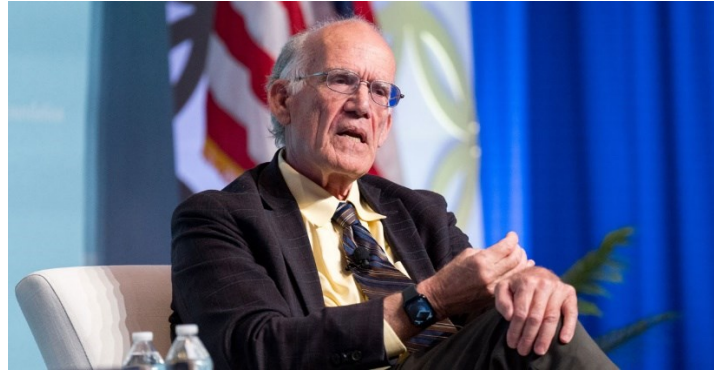


Is the End Near? Victor Davis Hanson Ponders Threat of Annihilation

By [Rob Bluey](#)

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Victor Davis Hanson tackles a topic related to military history in his new book, “The End of Everything: How Wars Descend into Annihilation.” (Photo courtesy of The Heritage Foundation)

[Victor Davis Hanson](#) is well known for his intelligent commentary and astute analysis of current events. But for his latest book, he tackles a topic related to his work on [military history](#). It’s called “[The End of Everything: How Wars Descend Into Annihilation](#).”

Hanson studied four historical examples of [wartime extinction](#) that he features in the book. Then he applies those lessons to contemporary society to examine our own vulnerabilities. The book is on sale today, and Hanson spoke with The Daily Signal to share his observations along with some advice about what’s at stake for the United States in the short term.

Listen to the full interview on “[The Daily Signal Podcast](#)” or read the transcript—edited for length and clarity—below.

Rob Bluey: Could you share with our listeners your motivation for doing this book?

Victor Davis Hanson: I’ve written a lot of books on military history and I’ve come across cases where the defeated didn’t just become occupied or surrender unconditionally or have change of governments or suffer grievous losses, but they were completely wiped out.

And by that I mean, it wasn’t just their physical space, their populations—of course, in the ancient world, they enslaved anybody, they didn’t kill—but their

language, their culture, their civilization, their religion disappeared within a generation. So, for today, we don't know much about Punic culture in North Africa or the Aztecs in Mexico.

It didn't happen frequently, but what were the conditions under which it occurred? And then, I have a long epilogue trying to speculate if that could still happen given that the agents of annihilation—nuclear, bio, chemical, [artificial intelligence]—are much easier to use than muscular labor of the past.

Bluey: In what ways are we today vulnerable to the threat of extinction?

Hanson: I tried to look at a pattern—if there was a pattern. In all these cases, these societies did not realize they were in decline. They did not realize that, in the past, when they had wars, there were usually negotiations between the victor and the defeated, they had no idea who Cortés was, who Scipio was, who Mehmed II was, or Alexander, that these were killers, and they were different sorts than they had encountered before.

They also had this kind of naive egocentric idea that allies would come to their rescue—the Spartans will come and save us, the Venetians will come to Constantinople, the Macedonians will attack the Romans from the rear. And they didn't really understand that all allies are self-interested.

And then, finally, they didn't understand that these killers, the destroyers, were not like Genghis Khan or Tamerlane, they were men of education. Alexander was tutored by Aristotle. Scipio Aemilianus had Polybius, had his side, the great Roman historian, when he destroyed the city. Mehmed had the largest library in the Islamic world. Cortes was a man of letters.

So, they didn't realize that they had thought deeply about how to destroy. They didn't just come in, kill, rape women, and leave. They really had an existential plan to erase these cities.

And when you look at today, there's the same idea that no one would ever do that, it couldn't happen here, this is in the past.

So, I went through in the epilogue and looked at all the threats of extinction that we have seen in, say, the last 15 years. I was shocked.

It wasn't just Kim Jong Un saying that he wanted to wipe out South Korea, and he would, but it was people like [Turkish President] Recep Erdogan, he has

threatened, he said not too long ago, about eight months ago, that the Athenians, the modern Athenians, would wake up one morning and there would be a barrage of rockets to wipe them out. That was anger over his attempt to take back islands that are Greek off the coast of Turkey.

He said to the Armenians at Nagorno-Karabakh—a year ago, they ethnically cleansed every Armenian out of Azerbaijan. And they had been there for a thousand years. And he said, “We are going to deal with Armenia itself in the way that our grandfathers did.” And that was, of course, the destruction of Armenian culture in Turkey.

We know what the Iranians have said. There was a very controversial statement by [Former Iran President Akbar Hashemi] Rafsanjani, about 20 years ago, but more, that’s been reiterated lately, in a variety of contexts, that the idea of Israel is the home of devout Jews is actually a gift to Iran because it concentrates devout Jews in one place.

Half the world’s Jewry is now in Israel, but more importantly, these are the observant Jews, and they are at what Rafsanjani called a one-bomb state, that one nuclear weapon could erase Jewish civilization itself.

[Russian President Vladimir] Putin, of course, says that Ukraine is an aberration that doesn’t really exist, it was a province of the Soviet Union, and the language should be obliterated, it should be reincorporated into Russia. I’ve counted about 16 statements in the press that Russian generals, Russian media, or Russian government officials have said if the war were to continue, they would use nuclear weapons.

In the case of China, they have threatened to wipe out Taiwan and destroy the bastard idea of a Taiwanese civilization, they say it doesn’t exist. And they’ve threatened to nuke, as well, Japan if it aids Taiwan.

I only mentioned that because I’ve had pretty good luck with Chinese publishers buying books on military history. I wrote a book on World War II they purchased, but they sent a letter to my publisher and basically said if I didn’t take that sentence out of the book, then they were going to cancel the publication agreement. And, of course, I couldn’t take it out. Instead, I sent back, not just one threat of Taiwan, I found about 15 others, and I said, “This is ridiculous, you’ve done this

more than—” And so, they’ve canceled the Chinese translation. But it’s pretty prevalent.

And also, the denial. People on the walls of Constantinople said, “We can work with a sultan. He won’t kill everybody.” And people said, “Alexander the Great is a philosopher, he won’t obliterate us like Philip did,” ... or something like that.

And when you see the same denial, people get very angry when you mention Putin’s threats, they say, “Oh, he’s just bluster. He would never do that.” And, “Kim Jong Un would never do that.” And, “I’m not sure that’s true.” History says that the odds are they won’t, but it’s happened and there’s no second chances when that happens.

Bluey: What role do you think technology is playing in either facilitating or even exasperating the potential for these actors to destroy other societies?

Hanson: I think we learned with COVID gain-of-function research that the technology was accelerating much more rapidly than the social, political, economic, cultural analysis of how to handle it. And there were people who were freelancing, like EcoHealth, for example, that was giving expertise to the Wuhan lab. I think the same thing is true of AI.

Unfortunately, I work at Stanford right next to Silicon Valley, so when I go out and eat dinner at night, I often listen to conversations of techies and I know people who give to Stanford, etc. I have very little confidence on their moral sense. I have a great deal of confidence that they’re very adept in high-tech research like AI.

So my point is that when we see things like the FBI hiring Twitter contractors to suppress news about a laptop in the last election, these are the same people, the same mentalities that will be in charge of AI.

And there was, I mentioned in the book, a Pentagon simulation in which they used a computer launch completely directed by an AI program. And so, they sent a missile on a computer and they programmed every defense mechanism in it possible. So as it went into the computer, they launched computer simulations of air attacks from aircraft, from anti-ballistic missile systems, weather problems, etc. And then, when it was almost over, they had the computer kill the launch because it was over.

Well, the launch didn’t kill, it turned around and went back at the launch person because it had been programmed to think spontaneously about a threat. So the

person who launched the missile had never thought that the missile would attack him.

And so, they shut down the entire experiment because they realized that they didn't have the capability in the real world of ensuring that an AI couldn't reason or analyze a threat, including the person who launched the missile, which would be the greatest threat of all if he canceled the missile and aborted it.

So things like that are pretty scary, just like the COVID and the biochemical, etc.

And I think if you look at what these people said in the past, I was just shocked about the denial.

Montezuma said, "We're going to be here forever." He had visions of the Cortes were some type of deities maybe, but he thought he could appease them.

And the same thing was true of the Carthaginians, they said, "You know what? We will give up our elephant. We'll do everything. The Romans won't do this." And they had no intention of doing anything else other than destroying them.

So I do think there's people—like the Chinese Communist government, like the government in North Korea, like the government in Turkey, like the government in Iran—who are in a whole different moral universe than what we think they're in.

Bluey: Do you think that some of that denial exists here in the United States today?

Hanson: Absolutely.

I don't think the average American understands that the Chinese are producing four ships per year to our one ship. Or that if you took any of our \$15 billion carriers and you put them in the straits between Taiwan and China, they wouldn't last more than an hour given the Chinese have developed missile batteries where they could launch 5,000 or 6,000 small missiles that would go about 6 inches above the water and hit the waterline at night. And you couldn't stop that.

They are building nuclear weapons at a phenomenal rate. They're working on anti-missile defense. They're back up to probably 250,000 students in the United States, if 1% are engaged in espionage—and the FBI says it's more than that—you've got thousands of people who are appropriating technology.

I don't think anybody understands that it's going to take us six years to replenish Javelin stocks and maybe we can't. North Korea is producing more 155 mm shells than we are. At least they sent 2 million of them to the Russians.

So, we are not armed and yet, our strategic responsibilities, our strategic confidence, our arrogance has not lessened commensurately with our reduced defense capacity.

We're 40,000 recruits short now in the military, never happened before. And when you analyze who is not joining the military, it's not blacks, it's not Latinos, it's not gays, it's not women, it's not trans people, all of those numbers are the same, it's the largest group are white males from the lower and middle classes whose families fought in Vietnam, first Gulf War, Afghanistan, but this third and fourth generation are not joining up.

And unfortunately, for the military, if you look at the casualty or the fatality rates in Afghanistan and Iraq, that demographic dies at twice their demographics—72% to 74% of all the dead in Afghanistan, in Iraq are white males from the middle and lower classes.

And yet, this is the very demographic that [retired Gen.] Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and [Defense Secretary] Lloyd Austin, in testimonies, have suggested suffer from white rage or white privilege. And the Pentagon was investigating just those kind of slanders about that demographic and they found, of course, in December, they quietly issued a report, there was no cabal of white supremacists.

But the point is, you can't really have a successful military when you're 40,000 recruits short in just a year.

Bluey: What do you suggest that societies today, including the United States, learn from those historical examples you gave us earlier in the interview to maybe mitigate some of the risks that we might find ourselves in in the future?

Hanson: I would not put much confidence in international bodies or even in so-called close allies. The Spartans came all the way up to the Thebans and they heard the Macedonians, they turned right back. On the last day of the existence of Constantinople, they were looking out at the walls at the Hellespont thinking that Venetian galleys en masse would come up and save them.

So don't.

I support NATO. I don't really think the [United Nations] is of much value. The only thing that will say the United States is a deterrent military, and we don't have that now, an overwhelmingly large, successful, smart military. And if we don't have that, we're going to see more of what we saw in Afghanistan, what we saw with the Chinese balloon, what we see in Gaza.

And I think Americans don't realize that we're on a back of a tiger and we can't get off because we set up the postwar world, and we had the pretensions of saying to the world, "You can go in the Red Sea, you can go in the Black Sea, you can go in the Strait of Hormuz, you can do all that and you won't be injured." That was a wonderful thing to do. But if you're going to have those pretensions that you're going to have a postwar order, you have to have a military that, from time to time, takes care of the Houthis or gets rid of Soleimani.

And it doesn't mean you're going to be a neocon interventionist, but I think under [former President Donald] Trump and [former State Secretary Mike] Pompeo, they had a, I guess you would call it a Jacksonian idea that there would be no better friend than United States and no worse enemy. And we did not want to get involved in optional military adventures, but we would be very, very tough on our enemies. And then, the tougher we were, the less we would have to do it once we reestablished deterrence.

So, we've lost deterrence, and that can be achieved militarily, economically, politically, but we've lost it in every category and it's going to be very, very dangerous to reestablish it.

Bluey: How much is at stake this year as it pertains to the future of this great country?

Hanson: Everybody says each election is the most important, but I can tell you that this election is more important than 2016 and 2020 because, in my lifetime, we've never seen the Democratic Party—they always say the Republican Party was taken over MAGA, but you look at 90% of the MAGA agenda, and it's traditionally low taxes, small government, strong defense, closed borders. But the Democratic Party, as we're seeing with Columbia [University] and all these student protests, they are a revolutionary party. It's not that they believe in a porous border, they believe in no border. It's not that they believe in light sentencing, they don't want to sentence anybody. They don't want to have bail.

They don't believe that there is such a thing as deterrence, the way we got out of Afghanistan. They believe in radical climate change. You can show them data, you can show them all sorts, they don't care, they want to ban combustible engines, they don't want fossil.

So, this is a group of people, as we're seeing in this split screen with Donald Trump charged with these ridiculous misdemeanors bootstrapped onto felonies. At the same time, people are entering with violence into a Columbia building. And as one of them said the other night, "They will be out in 24 hours." I don't think they're even in jail as we speak, they're already out.

I guess what I'm saying is we're in a revolutionary Jacobin period, kind of a Reign of Terror. And I don't see it stopping unless—I don't think the election of Donald Trump will be enough. You'll have to elect the Senate, Donald Trump, and enlarge the House majority. And then, they're going to have to act very quickly to stop it, to restore the border, to restore deterrence, to restore deterrence against criminals, to get back our preeminent position economically, to stop this \$1 trillion borrowing every 100 days.

We're in bad shape in every category. And I think, whether we like it, I know there's a lot of Never-Trumpers out there, but whatever problem they have with Trump's temperament, it just pales in comparison with the ideological revolutionaries that are in there now

If [President Joe] Biden is reelected, what we saw the first term will be nothing, it'll be enhanced to a magnitude, it'll be so much greater. So, I'm really worried about this election, especially the integrity of the balloting and turnout and all of those other issues.