

Hard-wired

When neuroscientists assess soldiers before and after deployment to a war zone, they observe changes in the architecture of their brains. Some regions of the brain physically shrink, especially those linked to memory, motivation, and threat perception. Other regions get larger or become more interconnected, such as areas involved in trauma processing. Several studies have found that many of these unconscious neural changes persist long after the soldier has left the war zone. It also appears to be true that the brains of civilian survivors of conflict are affected in similar ways, and that some changes can even manifest themselves psychologically a generation later, in the children of war survivors.

At the same time, over the past decade, neuroscientists have discovered that people with different brain architectures have different levels of vulnerability to joining violent groups. Minds that are more cognitively rigid and impulsive in everyday situations are most likely to take any ideology to its extreme. People whose brains have a smaller or less interconnected prefrontal cortex – the brain area behind our foreheads, responsible for sophisticated reasoning – tend to embrace more radical and authoritarian ideologies. War changes our psychology and neurobiology, while our neurobiology plays a part in instigating wars.

Surprisingly, despite Nicholas Wright's experiences advising the Pentagon, none of these scientific developments are explored in *Warhead*. Instead, this is a book written for war enthusiasts, and its tone is notably cheerful. There are scenes of dinners in Washington, marked by reciprocal flattery. "Wise leaders" (Winston Churchill, Horatio Nelson, Dwight D. Eisenhower) are applauded at length. Even Adolf Hitler is carefully praised as being "brave, talented, clever". The book alternates between basic neuroscience and war history, with the aim of figuring out how democratic societies should "diligently exploit" and leverage our "survival-grade neural machinery" so that democratic societies can win more wars and "save civilization".

We are often told, just as we are by Wright, that war is an inherent, ancient part of the human condition, one that is "hard-wired" within us, and as such we are

encouraged to forget the individual and prioritize the collective. The brain sciences counter this narrative. They reveal that the brain is flexible and malleable, not fixed; that our minds do not thrive in conflict, but rather that many of our most creative capacities diminish; and that the costs of war to individual people matter profoundly, altering the fabric of our bodies.

Notes

- The article notes the impact violence has on the human complex. How can our spirit, soul thrive if we do not love each other well — and is there a link between consciousness and human behavior?

