



The Word and the Sword:

How the Technologies of Information and Violence Have Shaped Our World

Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, Mass., 1991

[\[listed on Amazon.com\]](#)

In this book, Leonard Dudley attempts to impose a pattern on the entire history of human civilization. His central thesis is elementary: the major transitions in the character of social life have been determined by eight significant innovations: four new ways of dealing with information – writing, printing, mass media and integrated circuits – and four new means of organizing the application of violence – metal weapons, heavy cavalry, artillery and mechanized transport. Military and informational technologies make all the difference, he argues, because they are what holds a state together. Innovation providing new economies of scale in either regard rapidly promote agglomeration which in turn transforms human existence.

Six of the eight innovations encourage increased scale in organizations, be they communities, corporations, states or other forms of social group. Heavy cavalry and integrated circuits stand as exceptions to this trend, the former decreasing the optimal size of land armies, contributing to the collapse of the Roman Empire, the latter reducing the optimum scaled of production, and aiding Japan's growing mastery over the United States.

Dudley presents his thesis in eight independent historical episodes, each treating an era and a political process in which one of the innovations played a crucial role. He points out, though, that there have been excellent individual studies of military and communications innovations but none combining these elements systematically into a whole thesis. He asserts that previous analyses of historical patterns have missed the means of integrating the conquest of territory and the willingness of citizens to pay taxes. At the heart of this book is the insight that the soldier and the tax-collector are independent, and that the extent of their joint success determines the fortunes of states and nations.

Reviews

Journal of Economic Literature (vol. XXXIII, December 1995, pp. 2015-2016)

This is a study of how innovations in communication and war have influenced political units – states – and the relations of power between and within them. It

draws cases from the full sweep of recorded human history, from Sumer (3500-3000 BC) to the decline of the superpowers in our own time. The author has given us a fascinating and provocative exercise in macrohistory.

Journal of Interdisciplinary History (vol. 24, 1993, pp. 121-122)

In *The Word and the Sword*, Dudley takes on a no less formidable task than explaining the whole history of Western civilization. Using eight case studies (beginning with the appearance of cities in Sumer between 3,500 and 3,000 B.C., and ending with the decline of the American Empire in the late twentieth century), Dudley has written a book of striking breadth and scope.

Australian Journal of Politics and History (vol. 39, no. 1, 1993, pp. 136-137)

In the grand theory tradition of an Oswald Spengler, Karl Marx, or Arnold Toynbee, Leonard Dudley sets forth his own explanation of history's meta patterns. He attributes the great historical discontinuities since the beginning of recorded human history in the fourth millennium BC to eight innovations, four in the way we process information and four on how the super organization (i.e. the state) through its ruling class, exercises control of territory. Each of the innovations is given a separate chapter wherein it is analyzed with superb refinement. The entire grand theory is set out with a consummate scholarship that demonstrates both intellectual insight and meticulous attention to detail.