

# Blunt attack on battle lines

## NON-FICTION

**THE ILLUSION OF VICTORY: The True Costs of War.** By Ian Bickerton. Melbourne University Press, 241 pp. \$36.99.

Reviewer: RICHARD THWAITES

Our era of unresolved conflicts, between state and non-state antagonists with ill-defined or unstated goals, seems ripe for a review of the idea of victory. Ian Bickerton is a senior historian at the University of New South Wales who has specialised in the study of United States foreign policy and of conflict in the Middle East. He takes a dim view of war in general, and in this book, he tackles the problem of war backwards – rather than questioning the causes, he questions the results. The book hangs on his proposition that, in war, victory is an illusion, and in our current era has lost all meaning.

It's a fine topic for a vigorous debate, but first you have to define "victory". Bickerton doesn't offer a concise definition, but he refers to "strategic victory" as imparting the ability to impose peace and stability, including within the politics of the defeated nations. That sets the bar quite high. My *Oxford Dictionary* defines victory more simply, at two levels: "the position or state of having overcome an enemy or adversary in battle, combat or war"; then "supremacy or superiority achieved as the result of armed conflict". Bickerton's case is that victory of the first kind (overcoming an enemy in combat) does not guarantee any lasting strategic supremacy, superiority, or even peace for the nominal victors.

His method is systematic but, to my mind, rather a blunt instrument. He takes a series of wars that involved Europe and/or America, from the Napoleonic to the "war on terror", and lists what the "winners" demanded as their terms of victory, usually as stated in treaties and peace conferences. He then does a stocktake of those supposed outcomes after 25 years. By his reckoning, almost never have the terms of victory turned out as the victors intended. In most cases, the "losers" have done at least as well as the winners. German and Japanese postwar industrial reconstruction are the classic examples.

On the other side of the ledger, he collates the vast human and material costs of war, which are as likely to have crippled generations of the winning side as of the losing side.

Facts are marshalled by the legion and well deployed for the argument. It can be salutary to recall that British Empire troops fought to defend the Ottoman Empire against Russia in the Crimean War (the prize was control

of Jerusalem!), then later invaded Turkey at Gallipoli to protect the Russian Empire. Japan and Italy were British allies up to 1919, and enemies a bare 20 years later. The Soviet Union and Communist China flipped from valiant allies to mortal enemies almost overnight with flashpoints in Germany and Korea.

The horrors and costs of war have been recognised from the beginning of human history, but wars keep happening. Futility and transience of victory recur as themes in our literature since Homer.

The whole point of Kipling's "Recessional", from which our Anzac Day services derive "Lest We Forget", is to separate the permanence of individual loss and sacrifice from the ephemeral pomp of victory.

So is the idea of victory really worth attacking in this day and age, or is it something of a straw man? If it is common for the expectations of a victory to be disappointed, does that prove that no war should never be fought?

The problem with Bickerton's reliance on historical accounts is the absence of the counter-factual – what would have happened if there were no response, and no threat of response, to the ever-present temptation for one party to use aggressive force?

He fairly quotes Ambrose Bierce that "peace is a period of cheating between two periods of fighting", but cannot offer a better alternative to war than "consideration of more creative political approaches to resolving differences between states, and between states and non-state groups".

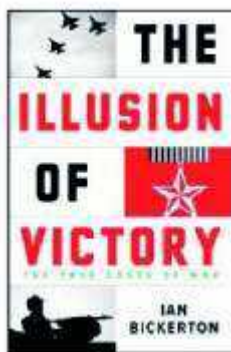
The human propensity for war seems intransigent, but not entirely beyond moderation.

Bickerton notes that the destructive power and reach of modern weaponry has vastly increased the proportion of civilian casualties as collateral damage to combat – he says 90 per cent of casualties in the Iraq conflict have been civilian. But the threat of mutually assured destruction, together with the greater accountability of governments to the governed, provides increasing restraint on the resort to warfare, at least in more democratic states that have not been seduced by "victories" into considering themselves invincible. More democracy should, all things being equal, mean less war.

Focusing only on the costs of war and the unreliable value of victory begs the question as to how aggression is to be resisted or even discouraged. Bickerton quotes Sun Tzu on the tactic of "defeating the enemy's strategy" by offering to meet the enemy's objectives by peaceful, mainly economic, inducements. He does not quote another part of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, that the greatest general is he who wins the war without having to fight a battle – by isolating, encircling, bribing and intimidating a weakened adversary.

This is an interesting polemic that deserves to provoke debate.

Richard Thwaites has reported on wars and politics, and participated in policy wars, but has so far avoided personal engagement in mortal combat.





Berlin's Brandenburg Gate – a symbol of victory? The horrors and costs of war have been recognised from the beginning of human history, but wars keep happening.