



Aftermath: The Remnants of War

Donovan Webster

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In riveting and revelatory detail, **Aftermath** documents the ways in which wars have transformed the terrain of the battlefield into landscapes of memory and enduring terror: in France, where millions of acres of farmland are cordoned off to all but a corps of demolition experts responsible for the undetonated bombs and mines of World War I that are now rising up in fields, gardens, and backyards; in a sixty-square-mile area outside Stalingrad that was a cauldron of destruction in 1941 and is today an endless field of bones; in the Nevada deserts, where America waged a hidden nuclear war against itself in the 1950's, the results of which are only now becoming apparent; in Vietnam, where a nation's effort to remove the physical detritus of war has created psychological and genetic devastation; in Kuwait, where terrifyingly sophisticated warfare was followed by the Sisyphean task of making an uninhabitable desert capable of sustaining life.

Aftermath excavates our century's darkest history, revealing that the destruction of the past remains deeply, inextricably embedded in the present.

Aftermath: The Remnants of War Details

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Kristin Strong says

This book is proof that, in the words of William Faulkner, "The past isn't dead. Actually, it's not even past."

We live today with the fallout (see what I did there) of other times when war raged somewhere in the world. Donovan Webster takes us on a trip through the 20th century's conflicts, beginning with World War I and concluding with then-ongoing efforts to dispose of the United States's obsolete chemical and toxic weapons stockpiles.

In France, he accompanies the nation's de-mining squads as they continue to deal with unexploded ordnance from two world wars. On the Russian steppe, he meets men who deal with the skeletal remains of the Germans who died in the battle for and around Stalingrad. American nuclear ambitions and the tests they required still keep large tracts of Nevada off-limits to humans. Vietnam struggles to come to terms with the economic and psychological costs of a war that began in the early '60s and continued well into the next decade. We're back to the de-mining squads in Kuwait after the Gulf War of the 1990s -- and hear about the innumerable explosive devices deployed in conflict zones worldwide with the long-lasting effects on human populations in physical suffering. Webster finishes with a trip to a toxic-weapons disposal facility still under construction in Utah, and if hearing about what happens to people who dare to question its safety and efficacy doesn't chill you, I don't know what will.

Despite its grim subject matter, the book is very readable and an excellent piece of long-form journalism. It exposes us to things we probably don't think about very often and takes us to places most of us would never visit in reality.

I'm no fan of extraneous punctuation, but it might be more accurate to write that wars are "over" than that wars are over. Because on the battlefields where they took place and in the minds of those who fought them, they really don't ever end.

Steven says

The most sobering book I have ever read. Webster explains the inner workings and effects of 20th century weapons in a way that is both exhaustive and horrifying.

Webster also has a way of capturing settings and moods perfectly with artful descriptions of even the most mundane (describing a man's facial expression of disgust as 'throwing accordions of wrinkles into his cheeks and closing the fleshy flaps over his eyes' etc).

Before reading this I had a rudimentary understanding of unexplored ordnance, leftover land mines and the general detritus of warfare that was still a problem in some parts of the world. I learned in this book just how shockingly big, complex and widespread these problems really are.

Sharon says

Many history books spend a great deal of time on the events leading up to a war which is necessary but personally, I have always been interested in what happened after the guns go silent and the treaties are signed. What happens after everyone goes home? What if they have no home to go home to? What is the effect on communities where a percentage of their young men are lost, or even in some cases if the town itself is lost?

Donovan Webster wondered the same thing. Traveling to France he wandered over the old WWI battlefields that still scar the landscape. The huge craters from underground bombs are now little ponds, added touches to golf courses but everyone knows if someone started digging around they would find human remains. Unexploded ordinances are still a 'thing', often displaced by locale farmers. A special team of brave demolition experts goes from place to place collecting armaments. The idea that this would be necessary 100 years after the war shocks the mind into realizing the scope and awfulness of the first World War. There are acres of land where no one can walk because it is still too dangerous. Human remains are often uncovered. This was from 100 years ago.

If the reader cannot comprehend this, then Stalingrad is ten times worse. Acres and acres of still unburied bodies. Tanks left scattered on the landscape. The Russian Government allowed the Germans to come in and bury their dead but would allow no monuments, just simple markers. It is terrible.

Webster travels to Sarajevo, Viet Nam, Kuwait and the parts of the American West that were the test sites for nuclear missiles. Everywhere the effects of war on the planet and on the present population are observed and recorded.

It's a sobering story and not for the faint of heart.

Mike Fendrich says

What a story. The aftermath of war. The massive piles of bones in Verdun and from the Germans invasion of Russia and siege of Leningrad, Agent Orange in Vietnam, land mines EVERYWHERE, chemical weapons. It is amazing what can come out of the mind and heart of man. And then someone has to clean it up (or maybe not). What a sobering book.

Aidan Blake says

I read this book as supplementary material to Dan Carlin's excellent Hardcore History Podcast, specifically his series "Blueprints for Armageddon" and "Ghosts of the OstFront", in which he references and recommends this book. This book was highly informative and engaging. It addresses unexploded WWI ordnance in France, the untouched skeletons of WWII German soldiers still laying outside of Stalingrad, unexploded ordnance and the effect of "The American War" in Vietnam, mine clearing in Kuwait following the Gulf War, and finally ends with an epilogue covering the disposal of chemical weapons and the effects of nuclear testing in the Nevada desert.

The chapters on France, Russian, and Vietnam helps give the reader an idea of the scale of those conflicts.

The number of artillery shells fired in WWI, the number of soldiers that died in WWII, and the number of bombs dropped by the US on Vietnam is staggering. It is very hard to comprehend and picture mentally, this book helps give you an idea of that scale.

The chapter on Kuwait has a lot of information about the state of mine warfare in the world at the time, though the focus is on the mines laid during the Gulf War. It reveals arms manufacturers mentalities on producing and distributing mines and illustrates the danger faced by mine clearing teams, who are among the bravest humans living today.

The epilogue was great, and I don't really understand why it wasn't a standard chapter in the book. It gives you a harrowing view of what chemical waste still exists in the US, the issues with disposal systems in the US, and the effect that nuclear testing had on the country.

All in all, this book is a great reference that again really gives you an idea of the scale of destruction and ruin that these conflicts unleashed. My only suggestion would be for the author to release an updated version, or perhaps a follow up book. Since this book's release, there have been a lot of developments in the world's policy on mines and ordnance, and there have been further conflicts since it was published as well. It would be great to hear a follow up on what has changed, what has remained the same, and what has gotten worse.

Nicholas Prior says

I highly recommend Aftermath: The Remnants of War to anyone who is remotely interested in warfare or how combat has been conducted in the last 110 years. I could also recommend this book to anyone who might be interested in the clean up efforts after wars have taken place. It goes into great detail about the clean up effort underway in parts of France to rid the landscape of explosive shells left over from both world wars AND the Franco Prussian war that are STILL on going...

Campbell says

A thoroughly gripping account of what happens to battlefields after the war is over. It looks at the work needed to clean them up and dispose of the ordinance left behind. From the unexploded artillery shells that still turn up to this day in the fields of France, to the disposal of chemical weapons in accordance with disarmament treaties, this is utterly fascinating stuff.

Martin Landry says

An amazing book that should be mandatory reading for all weapons designers, I would recommend it to any student of human conflict or with an interest in the social consequences of modern warfare. Would have rated it 5 stars, however there were a few places where I felt the author could have done a bit more research, and perhaps did not in order to avoid contradicting anecdotal evidence. On the other hand, I am writing this with the benefit of hindsight, if I had read the book at its release I might have had a different impression. Definitely worth reading.

Chuck says

An interesting book about battlefields generations after a war. Most military histories discuss what happened during the battle on a location and then move on when the armies do. But the effects of modern war can linger on for generations.

Webster visited battlefields in France, Russia, Vietnam, Kuwait, and even the chemical weapons disposal site in Utah and writes about what he found.

In France, Explosive Ordnance teams are still locating and disposing of bombs and shells from the battlefield of Verdun. And not only high explosive but still potent chemical weapons as well. At the time of his visit 15 years ago, parts of the battlefield were still cordoned off while the bomb squads arrange pickups of shells found by farmers in their fields. And Webster also covers the many members of the EOD teams themselves who have been killed or injured.

I recommend this book as a reminder that wars have consequences for generations and that in modern warfare the battlefield is affected well past the time the armies have moved on.

Nancy Regan says

The Second Battle of El Alamein became known, courtesy of Winston Churchill, as "not the end...[nor] even the beginning of the end, but ...perhaps the end of the beginning". Writing fifty plus year later, in 1996, Donovan Webster reframes my view of "the end of the beginning". After finishing *Aftermath*, I see the Paris Peace Treaties as the earliest possible date for the end of the beginning, the beginning, that is, of the war on the environment that the World War I leave-behinds conduct effortlessly.

Donovan visits the forests near Verdun with French *démineurs* who disarm and dispose of unexploded shells and grenades left over from World War I. He sees the skeleton fragments of Germans left unburied after the Battle of Stalingrad and the radioactive "playground" in Nevada where physicists who never heard the term "budgetary constraint" conjured with ideas like injecting human guinea pigs with radiation. Agent Orange's effects on Viet Nam's children of the 90's and the minefields that keep on killing in Kuwait are grim stops on his disaster tour.

The Tooele Chemical Agent Disposal Facility had yet to begin disposing when Webster toured it. Happily, its supplies of sarin, VX and mustard agent had all been incinerated by 2012. And the product of the incineration? Shipped to another disposal facility, of course.

Jesse D says

I read this book after listening to various episodes of Dan Carlin's Hardcore History in which he mentioned

the book. Rarely mentioned when talking about war history is the physical effect that takes place on various battlefields and terrains. It was fascinating to learn what still remains on the World War battlefields after all these years. This book should be required reading for anyone who has an interest in war history

Papaphilly says

An excellent read. Donovan Webster's premise is there are certain left behind issues from military action that need to be addressed from unintended consequences. Webster skillfully takes the reader through the remnant of war and the after affects on the populace both physically and psychologically. *Aftermath: The Remnants of War* looks at the devastation of munitions of WWI, WWII, Vietnam, Gulf War, and chemical weapons along with the effects that still affect the long quiet battlefields. What is surprising is how some of this is well over one hundred years old and still affecting parts of the world today.

Webster skillfully reports with a journalists eye without falling into the boring and is never preachy, he lets the story express itself the horrors of the aftermath of war.

BD says

We all know that war happens and assume that when one is over, that's it. Life goes back to normal. Webster shows that this is definitely not the case--not with any war. He begins with WWI then each subsequent chapter moves on to the next war, ending with the Gulf War. (The final chapter is a description of the chemical weapons destruction facility in Tooele, Utah.) In each chapter, Webster visits a country that was involved in the war (France--WWI, Russia--WWII, Vietnam--Vietnam War, Kuwait--Gulf War) and describes what is left behind. The aftermath includes unexploded bombs, live land mines, and chemical agents in the bloodstream of agent orange victims. All will take time to clean up and there are many lives lost in the process of doing just that. "There is no such thing as a good war and there is no such thing as a bad peace." Ben Franklin

Fred says

Good book, very interesting. Formed part of the basis for Dan Carlin's Hardcore History episode, *Ghosts of the Ostfront*. A compelling read, makes plain the great advantages of living in the country that doesn't get invaded, but does the invading. I don't think it had this political slant as it's basis, but it certainly makes plain that terms of the "great game" living in the u.s. has been a pretty good deal.

Byron Allred says

Amazing book.

I only wish this book was longer. I'd never read about the aftermath of battles - the cleanup and removal of bodies and weapons - until now. Supremely fascinating, and written with depth and emotionally charged feelings from people that have to do the cleanup. Again, I only wish this book longer.

