**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**The Legacy of World War (Chapter 20)**

**SLIDE 20.1**

Did the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century herald a fundamental change in the nature of warfare?

**SLIDE 20.2 [Image: John Nash “Over the Top”]**

Certainly these conflicts introduced unprecedented intensity, scale, global reach and destructiveness to warfare. For the first time, nearly all of the industrialized societies across the globe focused much of their productive capacity on war, with horrendous consequences. Assembly line production, new technologies, human and material resources drawn from overseas empires, and the growing organizational capabilities of governments ushered in what became known as total war. New weapon systems offered armies never before seen levels of mobility and firepower, combined with the ability to strike deep behind enemy lines, which by World War II, led to dreadful civilian casualties and suffering. The total war experienced in the first half of the twentieth century certainly was a new chapter in the long history of warfare.

**SLIDE 20.3 [Image: The Hydrogen Bomb]**

But total war may also have been a brief chapter in this history, unlikely to be repeated in the future. The reason for this is the emergence of the nuclear bomb, a product of the arms race during the Second World War.

This new weapon may prove to be the critical contribution of the world wars to the long-term history of warfare; and, potentially, the course of human history more generally.

This single new class of weapons, which ushered in the nuclear age, fundamentally altered the very nature of war. For most of human history, defenders have had a significant advantage over aggressors, because defense typically required smaller, less well-trained armies with simpler weapons. Occasionally technological developments have offered aggressors a decisive advantage, at least for a time. The tanks and warplanes used early in World War II arguably offer examples of this. But for most of history, these advantages proved short lived because effective defensive countermeasures tend to emerge quickly.

The nuclear bomb is an exception to this rule. Even today no reliable defensive countermeasure exists to nuclear weapons and the missiles that deliver them. This shift of advantage from defensive to offensive weapons heralded by the nuclear age has transformed warfare in human history. Is another total war likely when one or both sides have access to nuclear weapons which possess the potential to end such a war before either side had even mobilized?

**SLIDE 20.4 [Image: 50th Anniversary of Vietnamese Independence poster]**

But the nuclear age did not bring an end to war. Instead, the global total wars of the first half of the century were replaced by a variety of other types of conflicts. Wars directly involving the great powers occurred in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. Regional wars also occurred between, for instance, Iraq and Iran and India and Pakistan. Civil wars raged in many other areas, including the former Yugoslavia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Syria and Libya.

Finally non-state wars with terrorist acts and responses against them have also become a feature of the last few decades. One might say that older patterns of warfare have reemerged during the nuclear age.

**SLIDE 20.5 [Image: Aftermath of atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki]**

We live in an unprecedented period of human history. For less than a century, humankind has possessed weapons of such fearsome destructive power that they are capable of bringing change to our world beyond the scale of even the Industrial or Agricultural Revolutions. For the first time, we hold the fate of our whole species in our own hands. From this perspective, the nuclear age ushered in by the world wars of the twentieth century has fundamentally changed the nature of warfare in human history. Depending on our actions, it may also have sealed the fate of our species and potentially much of life on our planet more generally.