

# Death From A Distance...Up Close

By Ross Barkan

Stony Brook professors Paul Bingham and Joanne Souza want to explain and alter the direction of human history. Affable, talkative and tireless, the duo communicates with an eloquent urgency. They have scores of information to convey and only so much time to convey it in. Skeptical or not, you are compelled to listen.

Bingham and Souza's recently published book *Death From a Distance and the Birth of a Humane Universe: Human Evolution, Behavior, History, and Your Future* (BookSurge 2009) is a thorough exploration of their theory of human uniqueness and evolution. Their theory has been developed over decades of teaching, study and research. "I would say this book is to the future of all human social interaction what Darwin's books were to the future of biology," said Bingham matter-of-factly. It's clear they have the proverbial Big Picture in mind.

But what is this theory? Bingham and Souza, professors in the Department of Biochemistry and Cell Biology, are eager to dispel the "myths" of human uniqueness. It is not our large brains, bipedal nature, or command of language that distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom. They argue instead that it is our ability to cooperate with non-kin on a large scale—something non-human animals do not do—that makes us a unique species. The implications of their theory are great, they believe, because it helps to explain the course of human history and ways we as a species can achieve peace.

Bingham and Souza make some pretty controversial assertions—assertions, though, that are backed by their meticulous approach to evolutionary history. They argue that human civilization arose because human beings possessed the ability of coercive threat. Unlike their primate pals—monkeys and apes—early humans could pick up objects and hurl them with relatively great accuracy and speed. This ability allowed humans to ostracize those who did not want to cooperate, the so-called free-riders. A monkey can steal from and undermine his peers without repercussion. A human being cannot.

Our relatively stable modern states are the result of this ability to inexpensively coerce each other with the threat of violence. Bingham and Souza trace the explosion of the modern state to the invention of the flintlock mechanism in

the early 1600s, a firing mechanism on muskets and rifles that made them far more reliable, cheap, and easy to operate. Access to inexpensive coercive violence led to the end of the cycling, pre-modern state and *voilà*—we have the United States of America, Great Britain, etc.

This idea of coercion funnels into their conception of humanity's present

and future. And that is a controversial claim," Bingham said. Though they communicate their ideas in a meticulous manner that would make any admirer of the scientific method proud, they realize they are entering more perilous territory when the word *coerce* is introduced into the context of nation states. After all, wasn't the United States' controversial Iraq War, a blood-

fast while the ultimate thinker knows he is hungry because he is a non-equilibrium thermodynamic system in need of energy. Stressing impartiality, Bingham and Souza want to flesh out their vision of a peaceful and prosperous human future through an apolitical lens. Is this possible? In a storm of proximate arguments, they answer with a loud affirmative.

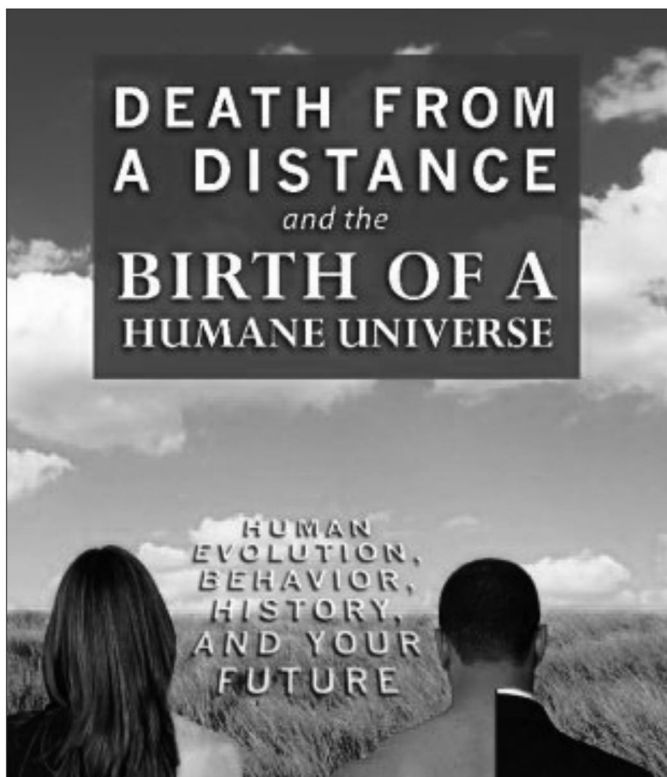
"I think if we are successful in democratizing Iraq, shockwaves will spread throughout the Islamic world," Bingham said. "The money and lives we've invested in this if we follow through can pay enormous dividends in the future." He and Souza envision a future without the "failed" volatile states of Iraq, Afghanistan, and North Korea. The large democratic countries will work to gradually push these totalitarian regimes toward democracy. Of course, this "push" isn't so simple. Thousands, if not millions of lives, will be sacrificed as these wars continue.

Approving of President Obama's decision to increase troop levels in Afghanistan, they are glad he is adhering to their carefully laid vision of a peaceful, democratized tomorrow. "We have to give protection for the grass roots of democracy to come up," Souza said. "We must give [Afghanistan] protection so they can guard what they produce to ensure that local warlords won't steal from them." Cautiously optimistic, they ultimately do not envision the quagmire that many anti-war activists see in Afghanistan.

Bingham only worries that the U.S. and other democracies aren't doing enough to promote democracy overseas. He calls acting in Afghanistan a matter of "enlightened self-interest." He compares the failure to take immediate action in Afghanistan to failing to recognize the threat of Adolf Hitler in 1935, three years before the outbreak of World War II. Whether an unstable Afghanistan poses the same threat to international interests as ultra-modern Nazi Germany remains to be seen. Bingham seems certain it will.

The duo will continue to teach in the coming year, educating people about their findings. Humans are capable of great things; peace, they believe, does lie ahead. Must peace be paved on the path of war? How many lives should be sacrificed for this grand dream of a democratized planet? These are hard questions.

"There are times when the willful application of force by people of good will is crucial," Bingham said.



and future. They believe, as many analysts do, that the most peaceful and effective forms of government are democracies. "If we truly want to create a more humane and productive world, we need more democracy. Democracies are not going to declare war on each other. They trade with each other," Souza said. In their book and lectures at Stony Brook (which are taped and will, they hope, be broadcast worldwide), Souza and Bingham synthesize their contentions by making one important claim: democratized nations, like the humans of early developing societies, have an obligation to coerce non-democratic states to become democracies.

"Democratized nations can gradually coerce the non-democratized parts of the world to become democratic. That, [the United States] must do. That is not a matter of Western values and arbitrary choices. That is the human con-

drenched and chaotic attempt at establishing democracy in the Middle East, a form of this coercion? Yes, they argue, and it was handled poorly. Bingham and Souza, however, do not think this means the U.S. and other democratized nations should waver in their mission to help non-democratic nations transition to democracy.

Bingham and Souza stand out in the liberal collegiate atmosphere by justifying the imperialist zeitgeist of 21st century American government. Rather than viewing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as hegemonic brutality, they see wars of democracy and nation-building from a long-term perspective. Bingham and Souza lecture that human beings are often mired in the search for proximate causes to dilemmas and fail to focus on ultimate causes. For example, the proximate thinker believes he is hungry because he has not eaten break-