

Predicting War

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Review of Lawrence Freedman's "The Future of War: A History" (Public Affairs, 2017).

"Set your course by the stars," Omar Bradley was fond of telling his subordinates, "and not by the lights of every passing ship." Thinking about both the past and the future of war and strategy consists largely of the art of separating the stars from the passing lights. Yet any decent strategist recognizes the fundamental paradox involved in thinking about the future. On the one hand, strategists must do it in order to make decisions about resource acquisition, force deployment, alliances and myriad other factors. On the other hand, the one sure thing we know about the future is that no one has a good track record of predicting it with any accuracy, war quite possibly least of all. One senior American military leader liked to tell his subordinates that the only promise he could make them is that they will fight the wrong war with the wrong weapons alongside the wrong allies at the wrong time.

The future, Lawrence Freedman tells us in his new book, "The Future of War: A History," is hard to discern in large part because it relies on choices yet to be made in environments yet to be determined. History, he writes, "is made by people who do not know what is going to happen next." Thus the winners of future wars will not necessarily be those with the most modern technology, but instead those who

have developed the most appropriate intellectual conception of the wars of the future.

Major shifts (whether seen or unseen) in the present and recent past complicate the future even further. Thomas Kuhn's work on the history of science shows that dominant paradigms are constantly being challenged, and those invested in the existing paradigm may consciously or unconsciously ignore the evidence of impending change. To borrow a quotation from Karl Marx about the Napoleonic age, strategists may shape history, but not always in the ways that they intend. Even as they operate under one set of intellectual and conceptual guidelines and ideas, others are working to undermine their basic strategic assumptions.

Freedman's innovative history of the future of war approaches this fundamental problem of predicting the future through a refreshingly non-technological lens. Weapons and ancillary technologies are present in his narrative, of course, but the center of his analysis is intellectual and conceptual, not material. He divides the modern history of warfare into three parts, starting with an age from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the Cold War. In this period, strategists generally conceived of war as a quest for decisive battle. In this ideal, wars began

with a devastating and largely unexpected first blow, followed by a bloody, but hopefully short, campaign that produced a clear winner and a clear loser. Although he pays it little attention, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 established the modern model. Japan attacked quickly and with almost no warning, sunk most of the Russian fleet in a few hours, and defeated the Russian army at Mukden. The consequences would be felt around the globe for the next half century.

Although enticing and alluring, the Japanese model was hard to replicate because strategists never control developments in the wider surrounding environment. The military problem for this stage of warfare, Freedman says, lay in the difficulty of designing a truly effective first blow; the Schlieffen Plan of 1914, the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and the stunning Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that same year achieved surprise and initial success, but they all failed spectacularly to produce a definitive victory. The unexpected willingness of civilian societies to endure protracted wars, the synergy of alliance networks, and the durability of industrialized nations rendered the model unusable and led to the bloody wars of attrition of the early twentieth century. As a mostly unintended consequence (though later as a matter of strategy), civilians became clear targets of war through strategic bombing, deliberate terror, and genocide.

Freedman's second age focuses on the end of the Cold War, when western states largely abandoned the Westphalian principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, embracing to a greater or lesser extent, liberal internationalism as the ideal of global governance. With this shift came an unanticipated decline in the classical prerogatives of state sovereignty. From the military perspective, this shift meant humanitarian interventions, the rise of concepts like the responsibility to protect civilians in conflict, and the absence of

Cold War deterrence in a global balance of power. A perception of the globalized nature of threats led western states with powerful militaries (most notably the United States) to intervene in places like the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Somalia, and elsewhere, not always with happy results. Technology changed rapidly in this period, but what interests Freedman is the way that western leaders changed their intellectual approach to war and its utility.

Then came the period after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Armed action against transnational terrorists and non-state armed groups became the primary security concern of the western democracies, particularly the United States. States gradually became tired of humanitarian interventions; the Libya intervention broke the 1990s model that culminated in the Kosovo war, and presaged (though the many liberal internationalists populating Western democratic institutions were slow to recognize it) the emergence of a new period of great power competition. But these new geopolitical conditions do not, in Freedman's account, replace the concerns identified in his second period. Rather, the reemergence of great power rivalries adds another dimension to an already unstable global strategic picture. We are thus left, Freedman contends, with no single vision for the future of war.

This is not to argue that people haven't tried to create one. The imperative to clarify strategic decision making has led, over the decades, to many attempts and methodologies to predict the future. Freedman's is the possibly the first book to analyze these approaches and try to find some common threads that can pull together methods of prediction about conflict. The most dramatic and frightening examples usually involve an adversary developing some new weapon or stealing some critical secret that enables them to launch a devastating and unexpected first strike.

Such predictions and methodologies for

making them have been around at least since the advent of mass media. Sometimes they try to highlight the weaknesses in one's own system. Incompetent politicians fail to prepare the nation to defend itself, insidious fifth columns undermine the nation's morale, spies traitorously help foreign agents to exploit a critical vulnerability, etc. Freedman covers, for example, the massive British literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that reflected new anxieties over the security of the British home islands. Sitting near me on my shelf is an American example, "The Defense of Pittsburgh," one of three novels written in the "Conquest of the United States" series by H. Irving Hancock in 1915 and 1916. The cover shows a German army marching through the streets of an American city because, Hancock alleges, the Wilson administration has left the country unprepared for modern war. Anyone familiar with 1950s science fiction or a movie like 1984's "Red Dawn" will be familiar with the general plot. Philip K. Dick's alt-history novel, "The Man in the High Castle," in which Nazi Germany and the Axis win World War II and divide up the territory of the United States between the Reich and the Empire, carries the genre to its logical extreme; perhaps it's not so much an accident that, amid the resurgence of Great Power competition today, the novel is a today popular television series on Amazon.

Popular fiction matters, Freedman argues, for two reasons. First, senior leaders were as influenced by it as the general public was. Ronald Reagan derived at least some of his ideas about the future of war from the fiction writer Tom Clancy, and defense officials responded to the nuclear nightmare scenarios of films like "Dr. Strangelove" (1964) and "WarGames" (1983) by reexamining their systems for the kinds of critical flaws the films featured as critical elements of their plots.

The parents of the director of "WarGames," moreover, were close friends

with the Reagans from their Hollywood days and arranged for the president to see a special advanced screening. In 1992, the same creative team made the (in my humble opinion underrated) film "Sneakers," about a cyber-criminal who has developed a device that allows him to hack into any existing computer network. It attracted the attention of the head of the National Security Agency, who worried that such a device might render American systems inoperable. Popular culture, speculative science fiction, and grand strategy thus formed a kind of feedback loop informing one another and shaping the thinking about the future of war.

One need not believe that senior leaders were as influenced by Stanley Kubrick and H. G. Wells as they were by classified intelligence briefs to see Freedman's main point. Strategists are not isolated from their society. The fears that influence society, whether they be of nuclear war, smartphones being hacked, or terrorism on the streets, are bound to have an influence on the ways that decision makers think about the problems of security.

Second, popular culture largely avoids a major problem Freedman sees in the specialist literature: the academic or policy specialist's tendency towards advocacy. Books claiming to have found The Next Big Thing normally come with a plea for greater attention to the area of research of the author. Popular culture, by contrast, has as its main goal (beyond sheer profit) to create an artistic impression. It is therefore unfettered by the need to make policy recommendations or suggestions about how the state should use its limited resources.

Besides, if all prediction is based on the flawed premise that we can see the future with anything like accuracy, then the source of the prediction matters far less than its wider impact. In one particularly provocative line, Freedman describes Albert Wohlstetter's Cold War analyses for RAND on nuclear war as "the modern-

day version of war fiction, except that there was no character development or narrative tension.”

“The Future of War” may overstate the case, but its larger point on the importance of studying popular culture is worth more attention than it normally receives. In effect, he argues, massive academic exercises like those at RAND or the University of Michigan’s Correlates of War project have no better track record in foreseeing the future than the non-specialists who write spy thrillers and direct movies about teenagers nearly starting a nuclear war by hacking into the NORAD computer system. In some ways, fiction may be better, Freedman suggests, because the imaginations of its creators are not limited by the “dangerous allure of numbers.”

Whether influenced by Hollywood or Santa Monica (the California headquarters of RAND), the history of war as Freedman relates it is essentially conceptual. The end of the dominant Cold War paradigm is a case in point. The ahistorical euphoria of the supposed “end of history” misled many western experts into predicting that an age of perpetual peace would at long last come into view because, as one specialist in this period wrote, the “absence of war between democracies comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations,” thus undergirding the rise of global governance ideals of liberal internationalism. The way forward in those early years after the fall of the Iron Curtain seemed therefore not technological, but conceptual. The key to peace lay in finding ways to help this one supposedly empirical historical law to take hold.

Rather than bring peace, however, the pursuit of the concept of perpetual security through democracy only produced a new idea of war. It convinced western leaders of the need to advance the speed of historical progress through carefully managed military action against a select number of dictators. As prosecuted by

George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and their advisers, the new paradigm not only made it possible for great powers to consider meddling in the domestic politics of smaller states, it impelled them to do so. By making more states democratic, through the use of force if necessary, these interventions would make the world safer. The idea was at least as old as Woodrow Wilson, but the eras of the world wars and the Cold War had made it too difficult to put in practice. After 1989, with the seemingly insurmountable dominance of western military organizations, the absence of a Soviet Union to balance western intervention, and the general post-Cold War hubris of western leaders, the environment was right for it to return.

The result, of course, has not been an end of history and perpetual peace, but an extension of conflict and a reawakening of older grievances. The central problem, as “The Future of War” depicts it, was an all-too-eager willingness to accept the basic principle of democratic peace theory without thinking through the limits of the theory or fully examining alternatives.

One clear alternative theory had already begun to emerge from the minds of theorists like Mary Kaldor and Rupert Smith. Their works essentially argued that war as once understood no longer existed. The future belonged to the side that could best exploit the disintegration of state authority, control the messaging, and work among the people in the new megacities. Anne-Marie Slaughter saw the inevitable splintering of the “sovereign state” into sub-sovereign centers of governance power, thereby squeezing out sovereignty in favor of power exercised by non-sovereign or less-than-sovereign institutions, on the one hand, and the ascendant rule of supra-national institutions, on the other. One might argue, although Freedman does not, that Hezbollah, FARC, Hamas, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and others have been able to survive against much more technologically sophisticated states because they have indeed made the

intellectual shift to the kind of conflict that Kaldor and Smith described.

The west has struggled against such adversaries not on the technological level but on the conceptual one. The west had two models on which to draw, neither of which helped them conceptualize the central problem. The “aid to civil power” model suggested building up the capabilities of local authorities so that they could care for their own security needs and maybe even become an exporter of regional security. The second model focused on “peacekeeping,” which required armies to act impartially even when, as in Yugoslavia, such a model indirectly empowered malicious actors like Slobodan Milosevic. Both models were frustrating, but they had just enough successes to keep them viable and allow them to survive intellectual challenges like the ones posed by Kaldor and Smith.

The final part of the book analyzes current thinking about the future of war. One strand of it shares with past thinking a proclivity for surprise attacks (think of the number of contemporary warnings about a “cyber-Pearl Harbor”) and advocacy for putting most of the nation’s security eggs in one shiny technological basket. Hybrid war theorists continue to worry about the blurring lines between soldier and civilian, as well as the blurring lines between conventional and non-conventional forces. Thus Hezbollah, with its sanctuaries in Lebanon and its material backing from Iran, presents a conceptual challenge that

Israel could not meet in conventional style with its operations in 2006.

“The Future of War” ends with a survey of some of the major challenges facing national security professionals today, including hybrid war, cyber war, climate change, robotics, drones, and artificial intelligence. The problem will be two-fold: designing the right intellectual concepts to deal with the changes these innovations will bring, while anticipating the ways that adversaries will use them for their own ends. Consistent with the rest of the book, Freedman finds solutions not in technology but in ideas, some of them to be found in the best science fiction. War as a contest of ideas as much as of material is an argument at once so obvious as to seem axiomatic and at the same time so terribly neglected by those wooed by the latest technological wizardry. Readers who spend their time with either tech-driven science fiction or RAND analyses should put them aside for a while and read this thought-provoking book on the power of ideas in shaping the future of grand strategy.

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