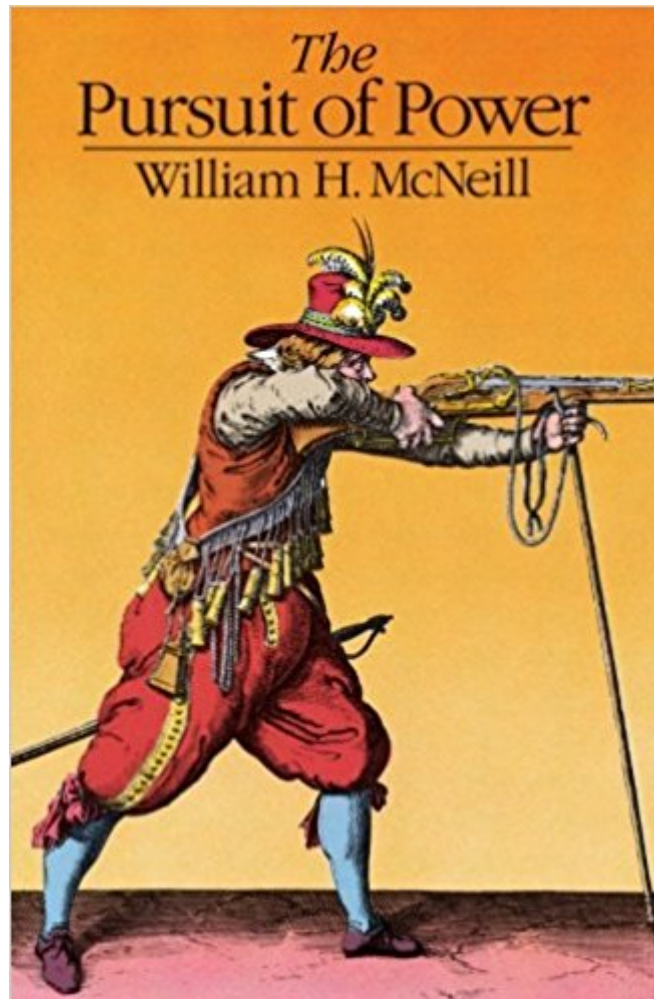


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The Pursuit Of Power: Technology, Armed Force, And Society Since A.D. 1000



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." "No summary can do justice to McNeill's intricate, encyclopedic treatment. . . . McNeill's erudition is stunning, as he moves easily from European to Chinese and Islamic cultures and from military and technological to socio-economic and political developments. The result is a grand synthesis of sweeping proportions and interdisciplinary character that tells us almost as much about the history of butter as the history of guns. . . . McNeill's larger accomplishment is to remind us that all humankind has a shared past and, particularly with regard to its choice of weapons and warfare, a shared stake in the future." "Stuart Rochester, Washington Post Book World "Mr. McNeill's comprehensiveness and sensitivity do for the reader what Henry James said that Turgenev's conversation did for him: they suggest 'all sorts of valuable things.' This narrative of rationality applied to irrational purposes and of ingenuity cannibalizing itself is a work of clarity, which delineates mysteries. The greatest of them, to my mind, is why human beings have never learned to cherish their own species." "Naomi Bliven, The New Yorker

Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press; 1 edition (September 15, 1984)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0226561585

ISBN-13: 978-0226561585

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (22 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #77,269 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #29 in [Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Military Sciences](#) #117 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Military](#) #153 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Europe](#)

Customer Reviews

Professor McNeill describes this 1982 book as a "footnote" to his famous 1963 *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 Peoples", 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.

In essence, the history of the evolution of the military-industrial complex. Intended as a complementary work to the author's previous "Rise of the West" and "Plagues and Peoples." To grossly oversimplify: technological advances improve military killing power; since new technologies are more expensive to produce and implement, and since governments have vested interest in a more deadly military, an ineluctable trend develops as states exert more and more socio-economic power in order to develop more and more killing power in order to exert more and more socio-economic power. Compare and contrast command economies v. market economies. One part I found especially new and interesting was how and why, over the course of the 19th century, first land forces were much more open to technological innovation than naval forces, then with the

advent of steam power those roles reversed. If the whole subject sounds awfully reminiscent of Kennedy's "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" and Ferguson's "War of the World," well, McNeill was one of Kennedy's major inspirations, as Kennedy was one of Ferguson's. An important and seminal work, as I just implied, but it still has its drawbacks. There's a lot of the "blind forces of history" style writing: for this book, the Napoleonic wars were "the French revolutionary solution to an excess of manpower and a deficiency of economically productive jobs." And there's the occasional truly weird stumble: he suggests that Northern European cultures are inherently more bloodthirsty than Southern European, because Northern Europeans need to slaughter large numbers of large mammals every year to get through the winter, "cf. the Saga of Olav Trygvesson." Huh?!?

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.

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