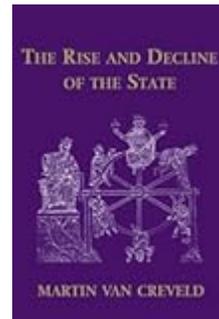




**Martin Van Creveld.** *The Rise and Decline of the State.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 421 pp. \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-65629-0; \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-65190-5.



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### The End of the State in Sight?

This is a book which many more should read than will, such as anyone teaching “Western Civilization” or “Modern Europe”, anyone interested in intellectual history, or anyone simply interested in the political condition of the modern world. Anyone who enjoyed Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* or Fukuyama’s *The End of History* would want to read this as well. Is that, you might well ask, because of the novelty of its conception or the brilliance of its insights? No. Is it then because of the scintillating prose style? No. Yet this book does have many very bright ideas that are well and clearly expressed.

One wants to read this book because of the author’s purpose. The purpose of this book “to encompass the evolution of the idea and practice of the modern, impersonal, abstract state” is so bold and enormous an undertaking that we are forced to admire the very idea behind this work. And the execution does not disappoint, even when one finds oneself in disagreement or even frustration.

Let us start at the end of the book where Van Creveld presents us with a definition of the state he has been

discussing: “... the most important characteristics of the state are as follows. First, being sovereign, it refuses to share any of ...[its] functions with others but concentrates all of them in its own hands. Secondly, being territorial, it exercises such powers over all the people who live within its borders and over them only. Thirdly and most importantly, it is an abstract organization. Unlike any of its predecessors at any other time and place, it is not identical with either rulers or ruled; it is neither a man nor a community, but an invisible being known as a corporation. As a corporation it has an independent persona. The latter is recognized by law and capable of behaving as if it were a person in making contracts, owning property, defending itself and the like (p.416).”

This modestly sized book of 421 pages is divided into eight chapters which attempt to survey the entire history of the state from prehistoric times to the very present. The first chapter (58 pages) deals with the entire era “before the state”, i.e. before A.D. 1300. (Yes, that’s right; the author is suggesting that Greece and Rome do not count as examples of the “state” in his “modern sense”.) The author breaks down political experience in this period of

world history before 1300 into four major categories: 1) tribes without rulers, 2) tribes with rulers (chiefdoms), 3) city-states, and 4) "Empires, strong and weak."

I had very mixed reactions to parts of this chapter. First I was grateful for his analysis and his bibliographical references for the material on tribes. And most of what he said about empires also made sense, with the exception of his comment on Charlemagne's conception of himself as head of the religion. Charlemagne's idea of his role in the Church was much more complex than van Creveld makes out. But I have the most difficulty with van Creveld's work on the city-states, both classical Greek and Roman republican. Van Creveld is too good and too honest an historian to distort or even ignore what does not fit. His description of Athenian government and the Roman Republic are excellent and, as far as I can tell as a non-expert, quite accurate. But, if anything, they tend to prove that there was some conception of the state in both of those cases that bears a remarkable resemblance to what came into existence later, in the modern era, first in western Europe and later in the rest of the world. Of course there were differences, but despite van Creveld's best efforts, those differences seem unimportant. In point of fact, van Creveld admits himself that "Both [Greek city-states and the Roman republic] were able to distinguish the functions of government from the private property of individuals who, for a time, occupied the offices and acted as magistrates (p. 53)."

After that intoxicating beginning – I found myself reading that chapter twice to be certain that I understood him clearly – van Creveld then takes a chapter to describe the rise of the embryonic state (my term, not his) from 1300 to 1648; this is really the story of the gradual victory of monarchy over its enemies, first the Church, then the Empire, the nobility and then the towns. By 1648 the idea and practice of the modern state was ready for birth and for real growth. The time, from 1648 to 1789, had come for development of the state as an instrument of royal will in a period often referred to as "royal absolutism." Van Creveld describes and analyses the royal use of such instruments as the new bureaucracy, the widespread increase in information collection, the creation of a communications infrastructure, and the monopolization of violence. Most interesting of all, he discusses the development of political theory to accompany and explain the new style of government. He points out that all of these led eventually to the separation of the "state" from the person of the monarch.

Chapters Four and Five chronicle the victory of the

idea and practice of the state, first in Western Europe and then, by 1975, in the rest of the world. Van Creveld discusses all the aspects that we would expect to see here: the great transformation that occurred with and later as a result of the French Revolution, the imposition of real discipline over populations with new police forces and larger armed forces, the solution finally to the money problem, the arrival of total war and the apparent apotheosis of the state after World War II. On this last theme of apotheosis Van Creveld remarks: "Born in sin, the bastard offspring of declining autocracy and bureaucracy run amok, the state is a giant wielded by pygmies. Considered as individuals, bureaucrats, even the highest- positioned among them, may be mild, harmless, and somewhat self-effacing people; but collectively they have created a monster whose power far outstrips that of the mightiest empires of old." (p.258)

Before we go on to examine the last part of the book we should consider whether this book is unwarrantedly Euro-centered. I pondered this question, then went back and read the preface again. Such a judgment would be misplaced even if it is understandable why and how it arises. Van Creveld did not set out to write a general world survey of concepts (and practices) of government. Imagine, instead, the author examining a major institution of the present world, noticing its very recent troubles and wondering about its past. Think of him going back to find the origins of this modern institution and, almost as if following a thread through the woods, traces a history of how it has come to be what it is. To help us to follow him as he follows this thread, he provides us with a brief account of other concepts and practices which might otherwise have confused us. Is this a certain kind of tunnel vision? Or perhaps a variation on "hindsight?" Perhaps. But I prefer to think of it as simply doing well and reasonably a task that much needed to be done. And Van Creveld, time and again, gives us copious notes and bibliographic references so that we might be able to pursue other, related avenues of inquiry that he left alone.

If you believe what the author says in the preface, all of the book thus far was to build the case for the last chapters (Chapter Six and the Conclusion) on the decline of the state after 1975 and a prediction of where we might be going. These chapters might cause schizophrenia in the weak-minded. On the one hand, these are the most debatable things by far that the author has said in the whole volume. On the basis of fairly slim evidence he asserts that the period since 1975 has seen the waning of major war and that that trend will continue into the future, that the retreat of welfare marks a permanent shift

away from state activity, that technology is irresistible universalism, that the threats to domestic order from terrorism and from ethnic conflict are growing and will continue to do so. And that all of this has led already to a decline of faith in the state. Although all of these ideas have appeared in print already, we have never seen them so succinctly expressed or so intelligently presented. And yet, I am still not completely convinced! It is not because I have substantial, hard evidence that Van Creveld is wrong. Rather it is a case of believing that we are too close to the developments he is discussing to know for certain whether they are temporary aberration or, as he seems to believe, a significant, permanent change of direction in affairs of state. Likewise, I must say, the author may be making too much out of a relatively small number of developments to draw such sweeping conclusions. After all, as Van Creveld has just shown us, it took over six hundred years for the "state" to emerge and triumph; is it likely to disappear in less than a century?

I have saved one of its best features to the end. This book possesses in its footnotes one of the widest and deepest sets of bibliographical references on the "state" and government that I have ever seen. I wish, however, that the author had saved me the enormous work that it is going to take to go through the entire volume to pull out all of his marvelous references; that would have been

accomplished by the simple act of an inclusion of a bibliography which I could photocopy. But, I must admit that, nonetheless, one could develop an entire teaching career from his countless excellent references alone.

If you are not interested in predictions or prophesy, I would still suggest that you read this book; just stop after chapter 5 and it will have been well worth the effort. Seldom have I seen a synthesizing work so well done, so clearly expressed, so convincingly argued. To see events and developments integrated so comfortably with ideas and theories would itself be worth the reading.

This is the rare kind of book that you would put near your office desk, with those other books which you return to time and again, perhaps just before a difficult lecture or at the start of a series of classes on political evolution in the nineteenth century or before talking about Louis XIV or Frederick the Great in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For that matter, you would be well advised to consult it before talking about Periclean Athens or Caesar's Rome. Or again, ....

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