture all of Grossman's thorough contentions. ON KILLING made me think harder about a subject that I hadn't given a lot of thought too before. The information and research here is invaluable.

As a police officer we spend many hours in various forms of training. Some of this training is dedicated to the rules surrounding the use of our department issued firearms. Some of this training is dedicated to the physical skill of firing this weapon. None of the training is dedicated to what you go through after having actually used this weapon against another human being in self defense. The extent of my departments response was...absolutely no critical incident debriefing and my appointment with the department psychologist occurred 9 days after the shooting. The evaluation by the psychologist last 23 minutes total. At that point I knew that my well being was up to me to provide for. After some research I located this series of books by Dave Grossman. Purchasing these books was the best thing I could have done for myself. The information within these pages helped me understand all the stages of emotion that I was, and still am, going through. I would recommend these books to anyone in the military or in law enforcement (or any family member there-of). They may very well have saved my sanity.

I just wanted to write a quick note and review about LTC Grossman's book and his character. I read a review which stated that, "His only vaguely denounced and hidden desire to change the US Constitution make me want to examine Mr. Grossman's education and military record in depth." Let me say, I served briefly under LTC Grossman, then Major Grossman as a new Second Lieutenant in the US Army. He was, in my opinion, one of the most intelligent, thoughtful, and studied officers I ever had the privilege of serving with. It was LTC Grossman, that first instilled in me how a professional soldier acts, thinks, commands, and motivates. LTC Grossman used to give a speech to ROTC Cadets during summer training at Ft. Lewis, WA that was so motivational, by the end the cadets would literally stand up and scream for more. The Army videotaped the presentation and often tried (unsuccessfully) to duplicate it. LTC Grossman used to lead philosophical discussions about the "warrior spirit" that would engage even the least interested. He first enlightened me to

think about the mind of our enemy ("One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter") and has helped me understand the minds and motivation of those that attacked the U.S. on 9/11 (I served under LTC Grossman in 1996). You will not defeat an enemy until you understand and address the root cause of their grievances. For those interested in LTC Grossman's thoughts, I can recommend taking a look at several of Robert Heinlein's books, which LTC Grossman recommended to me. Specifically, "Starship Troopers", the book bastardised by Hollywood in the movie under the same name. Many of LTC Grossman's teachings remain with me today, and he is one person that will impart knowledge that stays with you for a lifetime. While studying for my MBA, I wrote my business plans in accordance with the 5 paragraph OPORD, or Operations Order, and as a result I had more than one professor ask me to review independent grant, business, and research proposals. I read LTC Grossman's book as a Cadet, and while I have to admit, much of it made me feel intellectually humble, his overarching hypothesis has passed the litmus test of time. After the Columbine shootings in Colorado, I saw LTC Grossman on a morning talkshow addressing many of the concerns premised in his book "On Killing" which was several years old by then. The events of 9/11 make me believe that we can all learn a little from LTC Grossman that will help this nation understand who, what, why, and how this nation will fight and win the war against terror.

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