
11-7-2023

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Recommended Citation

Bakken, Tim (2023) "Book Review: *Kings, Conquerors, Psychopaths: From Alexander to Hitler to the Corporation*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*. Vol. 17: Iss. 2: 1–3.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.17.2.1979>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol17/iss2/2>

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Book Review: *Kings, Conquerors, Psychopaths: From Alexander to Hitler to the Corporation*

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Kings, Conquerors, Psychopaths: From Alexander to Hitler to the Corporation

Joseph N. Abraham

Arnaudville, LA, Hidden Hills Press, 2020

306 Pages; Price: \$29.99

Reviewed by Tim Bakken¹

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Joseph N. Abraham, in *Kings, Conquerors, Psychopaths: From Alexander to Hitler to the Corporation*, begins by asking an eminently logical question, the “central question” of his book: “Why do we have a great capacity for logic within certain contexts but refuse to apply that capacity in other contexts?”²

The book suggests that the answer is that some people, in their thinking, which Abraham endeavors to explain (from biology to personal character), are obtuse and/or amoral. When operating as kings, conquerors, or modern-day oligarchs, in the corporation or the “military-industrial-congressional complex,”³ those who obtain personal benefit will intentionally harm or not care very much if they harm any number of innocent victims who stand in their way or who are simply objects of control.

The book broadens the list of the world’s most notorious wrongdoers to include business executives and bureaucrats within governments. Abraham takes on a big responsibility because the nefarious and illegal behavior of despots and soldiers who kill innocent civilians, discussed in the book, are distant from the behavior of corporate executives and government officials who, at least in the beginning, may act legally and do not intend to harm anyone. Presumably, the point in the book is that modern-day institutions dominate people as did the kings and conquerors (like King Henry VIII and Adolf Hitler). But the inclusion of all these characters in the same discussion does not lead to an easy or natural comparison. That is why it is an accomplishment to describe with precision what elements make some people more responsible and dangerous than others.

Aggressors covet land, money, and power, and kill innocent people. Business executives covet money, but in the process of obtaining it they may make decisions that lead indirectly to the deaths of innocent people. Making a clearer distinction between such oligarchs and the mass killers might have led to a category of wrongdoing that is below intentional killing but above common crimes. Nonetheless, the book is plump full of interesting quips that illustrate serious wrongdoing and grave harm, including stories about ancient kings, Ponzi-scheme-fraudsters, and mass-killing “psychopaths.”

The book includes a sober discussion about how General Motors, in the 1970s, and again in the 2000s, apparently did not redesign gas tanks and ignition systems in some of its automobiles because the costs of redesign would exceed General Motors’ costs in paying money settlements to the families whose relatives were killed or injured from exploding gas tanks, engines

¹ The author’s views do not represent those of the U.S. government, Army, or Military Academy.

² Joseph N. Abraham, *Kings, Conquerors, Psychopaths: From Alexander to Hitler to the Corporation* (Hidden Hills Press, 2020), xxi.

³ *Ibid.*, 203.

that turned off at high speeds, or air bags that did not deploy.⁴ The decisions of the executives at General Motors might have been morally wrong if they knew they were creating a greater risk of death for automobile drivers and passengers. But most people would believe that the executives are less culpable than kings who pillage and soldiers who gun down innocent civilians.

There might be analogues to the behavior of the corporate executives. The U.S. Army Chief of Staff from 1964 to 1968 was General Harold Johnson. By the time Johnson resigned from the Army in 1968, he and many others in the U.S. government knew that America, on its present course, could not win the war in Vietnam. But everyone remained silent. Later in life, General Johnson voiced regret about remaining silent. But he seemingly justified his lack of action as a tactical mental error. He seemed to say that he was a good soldier with good intentions:

I remember the day I was ready to go over to the Oval Office and give my four stars to the President and tell him, "You have refused to tell the country they cannot fight a war without mobilization; you have required me to send men into battle with little hope of their ultimate victory; and you have forced us in the military to violate almost every one of the principles of war in Vietnam. Therefore, I resign and will hold a press conference after I walk out of your door." I made the typical mistake of believing I could do more for the country and the Army if I stayed in than if I got out. I am now going to my grave with that lapse in moral courage on my back.⁵

General Johnson's mental error does not seem as blameworthy as that of the automobile executives. But a majority of the 58,000 U.S. soldiers who were killed in the Vietnam War died after 1968, when Johnson resigned. Should he and the executives be grouped together because they all remained silent when speaking up might have saved lives?

I have suggested that the inability or unwillingness to speak up,⁶ especially in the military, is the result of fear of retaliation and of the destructive control within authoritarian groups and societies, which Abraham, a physician, discusses with significant agility in a chapter on the "authoritarian personality." Perhaps emanating from his experience treating patients in emergency rooms and encountering the many diverse characters who daily inhabit them, Abraham, as much as anyone, can say he has seen almost everything in the way of human hardship and foibles. This is where his book is especially interesting because he seems to understand well the motivations behind human behavior. He perfectly describes the lack of humor in authoritarian personalities, especially the ultra-religious, and the "psychopathy of anger" inside people.⁷

Abraham laments the control that corporations and bureaucrats exercise over the populace. Thus, in its arguments, *Kings and Conquerors* might have identified some cause-and-effect (or contributory) relationships between the current class of "nobles" and everyone else. But the book is not designed to be an empirical study. It is a survey of human wrongdoing.

Abraham writes that the "goal of conquest is fabulous wealth, and there is little profit to be had from a defeated army. Citizens, their wealth, and their future value are the sole objectives of invasion."⁸ More analysis would be helpful in support of statements like these because the origins of war seem more complicated.

Abraham writes that the first theme of his book is a "historical and biological theory about why we blindly follow demagogues and their ideologies" . . . and the "second theme is that

⁴ Ibid., 197–199.

⁵ Tim Bakken, *The Cost of Loyalty: Dishonesty, Hubris, and Failure in the U.S. Military* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 163.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Abraham, *Kings, Conquerors, Psychopaths*, 101.

⁸ Ibid., 17.

these men, and the prejudices we inherit from them, have held us back for almost all of civilization.”⁹ Abraham, who is also a biologist, believes that genetics influence behavior, but that “genetic behavior is not determinism. Our genes are only one voice speaking to us and we can choose to ignore their advice.” Like the psychologist Steven Pinker, he seems to conclude that there is something like “human nature.”¹⁰ Abraham tries to prove his points by describing his experience with patients:

But at some point in labor, the mother’s genes just take over and tell the mind what’s about to happen. It’s a sobering experience. The mother screams, “I gotta push!” and the midwife had better be there or the baby will end up on the floor.¹¹

The book offers a practical approach to counter wrongdoing, a reliance on “We, the People.”¹² With optimism, he traces the advances in human behavior within the last century and reminds us to remain vigilant:

Powerful, elite forces are trying to force us backward toward a non-democratic state, one where power, wealth, and prerogative are concentrated into fewer and fewer hands It is not enough for us to express outrage, to stand back, and complain. Our attentiveness and engagement are the only escape from the rapidly-tightening shackles Because when all of the other checks and balances begin to fail, then we must be the final check. Only we can restore balance.¹³

The book concludes that democracy is a powerful antidote to wrongdoing, but to preserve it good people must act to regulate the wrongdoers.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁰ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹² *Ibid.*, 273.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 274.