

"An illuminating  
account of how  
soldiers learn to kill  
and how they live  
with the experience  
of having killed."

—*Washington Post*

# on killing

The Psychological Cost of  
Learning to Kill in  
War and Society

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman



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# ON KILLING

The Psychological Cost of Learning  
to Kill in War and Society

*by Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman*



Back Bay Books  
Little, Brown and Company  
New York Boston

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Back Bay Books / Little, Brown and Company  
Time Warner Book Group  
1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020  
Visit our Web site at [www.twbookmark.com](http://www.twbookmark.com)

First Paperback Edition

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Grossman, Dave.

On killing : the psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society / Dave Grossman. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-316-33000-0 (he) 0-316-33011-6 (pb)

1. Combat — Psychological aspects. 2. Psychology, Military.  
3. Homicide — Psychological aspects. 4. Violence — Social aspects.  
5. Violence — Psychological aspects. I. Title.

U22.3.G76 1995

355V0019—dc20

95-13888

Illustrations by Mary Reilly

20 19 18 17 16

Q-MB

Printed in the United States of America

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## *Dedication*

Not of the princes and prelates with periwigged charioteers  
Riding triumphantly laureled to lap the fat of the years,  
Rather the scorned — the rejected — the men hemmed in with spears;

The men in tattered battalion which fights till it dies,  
Dazed with the dust of the battle, the din and the cries,  
The men with the broken heads and the blood running into their eyes.

Not the be-medalled Commander, beloved of the throne,  
Riding cock-horse to parade when the bugles are blown,  
But the lads who carried the hill and cannot be known.

Others may sing of the wine and the wealth and the mirth,  
The portly presence of potentates goodly in girth; —  
Mine be the dirt and the dross, the dust and scum of the earth!

Theirs be the music, the colour, the glory, the gold;  
Mine be a handful of ashes, a mouthful of mould.  
Of the maimed, of the halt and the blind in the rain and the cold —

Of these shall my songs be fashioned, my tale be told. Amen.

—John Masefield  
"A Consecration"



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## *Acknowledgments*

War has always interested me; not war in the sense of maneuvers devised by great generals . . . but the reality of war, the actual killing. I was more interested to know in what way and under the influence of what feelings one soldier kills another than to know how the armies were arranged at Austerlitz and Borodino.

— Leo Tolstoy

I have been assisted in this study by a host of great men and women who have stood beside me and gone before me in this endeavor. These I do now gratefully acknowledge.

To my wonderful and infinitely patient wife, Jeanne, for her staunch support; to my mother, Sally Grossman; and to Duane Grossman, my father and co-conspirator, whose many hours of help in research and concept made this book possible.

To the Indian Battalion of Arkansas State University, the finest ROTC battalion in the U.S. Army. To my fellow soldier-scholars among the ROTC cadre, to all my dear friends among the staff and faculty at Arkansas State University, and particularly to Jan Camp, who helped much with preparing the final draft and getting quotation authorizations. And most of all to my young ROTC cadets at Arkansas State; it is currently my privilege to teach them, and my honor to initiate them into the way of the warrior.

To Major Bob Leonhard, Captain Rich Hooker, Lieutenant Colonel Bob Harris, Major/Dr. Duane Tway, and that indomitable team, Harold Thiele and Elantu Viovoide: peers, friends, and fellow believers who have endured many a crude draft and contributed much time and effort to assisting and supporting me in this work.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Richard Curtis, my literary agent, who contributed significantly and then waited long and patiently for the completion of this work. And to Roger Donald and Geoff Kloske, my editors at Little, Brown and Company, who had faith in this book and then worked long and hard to help me to fine-tune it into a professional product. And to Becky Michaels, my publicist, a true professional who has been faithful during the hard part.

To that magnificent group of soldier-scholars at the U.S. Military Academy whom I had the privilege of working with: Colonel Jack Beach, Colonel John Wattendorf, Lieutenant Colonel Jose Picart, and all the gang in the PL100 committee. And to that superb group of West Point cadets who volunteered to spend their summer conducting interviews, testing some of the theories presented in this book.

To my fellow students at the British Army Staff College at Camberley, England, who provided me with one of the finest and most intellectually stimulating years of my life.

To all of those remarkable soldiers who have molded, mentored, befriended, and commanded me, patiently giving of their wisdom and experiences over twenty years: First Sergeant Donald Wingrove, Sergeant First Class Carmel Sanchez, Lieutenant Greg Parlier, Captain Ivan Middlemiss, Major Jeff Rock, Lieutenant Colonel Ed Chamberlain, Lieutenant Colonel Rick Everett, Colonel George Fisher, Major General William H. Harrison, and countless others to whom I owe so much. And to Chaplain Jim Boyle: Ranger buddy, friend, and true brother. For most of these this is not their current rank, but that was what they were when I needed them most.

To Dr. John Warfield and Dr. Phillip Powell, at the University of Texas at Austin, who gave unselfishly of their wealth of wisdom and knowledge, while trusting me and letting me do it my way. And to Dr. John Lupo and Dr. Hugh Rodgers at Columbus College, in Columbus, Georgia, from whom I learned to love history.

I also need to make special acknowledgment of the extensive use I have made of the recent and excellent books by Paddy Griffith, Gwynne Dyer, John Keegan, Richard Gabriel, and Richard Holmes. Paddy Griffith was a boon mentor, friend, and com-

panion during my stay in England, and along with Richard Holmes and John Keegan he is one of the world's true giants in this field today. And I particularly want to note that this study would have been much more difficult to complete without drawing on the tremendous body of insight and personal narratives collected in Richard Holmes's book *Acts of War*. Holmes's superb book will be *the* primary reference source for generations of scholars who study the processes of men in battle. My correspondence with him has confirmed that he is a gentleman, a gentle man, and a soldier-scholar of the highest order.

And I need to recognize that one of this study's most valuable and unusual sources of individual narratives has been the pages of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. The image of the traumatized Vietnam veteran being spit upon, insulted, and degraded upon return to the United States is not mythical, but based upon literally thousands of such incidents — as chronicled in Bob Greene's excellent book, *Homecoming*. In this environment of condemnation and accusation, many Vietnam veterans felt that they had only one national forum in which they could attain some degree of closure by writing of their experiences in a sympathetic and nonjudgmental environment, and that forum was *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. To those who would prejudge this material and automatically reject anything coming from this quarter as mindless machismo, I ask that you read these narratives first. I am particularly indebted to Colonel Harris for his recommendation of this novel resource, and for the loan of his personal collection of these magazines. Most of all I need to thank Colonel (retired) Alex McColl, at *Soldier of Fortune*, for his support in using these quotes. It is good to know that there are still places where an officer is a gentleman, his word is his bond, and that is all that is required.

Last, and *most important*, to all the veterans throughout history who have recorded their responses to killing, and to those in my own life who permitted me to interview them. To Rich, Tim, Bruce, Dave, "Sarge" (Arfl), the Sheepdog Committee (who still share a wonderful secret with me), and a hundred others who have shared secrets with me. And to their wives, who sat beside them and held their hands while they wept and told of things they had never told before. To Brenda, Nan, Lorraine, and dozens of

others. All those who spoke with me have been promised anonymity in return for their secret thoughts, but my debt to them is such that it can never be paid.

To all of these I wish to say thank you. I do truly stand on the shoulders of giants. But the responsibility for the report given from this august height is strictly my own. Thus, the views presented here do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or its components, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, or Arkansas State University.

David A. Grossman  
Arkansas State University  
Jonesboro, Arkansas

### **A Brief Note Concerning Gender**

War has often been a sexist environment, but death is an equal opportunity employer. Gwynne Dyer tells us:

Women have almost always fought side by side with men in guerrilla or revolutionary wars, and there isn't any evidence they are significantly worse at killing people — which may or may not be comforting, depending on whether you see war as a male problem or a human one.

With but one exception, all of my interviewees have been male, and when speaking of the soldier the words of war turn themselves easily to terms of "he," "him," and "his"; but it could just as readily be "she," "her," and "hers." While the masculine reference is used throughout this study, it is used solely out of convenience, and there is no intention to exclude the feminine gender from any of the dubious honors of war.

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## *Introduction to the Paperback Edition*

If you are a virgin preparing for your wedding night, if you or your partner are having sexual difficulties, or if you are just curious . . . then there are hundreds of scholarly books available to you on the topic of sexuality. But if you are a young "virgin" soldier or law-enforcement officer anticipating your baptism of fire, if you are a veteran (or the spouse of a veteran) who is troubled by killing experiences, or if you are just curious . . . then, on *this* topic, there has been absolutely nothing available in the way of scholarly study or writing.

Until now.

Over a hundred years ago Ardant du Picq wrote his *Battle Studies*, in which he integrated data from both ancient history and surveys of French officers to establish a foundation for what he saw as a major nonparticipatory trend in warfare. From his experiences as the official historian of the European theater in World War II, Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall wrote *Men Against Fire*, in which he made some crucial observations on the firing rates of men in war. In 1976 John Keegan wrote his definitive *Face of Battle*, focusing again exclusively on war. With *Acts of War*, Richard Holmes wrote a key book exploring the nature of war. But the link between killing and war is like the link between sex and relationships. Indeed, this last analogy applies across the board. All previous authors have written books on relationships (that is, war), while this is a book on the act itself: on killing.

These previous authors have examined the general mechanics and nature of war, but even with all this scholarship, no one has looked into the specific nature of the act of killing: the intimacy

and psychological impact of the act, the stages of the act, the social and psychological implications and repercussions of the act, and the resultant disorders (including impotence and obsession). *On Killing* is a humble attempt to rectify this. And in doing so, it draws a novel and reassuring conclusion about the nature of man: despite an unbroken tradition of violence and war, man is not by nature a killer.

### **The Existence of the "Safety Catch"**

One of my early concerns in writing *On Killing* was that World War II veterans might take offense at a book demonstrating that the vast majority of combat veterans of their era would not kill. Happily, my concerns were unfounded. Not one individual from among the thousands who have read *On Killing* has disputed this finding.

Indeed, the reaction from World War II veterans has been one of consistent confirmation. For example, R. C. Anderson, a World War II Canadian artillery forward observer, wrote to say the following:

I can confirm many infantrymen never fired their weapons. I used to kid them that we fired a hell of a lot more 25-pounder [artillery] shells than they did rifle bullets.

In one position . . . we came under fire from an olive grove to our flank.

Everyone dived for cover. I was not occupied, at that moment, on my radio, so, seeing a Bren [light machine gun], I grabbed it and fired off a couple of magazines. The Bren gun's owner crawled over to me, swearing, "Its OK for you, you don't have to clean the son of a bitch." He was really mad.

Colonel (retired) Albert J. Brown, in Reading, Pennsylvania, exemplifies the kind of response I have consistently received while speaking to veterans' groups. As an infantry platoon leader and company commander in World War II, he observed that "Squad leaders and platoon sergeants had to move up and down the firing line kicking men to get them to fire. We felt like we were doing good to get two or three men out of a squad to fire."



There has been a recent controversy concerning S. L. A. Marshall's World War II firing rates. His methodology appears not to have met modern scholarly standards, but when faced with scholarly concern about a researcher's methodology, a scientific approach involves replicating the research. In Marshall's case, every available parallel scholarly study replicates his basic findings. Ardant du Picq's surveys and observations of the ancients, Holmes's and Keegan's numerous accounts of ineffectual firing, Holmes's assessment of Argentine firing rates in the Falklands War, Griffith's data on the extraordinarily low killing rates among Napoleonic and American Civil War regiments, the British Army's laser reenactments of historical battles, the FBI's studies of nonfiling rates among law-enforcement officers in the 1950s and 1960s, and countless other individual and anecdotal observations all confirm Marshall's conclusion that the vast majority of combatants throughout history, at the moment of truth when they could and should kill the enemy, have found themselves to be "conscientious objectors."

### **Taking Off the Safety Catch**

Slightly more controversial than claims of *low* firing rates in World War II have been observations about *high* firing rates in Vietnam resulting from training or "conditioning" techniques designed to enable killing in the modern soldier. From among thousands of readers and listeners, there were two senior officers with experience in Vietnam who questioned R. W. Glenn's finding of a 95 percent firing rate among American soldiers in Vietnam. In both cases their doubt was due to the fact that they had found a lack of ammunition expenditure among some soldiers in the rear of their formations. In each instance they were satisfied when it was pointed out that both Marshall's and Glenn's data revolved around two questions: "Did you see the enemy?" and "Did you fire?" In the jungles of Vietnam there were many circumstances in which combatants were completely isolated from comrades who were only a short distance away; but among those who did see the enemy, there appears to have been extraordinarily consistent high firing rates.

High firing rates resulting from modern training/conditioning techniques can also be seen in Holmes's observation of British firing rates in the Falklands and in FBI data on law-enforcement firing rates since the introduction of modern training techniques in the late 1960s. And initial reports from researchers using formal and informal surveys to replicate Marshall's and Glenn's findings all indicate universal concurrence.

### **A Worldwide Virus of Violence**

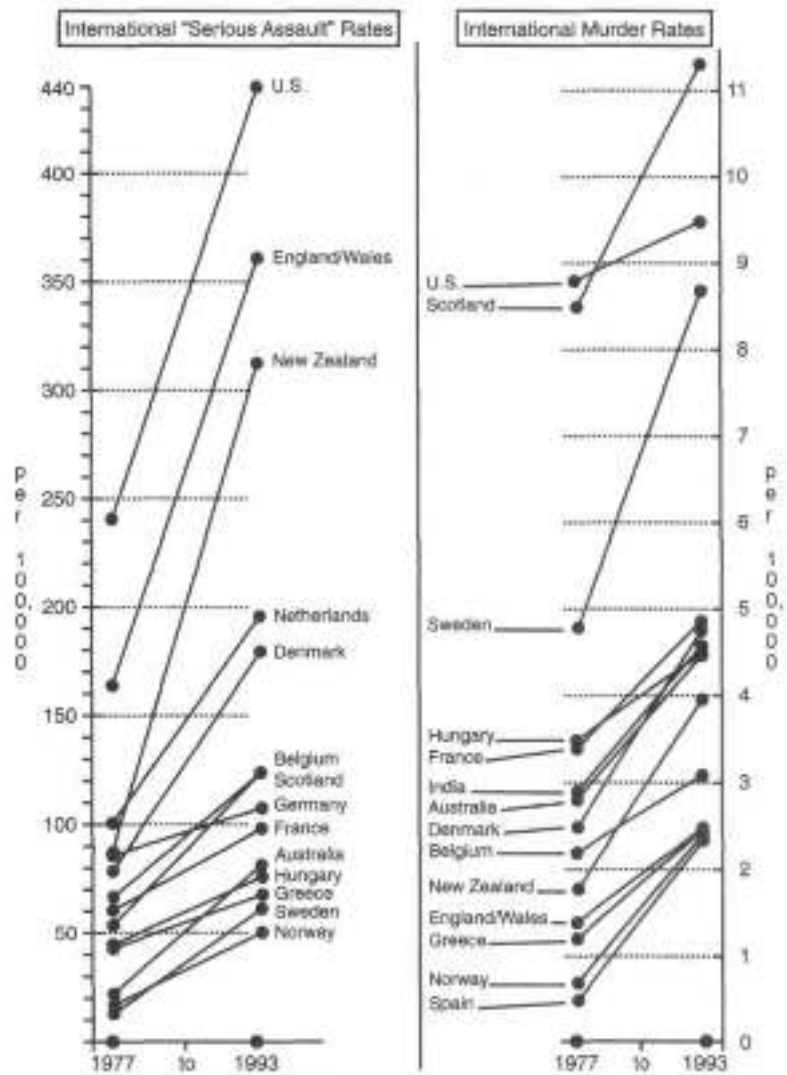
The observation that violence in the media is causing violence in our streets is nothing new. The American Psychiatric Association and the American Medical Association have both made unequivocal statements about the link between media violence and violence in our society. The APA, in its 1992 report *Big World, Small Screen*, concluded that the "scientific debate is over."

There are people who claim that cigarettes don't cause cancer, and we know where their money is coming from. There are also people who claim that media violence does not cause violence in society, and we know which side of *their* bread is buttered. Such individuals can always get funding for their research and are guaranteed coverage by the media that they protect. But these individuals have staked out the same moral and scientific ground as scientists in the service of cigarette manufacturers.

*On Killing's* contribution to this debate is its explanation as to *how* and *why* violence in the media and in interactive video games is causing violence in our streets, and the way this process replicates the conditioning used to enable killing in soldiers and law-enforcement officers . . . but without the safeguards.

An understanding of this "virus of violence" must begin with an assessment of the magnitude of the problem: ever-increasing incidence of violent crime, in spite of the way that medical technology is holding down the murder rate, and in spite of the role played by an ever-growing number of incarcerated violent criminals and an aging population in holding down the violence.

It is not just an American problem, it is an international phenomenon. In Canada, Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand, and all across Europe, assault rates are skyrocketing. In countries like India,



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 As reported by each nation to Interpol offices, and published in Interpol's biannual *International Crime Statistics*.

Note that what a nation elects to report under the headings of "murder" and "assault" can vary from nation to nation. For example, Scotland's totals include acts that the United States might classify as "manslaughter," thereby inflating its numbers. Therefore, comparisons between nations are of limited value. What is important is the *increase* in violent crime within each nation, and the fact that this is occurring in all the indicated countries.

where there is no significant infrastructure of medical technology to hold it down, the escalating murder rate best reflects the problem. Around the world the result is the same: an epidemic of violence.

### **How It Works: Acquired Violence Immune Deficiency**

When people become angry, or frightened, they stop thinking with their forebrain (the mind of a human being) and start thinking with their midbrain (which is indistinguishable from the mind of an animal). *They are literally "scared out of their wits."* The only thing that has any hope of influencing the midbrain is also the only thing that influences a dog: classical and operant conditioning.

That is what is used when training firemen and airline pilots to react to emergency situations: precise replication of the stimulus that they will face (in a flame house or a flight simulator) and then extensive shaping of the desired response to that stimulus. Stimulus-response, stimulus-response, stimulus-response. In the crisis, when these individuals are scared out of their wits, they react properly and they save lives.

This is done with anyone who will face an emergency situation, from children doing a fire drill in school to pilots in a simulator. We do it because, when people are frightened, it works. We do not *tell* schoolchildren what they should do in case of a fire, we *condition* them; and when they are frightened, they do the right thing. Through the media we are also conditioning children to kill; and when they are frightened or angry, the conditioning kicks in.

It is as though there were two filters that we have to go through to kill. The first filter is the forebrain. A hundred things can convince your forebrain to put a gun in your hand and go to a certain point: poverty, drugs, gangs, leaders, politics, and the social learning of violence in the media — which is magnified when you are from a broken home and are searching for a role model. But traditionally all these things have slammed into the resistance that a frightened, angry human being confronts in the midbrain. And except with sociopaths (who, by definition, do not have this resistance), the vast, vast majority of circumstances are not sufficient to overcome this midbrain safety net. But if you are conditioned

to overcome these midbrain inhibitions, then you are a walking time bomb, a pseudosociopath, just waiting for the random factors of social interaction and forebrain rationalization to put you at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Another way to look at this is to make an analogy with AIDS. AIDS does not kill people; it simply destroys the immune system and makes the victim vulnerable to death by other factors. The "violence immune system" exists in the midbrain, and conditioning in the media creates an "acquired deficiency" in this immune system. With this weakened immune system, the victim becomes more vulnerable to violence-enabling factors, such as poverty, discrimination, drug addiction (which can provide powerful motives for crime in order to fulfill real or perceived needs), or guns and gangs (which can provide the means and "support structure" to commit violent acts).

Canada is an example of a nation that we have always considered to be relatively crime-free and stable. Stringent gun laws, comparatively intact family structure, beloved and paternalistic government. But (surprise!) Canada has the exact same problem that we do. According to the Canadian Center for Justice, since 1964 the number of murders has doubled per capita, and "attempted murders" increased from 6 per million in 1964 to 40 per million in 1992. And assaults went up from 209 per 100,000 in 1964 to 940 per 100,000 in 1992. This is almost exactly the same ratio as the increase in violent crime in the United States. Vast numbers of Canadians have caught the virus of violence, the "acquired violence immune deficiency," and as they ingest America's media violence, they are paying the inevitable price.

This process is occurring around the world in nations that are exposed to media violence. The one exception is Japan.

If you have a destroyed immune system, your only hope is to live in a "bubble" that isolates you from potential contagions. Japan is an example of a nation living in a "violence bubble." In Japan we see a powerful family and social structure; a homogeneous society with an intact, stable, and relatively homogeneous criminal structure (which has a surprisingly "positive" group and leadership influence, at least as far as sanctioning freelancers); and an island

nation with draconian control of not just guns but many other aspects of life.

Thus, the Japanese have very few cultural, social, "forebrain" violence-enabling factors working against them, so we do not see nearly as much violence in their society. But they (like any nation that has a significant number of citizens with "acquired violence immune deficiency") are like weapons, sitting loaded with the safety off, just waiting for someone (another Tojo?) to pull the trigger.

The bottom line is that Japan can "accept" a higher degree of midbrain violence-enabling in the media because that variable is being held down by all the other factors. For a while.

But this restraint can defy gravity for only so long. Certainly their recent terrorist nerve-gas attacks have been sufficient to cause some soul-searching as Japan examines the degree to which media violence is causing its citizens to accept violence as a viable alternative.

Most of the world has *not* been able to protect its citizens. Governments around the globe, try as they might, have not been able to keep their immune-deficient citizens in a bubble. And they will never truly be able to control violent crime unless they stop infecting their children.

### **"Just Turn It Off," or "Let Them Eat Cake"**

One common response to any concern about media violence is, "We *have* adequate controls. They are called the 'off switch. If you don't like it, just turn it off."

Unfortunately, this is a tragically inadequate response to the problem. In today's society the family structure is breaking down and even in intact families there is enormous economic and social pressure for mothers to work. Single mothers, broken homes, latchkey kids, and parental neglect are increasingly the norm. Through herculean effort, parents *might* be able to protect their own kids in today's world, but that doesn't do much good if the kid next door is a killer.

The worst thing about the "off switch" solution is that it is so blatantly, profoundly racist in its effect, if not its intent, because

the black community in America is the "culture" or "nation" that has borne the brunt of the electronic media's violence-enabling. In this case, poverty, drugs, gangs, discrimination, and the availability of firearms all predispose more blacks than whites toward violence. These factors defeat the first filter; then the absence of the second, midbrain filter becomes noticeable.

Bronson James, a black Texas-based radio commentator whose show I was on, observed that this is identical to the genocidal process in which for centuries the white man used alcohol in a systematic policy to destroy the culture of the American Indian. For a variety of cultural and genetic reasons, the Indians were predisposed toward alcoholism, and we dumped it into them as a crucial part of the process that ultimately destroyed their civilization.

The pumping of media violence into the ghettos today is equally genocidal. Media violence-enabling in the ghetto is the moral equivalent of shouting, "FIRE!" in a crowded theater. As a result, murder is the number-one cause of death among black male teens, and 25 percent of all black males in their twenties are in jail, on probation, or on parole.

If this isn't genocide, then it is close.

What makes the "off switch" solution so racist is that, if these murders and incarceration rates were happening to the sons of white upper- and middle-class America, you can bet that we would have seen some drastic action by now. Viewed in this light, I think that most individuals would agree that the "just turn it off" solution probably rates right up there with "let them eat cake" and "I was just following orders" as all-time offensive statements.

In developmental psychology there is a general understanding that an individual must master the twin areas of sexuality and aggression (Freud's Eros and Thanatos) in order to have truly achieved adulthood. In the same way, the maturation of the human race necessitates our collective mastery of these two areas. In recent years we have made significant progress in the field of sexology, and this book is dedicated to the creation and exploration of the equivalent field of "killology."

After nuclear holocaust, the next major threat to our existence is the violent decay of our civilization due to violence-enabling in the electronic media. This book appears to be well on its way to making a difference in the desperate worldwide battle against the virus of violence.

May it be so, and may you, the reader, find what you seek in these pages.



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