

## A BEAUTIFUL ARGUMENT ABOUT WAR

**Paul Monk**

*“...while practically all the arts have made a great advance and we are living today in a very different world from the old one, I consider that nothing has been more revolutionised and improved than the art of war.”*

-Demosthenes *Third Philippic* #48 (341 BCE).

Even scientists, when engaging in debates, often disregard much of the evidence of those whose opinions they disagree with. This is symptomatic of the universal human tendency to take a position and staunchly never budge. Rather than carefully consider opposing arguments, we are markedly prone to ignore them, ridicule them or attack those who present them. It is highly refreshing, therefore, to find two authors who have serious disagreements, but don't lapse into such behaviour. Lawrence Keeley and Raymond Kelly are concerned with the origins of human warfare. The subject itself is clearly important. It is the way they engage in inquiry and debate, though, that is truly impressive.

“The subject of war among ancient and modern tribal peoples remains prone to glib speculation, the caprices of intellectual fashion, and the deeper currents of secular mythology”, wrote Keeley, in 1996<sup>i</sup>. Disillusionment with modern war, he contended, twentieth century scholars had “pacified the past”, arguing that pre-literate and pre-agricultural human beings were peace-loving and warfare rare, ritualised and not very deadly. In reality, pre-civilised warfare was more endemic, more brutal and took a higher toll of the populations involved than have the wars of recorded history.

In 2000, Raymond Kelly published a re-examination of the evidence and argued that war had originated very late in the evolution of the species and the human world had been warless for countless millennia before that<sup>ii</sup>. In other words, the pre-civilised past was, indeed, warless. Though it seemingly represented a challenge to his own argument, Keeley greeted the book as “important, interesting, plausible” and “fascinating reading”. He did not dismiss its claims, even though they might be seen as antithetical to his own.

Even before I read his remarks about Kelly's book, I had a lot of respect for Lawrence Keeley. That's because the Preface to his own book is remarkably honest in explaining how he'd been driven by the archaeological evidence to *change* his whole way of thinking about warfare. That Preface is worth reading even on its own, because it shows a truly scientific mind at work, examining its own thinking, testing it, learning and revising its beliefs. As his response to Kelly shows, he is still alert and still looking to learn, rather than just entrenched behind his prejudices and his erudition, determined to drive off all challenges.

“This book had its genesis in two personal failures”, his Preface begins. “One of a practical academic sort, the other intellectual...My practical failure involved two unsuccessful research proposals requesting funds to investigate the functions of recently discovered fortifications surrounding some Early Neolithic (ca 5000 BC) villages in northeastern Belgium.” Archaeologists reviewing the proposal for the US National

Science Foundation refused to accept that the nine foot deep ditches and palisades around the villages constituted 'fortification' and therefore declined to recommend funding for the research. A third proposal was accepted "only after I rewrote it to be neutral about the function" of the ditch/palisade structures, referring to it as an 'enclosure' rather than a 'fortification.' "In other words, only when the proposal was cleansed of references to that archaeological anathema, warfare, was it acceptable to my colleagues."

Nonetheless, Keeley and his Belgian colleague Daniel Cahen were "shocked" when their new research confirmed that these early villages and others they discovered during their research were, indeed, fortified. "Our mutual amazement was based on the prejudices we shared with the very colleagues who had given my early unsuccessful proposals a sceptical review. Subconsciously, we had not really believed our own arguments...Later, reflecting on my own education and career, I realised that I was as guilty as anyone of pacifying the past by *ignoring or dismissing evidence* of prehistoric warfare – even evidence I had seen with my own eyes." The archaeological evidence had, in fact, long been readily available, but "I (had) dismissed this data as either unrepresentative, ambiguous or insignificant." The rejection of his research proposals, he relates, had made him aware of the prejudices of his colleagues, but then he realised how he had, for many years, "worn the same blinders".

By the early 1990s, the view among archaeologists had shifted to accepting that the Early Neolithic had not, after all, been a warless golden age, but an epoch in which warfare had been endemic. Keeley was impressed by the fact that resistance had been overcome by evidence and argument. His faith in the robustness of archaeology as a science was strengthened, because he had seen that physical evidence had exhibited "an extraordinary ability to overcome even the most ingrained ideas." Like all disciplines, he conceded, archaeology "has unacknowledged blind spots, unconscious prejudices and declared theoretical biases", but because it is based on hard, physical evidence archaeology was less able than some disciplines to dismiss uncongenial facts "by selective ad hominem scepticism, clever sophistry or the currently fashionable denial that there is any 'real past'."

The real past, revealed by archaeology far more than by any mythology, is of immense antiquity. Hominids have been around for at least two to three million years. Our own species, *Homo sapiens*, for well over 100,000 years<sup>iii</sup>. Yet, as of 500 years ago, Keeley points out, only a third of the world was civilised. "Australasia and Oceania, most of the Americas and much of Africa and north Asia remained preliterate and tribal." Such 'peoples without history' are the province of anthropologists. Yet what had anthropologists revealed about warfare among these prehistoric and tribal peoples? Almost nothing. "Less by sustained argument than by studied silence or fashionable reinterpretation, prehistorians have increasingly pacified the human past. The most widely used archaeological textbooks contain no references to warfare until the subject of urban civilisations is taken up. The implication is clear: war was unknown or insignificant before the rise of civilisation."

Keeley quotes a 1991 book by two military historians as exemplifying this view of human affairs. "In less than 2,000 years, man went from a condition in which warfare was relatively rare and mostly ritualistic to one in which death and destruction were achieved on a modern scale...The Iron Age also saw the practice of war firmly rooted in man's societies and experience and, perhaps more importantly, in his psychology. War,

warriors and weapons were now a normal part of human existence.”<sup>iv</sup> He quotes a professor of sociology as from a letter to the editor of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in 1991. The sociologist wrote of “the emotional richness and cultural diversity of traditional African tribal life” compared with “the enhanced capacity for destructiveness that the emergence of all civilisational structures brought forth, such as organised mass warfare.”

This idea, that warfare as such and its deadly nature in particular arose with civilisation, whereas prehistoric societies had lived lives of emotional richness, peace and mutual good will, is the myth Keeley set out to confute. He adduced three kinds of evidence. First, archaeological remains of mass killings dating back to prehistoric times in Africa, Europe and the Americas. Second, the brutality exhibited in prehistoric warfare. Third, the remarkable statistical evidence showing that, on a per capita basis, tribal and prehistoric warfare was both more endemic and *far more deadly* than the famous wars of the historical and civilised world.

At a Late Palaeolithic site called Gebel Sahaba, in the Sudan, dating back as far as 12,000 BCE, 40 per cent of the skeletons recovered from a burial ground used over several generations showed signs of having been killed in combat or having been executed by blows to the head and neck.<sup>v</sup> At Talheim, Germany, a Neolithic mass grave has been found with the remains of eighteen adults and sixteen children who had been killed and thrown into a large pit.<sup>vi</sup> At Crow Creek, South Dakota, “archaeologists found a mass grave containing the remains of more than 500 men, women and children, who had been slaughtered, scalped and mutilated during an attack on their village” in around 1325 CE, ie more than 150 years before Columbus crossed the Atlantic. In short, as Keeley observes, well “before any possible contact with civilisations, the tribesmen of Neolithic Europe, like those of the prehistoric United States, were..wiping out whole settlements.”<sup>vii</sup>

Regarding the brutality of prehistoric warfare, Keeley points out that adult males of an enemy tribe were very rarely taken prisoner, allowed to surrender or spared from execution. Usually they were summarily killed. If prisoners were taken, it was usually in order to use them as sacrificial victims or to torture them to death over several days and possibly to eat them. Such behaviours have been documented, he relates, “for the Maoris and Marquesans of Polynesia, Fijians, a few North American tribes,, several South American groups and various New Guinea groups.”<sup>viii</sup> He then adds, “Of course, many tribal societies took no prisoners and retained no captives of any sex or age...Perhaps the harshest treatment of captives was meted out in Polynesia. The Tahitians are described as leaving enemy children pinned to their mothers with spears or ‘pierced through the head and strung on cords’. The Maoris sometimes disabled captive women so that they could not escape, permitting the warriors to rape, kill and eat them when it was more convenient to do so.”<sup>ix</sup>

The most interesting category of evidence, however, is the statistical. Keeley makes the startling observation that the absolute numbers of people killed in civilised warfare (70,000 in one day at Cannae in 216 BCE, for example, or 50 million in the six years of the Second World War) *mislead* us into thinking that tribal or prehistoric warfare, even where it existed, was a trivial and relatively harmless affair by comparison. Calculated as a percentage of the populations at risk, he argues, this is so far from being true that we need to rethink our whole way of looking at warfare. “A typical tribal society

lost about .5 per cent of its population in combat each year.” This may sound trivial, but that is a statistical illusion. Consider that the total number of people killed through all causes in the wars of the twentieth century was between 100 and 150 million. Then consider that, if you applied the *tribal* death rate from war to twentieth century populations, there would have been “more than 2 *billion* war deaths since 1900.”<sup>x</sup>

Keeley adds a thought-provoking footnote for the benefit of those sceptical of this approach to the evidence. “Some readers may be unconvinced by percentage comparisons between populations of hundreds or thousands of people and populations of millions or tens of millions – that is, they are more impressed by absolute numbers than ratios. However, consistent with such views, such sceptical readers must also disdain any calculations of death *rates* per patient or passenger mile and therefore always choose to undergo critical surgery at small, rural Third World clinics and fly on small airlines. At such medical facilities and on such airlines, the *total* number of patient or passenger deaths is always far fewer than those occurring on major airlines or at large university and urban hospitals. These innumerate readers should also prefer residence on one of the United States’s small Indian reservations to life in any of its metropolitan areas, since the annual *absolute* number of deaths from homicide, drug abuse, alcoholism, cancer, heart disease and automobile accidents will always be far fewer on the reservations than in major cities and their suburbs.”<sup>xi</sup>

We are unlikely to rationally or effectively address the scourge of war “while we are in the thrall of nostalgic delusions”, Keeley concludes. The prehistoric and tribal world was not one of peace, plenty and emotional richness and it does not offer the solutions we need to the problems of the modern world. In sober fact, “the only practical prospect for universal peace must be more civilisation, not less. Adherence to the doctrines of the pacified past absolve us from considering the difficult question of what a truly global civilisation should consist of and, more importantly, what its political structure should be.”<sup>xii</sup>

Raymond Kelly is not prepared, however, to give up the doctrines of the pacified past. And, despite all the evidence he has mustered against those doctrines, Keeley takes Kelly’s argument seriously. Why? Because Kelly argues carefully and dispassionately. He *accepts* almost all of what Keeley points out about tribal peoples *since the Neolithic*. He also accepts that tribal peoples everywhere have been violent, not peaceful and gentle. Yet, sifting the evidence finely, he still believes that warfare originated *very late* in human evolution and that he can pinpoint what led to its emergence and proliferation. He observes that “excepting a single Upper Palaeolithic site, archaeological evidence points to a commencement of warfare that postdates the development of agriculture. This strongly implies that earlier hunter-gatherer societies were warless and that the Palaeolithic was a time of universal peace.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Kelly, like Keeley, is acutely interested in argument and evidence, the testing of hypotheses and the rejection of ill-considered prejudices or theoretical biases. “The issue is too important”, he remarks, “to limit ourselves only to knowledge that makes us feel good, and to consequently fail to consider all the relevant data.”<sup>xiv</sup> It is principally for this reason, I think, that Keeley warmed to his writing. He does not reject any of Keeley’s evidence, yet he finds Keeley’s argument inconclusive. He is aware of Keeley’s “survey of a substantial body of relevant ethnographic and archaeological data and...his denunciation of what he sees as ‘the pacification of the past’.”<sup>xv</sup> He specifically argues,

however, that the “earliest conclusive archaeological evidence of warfare” is that described by Keeley at Gebel Sahaba<sup>xvi</sup>. Prior to that, however, going back over hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution, he finds evidence of *violence*, not evidence of *warfare*. This is a distinction very important to his case and, as it happens, one that Keeley had not paid very much attention to. It leads Kelly to a fascinating hypothesis.

“If war is *not* a primordial feature of human society, he reflects, then it must have originated at some point in the human past”. The question is, was that far back in the Upper Palaeolithic as long as 35,000 years ago, or perhaps even before the emergence of modern humans about 150,000 years ago, or was it much more recently? Here is where he urges that we must define our terms with care. “It is not the case”, he argues, “that one definition of war is as good as another. Rather, there are explicit logical criteria for establishing a superior definition.” Thus, we need to differentiate between homicide, capital punishment, raiding, feuding and warfare. To make this point he observes that “pongicide (apes killing one another) is an analogue of homicide and both are undoubtedly ancient. However, chimpanzees lack both capital punishment and war.”<sup>xvii</sup>

“War”, he argues, “is grounded in the application of a calculus of social substitution to situations of conflict such that these are understood in group terms.” Warless societies are *not* non-violent. “On the contrary, physical violence is...a principal vehicle of conflict resolution, as manifested in regulated, contest-like fighting and in the removal of a killer or sorcerer by execution. However, what warless societies do uniformly manifest are intrinsic limitations on the extent to which one act of lethal violence leads to another.” The emergence of war in the Neolithic, he argues, must be seen, therefore, as “a transition from one form of collective violence to another, rather than a transition from peaceful non-violence to lethal armed conflict.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Kelly corroborates Keeley’s contention that primitive societies are very violent ones. “Homicide rates in simple foraging societies”, he accepts, “are considerably *higher* than those reported for agricultural societies with more developed forms of sociopolitical organisation.”<sup>xix</sup> But “the calculus of social substitution that is the hallmark of war is clearly absent” and “delineating this boundary makes it possible to rigorously discriminate between the warless societies and those in which warfare is present.”<sup>xx</sup> He argues that it can be empirically shown that this boundary was probably not crossed by the overwhelming majority of human societies before the beginnings of agriculture.

Then a transformation set in. The engine of that transformation, he argues, consisted of an adaptive modification towards war among societies competing for *reliable and abundant*, not scarce, resources. This last point is as counter-intuitive and important as Keeley’s observation about absolute numbers and ratios, so it is worth pondering. Kelly calls it a paradox, but he draws attention to the fact that it is *only* under such conditions “that a society can afford to have enemies for neighbours”. The demographics of warfare, as described by Keeley, dictate that warlike societies would have been *selected against* right down through the Upper Palaeolithic, because they would have been “*unable to colonise* environments characterised by *low* resource density, diversity and predictability.”<sup>xxi</sup> The ethnographic case material Kelly uses to make this point is analysed with a scrupulous care that won Keeley’s admiration.

This is a beautiful argument and it is not yet over. It proceeds by the careful weighing of evidence, the testing of hypotheses and the refinement of definitions. It therefore actually throws light back into the past, rather than generating consoling myths

in the present. This is social science at its finest and most illuminating. Lawrence Keeley remarked, in a footnote to his book, that successive waves of existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodernism, coming out of Europe, “have left American universities a ‘burned-over district’ like those areas of nineteenth century New England exhausted by a succession of religious evangelisms.”<sup>xxii</sup> His engagement with Raymond Kelly, however, is fresh, lucid and scientific. So long as scholarship of this calibre is possible, America’s universities – and hopefully our own – will remain laboratories of learning and not mere cloisters of ideological evangelism.

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence H. Keeley *War Before Civilisation: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage*, Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>1</sup> Raymond C. Kelly *Warless Societies and the Origins of War*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2000.

<sup>1</sup> For an outstanding, magnificently illustrated account of the whole process of human evolution, see Donald Johanson and Blake Edgar *From Lucy to language*, Cassell Paperbacks, 2001.

<sup>1</sup> *ibid* p. 22, quoting R. Gabriel and A. Metz *From Sumer to Rome: The Military Capabilities of Ancient Armies*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1991, pp. 3, 19.

<sup>1</sup> Keeley, p. 37.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 38.

<sup>1</sup> *ibid* p. 68.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 85.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 87.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 93.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 214 n21.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 179.

<sup>1</sup> Kelly *Warless Societies and the Origin of War*, p. 2.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 18.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 125.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 148.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 123.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* pp. 41-43.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 20.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 10.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p. 135.

<sup>1</sup> Keeley, *op. cit.* p. 221 n1.

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<sup>x</sup> *Ibid* p. 93.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid* p. 214 n21.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid* p. 179.

<sup>xiii</sup> Kelly *Warless Societies and the Origin of War*, p. 2.

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- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid p. 18.  
<sup>xv</sup> Ibid p. 125.  
<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid p. 148.  
<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid p. 123.  
<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid pp. 41-43.  
<sup>xix</sup> Ibid p. 20.  
<sup>xx</sup> Ibid p. 10.  
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<sup>xxii</sup> Keeley, op. cit. p. 221 n1.