The Culture of Future Conflict

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The computer will not replace the book, and post-modern forms of conflict will not fully replace conventional war. We will, however, experience a bewildering expansion of the varieties of collective and factional violence. The computer expands our possibilities, and alters methods of working and organizing. So, too, the worldwide crisis in systems of social organization and belief broadens the range of challenges to global, regional, and local order. States and military establishments that restrict their preparations, initiatives, and responses to traditional patterns will pay for their fear of the future in blood, money, and quality of life.

Although man and his failings will remain at the center of war and conflict, a unique combination of factors will precipitate and shape events. At least into the 17th century, Western man believed planetary and stellar conjunctions were responsible for disasters upon the earth. Today, we face a constellation of crises much closer to home with profound strategic and military implications. The warning comet is already with us as we approach a dark new century.

Future wars and violent conflicts will be shaped by the inabilities of governments to function as effective systems of resource distribution and control, and by the failure of entire cultures to compete in the post-modern age. The worldwide polarization of wealth, afflicting continents and countries, as well as individuals in all countries, will prove insurmountable, and social divisions will spark various forms of class warfare more brutal than anything imagined by Karl Marx. Post-state organizations, from criminal empires to the internationalizing media, will rupture the integrity of the nation-state. Niche technologies, such as post-modern means of information manipulation and dissemination, will provoke at least as often as they produce, and will become powerful tools of conflict. Basic resources will prove inadequate for populations exploding beyond natural limits, and we may discover truths about ourselves that we do not wish to know. In the end, the greatest challenge may be to our moral order.

The incompetence of the state has been demonstrated along fault lines from the former Yugoslavia and desperate North Korea to Zaire and Liberia. The "state" as we revere it is a cultural growth and must develop organically--where it has been grafted it rarely takes. The Euro-American and East Asian state's civility as well as its authority rely upon expanding wealth, on a perceived community of interests that allows public compromise or acquiescence, and on individual and collective senses of responsibility. In many of the "states" that presently hold seats in the United Nations, per capita wealth is declining, there is no community of interests, nor is there an individual sense of responsibility for the common good. Even in Western states, the vital sense of generalized responsibility is deteriorating as interest groups promote factionalization and citizen expectations grow excessive and wantonly selfish.

In many "accidental states" shaped hastily in the recession of empire, state structures survived only through their ability to apply internal violence. Today, even these oppressive construct-states are breaking down as burgeoning populations make state-sponsored violence against their own citizens statistically ineffectual. Simultaneously, thanks largely to the temptress Media, worldwide citizen expectations of government have wildly surpassed the abilities of government to deliver (the gray area between possibilities and needs/wants is the age-old breeding ground of organized crime and political radicalism). This is true of the United States and of Algeria. Fortunately for us in the United States, our government's ability to deliver generally exceeds requirements, if not expectations. In Algeria, government shortcomings have led to a cultural struggle that has engulfed the state and threatens to destroy it.

Cultural failure has many historical precedents, from the collapse of the Hittite empire to the destruction of the Aztecs, but there has never before been a time when a single dominant culture and its imitators have threatened to overwhelm every other major culture on earth. Even in the great age of European empire, most of the conquered

peoples remained free to practice their own religions and lifestyles, blissfully unaware of a seductive alternative model. Today, thanks to the distribution of addictively-Western films, videos, television, and radio to even the most obscure and hopeless backwaters, there is an unprecedented worldwide awareness of relative physical and cultural poverty within non-Western cultures. Western models of behavior and possession--often misunderstood--create crises of identity and raise appetites that local environments cannot sate. Increasingly, we live in a world where the Flintstones meet the Jetsons--and the Flintstones don't much like it. When they try to imitate our performance, they fail, except in the case of gifted individuals. When they try to secede from the West, they fail again. In the end, there is only rage.

Wealth polarization is worsening after a century of limited progress toward equalization. The West and some uniquely receptive Far Eastern nations have entered a wealth-generation cycle for which there is no predictable end, despite intermittent trade squabbles and recessions. But the nature of post-modern competition is such that membership in this club is closing. While some disciplined, culturally predisposed states may eventually join the rich West-plus, they will be exceptions. The value of manual and mass labor is plunging in a world of surplus population, while the skills necessary for successful economies and desirable jobs increasingly rely on the total environment in which the individual lives and learns, from infancy forward. In the past, fortunate individuals could jump from pre-modern to modern. But the gap between pre-modern and post-modern is too great to be crossed in a single leap. The economically vibrant jobs of the next century will demand "transcendent literacy": the second-nature ability to read, write, think abstractly, and manipulate information electronics. This fateful shift is already creating painful dislocations in our own country and threatens to create an expanded and irredeemable underclass. Its effect on the non-Western world will be to condemn states, peoples, and even continents to enduring poverty.

Social division is the obvious result of the polarization of wealth. Although most of the world's population always has been condemned to poverty, a combination of religious assurance, ignorance of how well others lived, and hope of a better future more often than not curbed man's natural rage at wealth discrepancies. Now the slum-dwellers of Lagos are on to the lifestyles of the rich and famous, while hopes of prosperity even for a future generation dwindle. In the West-plus this bifurcation into skilled and well-off versus unskilled and poor has created archipelagoes of failure in a sea of success. The rest of the World contains only fragile archipelagoes of success in vast, increasingly stormy seas of failure. Occasionally, the failures attack us at home, staging events, such as the World Trade Center bombing, that are as spectacular as they are statistically ineffective. More often, these unmoderns usually take out their inchoate anger on the nearest targets--rival clans or tribes, citizens of minority religions or ethnicities, or their own crumbling governments. Intermittently, these local rages will aggrieve our extra-territorial welfare--primarily our economic interests--and we will need to intervene. In the 20th century, the great wars were between ambitious winner-states. In the coming century, the routine conflicts to which we will be party will pit those same winner-states, now reconciled, against vast "loser" populations in failed states and regions.

The rise of the anti-state in various forms has been and will be the result of the failure of governments to cater to basic needs and to satisfy expanding desires. The anti-state can take many forms, from media conglomerates that determine what the world should know, through much-maligned, peace-preferring multinational corporations, to webs of criminality expanding across oceans, enterprise disciplines, and cultures. In the world of the anti-state, international criminals often cooperate more effectively and creatively than do states. Criminal enterprise mirrors legitimate enterprise in its focus on secure profits, but its "integrity" exceeds that of the greatest multinationals because the criminal anti-state has a galvanizing enemy: the state fighting for its life. It is in the adaptive nature of the post-modern anti-state that it can even develop a symbiotic relationship with a formal government it strategically penetrates, as criminal anti-state webs have done in Russia, Nigeria, Mexico, and numerous less-spectacular examples. Anti-states also take the forms of pre-modern structures, such as tribal or religious identifications. At the high end of development we are witnessing the birth of new "tribes" based on skills, wealth, and cultural preferences. As with the old, enduring tribes, the geographic domain of these new communities rarely matches the contours of existing state borders.

We are entering an era of multidimensional, inter-penetrating structures of social control, wealth allocation, and even allegiance. The decline of the state, real or relative, accelerates under *knowledge assault*, as new structures of knowing outpace the ability of traditional governments to process and respond to information. The modern age was the age of mass efficiencies. The post-modern age is the age of mass inefficiencies, wherein bigness equals clumsiness and lethargy. Ours is increasingly an age of neo-anarchic "cellular" accomplishment that, at its best, gives us enhanced microchips and, at its worst, turns the world's cities into criminal harbors. Reduced to the fundamentals, we face a

conflict between blood ties and knowledge ties. Ours is a world whose constituents may lurch backward as well as forward, but in which nothing can remain unchanged.

Decisive technologies, from the birth control pill to the computer, have exploded traditional forms of organization, behavior, and belief in our lifetimes. Technology can lead to enhanced environmental mastery--but it can also lead to fatal dependencies. The best example of this pits the computer against the television. A skilled computer user is an active "techno-doer." Unless he or she is particularly creative, this computerist is the post-modern blue-collar worker, the new machinist. This computerist adds value in the classic sense enshrined by Marx, Keynes, and Schumpeter. On the other hand, the passive television viewer, especially one possessing a VCR, confuses us because we imagine he is mastering technology. On the contrary, the technology is mastering the human. The passive techno-user adds no value and may even lose operative abilities and initiative, becoming a "self-sucking vampire." This is not an attack on television in general, which can be a powerful tool for the dissemination of information; rather, it is a warning that technology consumers do not necessarily become technologically capable. *A society must produce techno-doers*, and all technologies, active and passive, must find a healthy integrative level. Otherwise, the force of technology is destructive, if deceptively comforting in its amusement value. Dangerous for segments of our own society, this addictive passivity can be fatal to noncompetitive cultures.

Rich issues also arise out of our attempts to redefine "military technology" in the post-modern age, but there is one respect in which all relevant branches of Westernness, from the military through business, are alike. Increasingly, we take our entire environment with us when we go. From techno-gypsies working their laptops in jungle backwaters to the military that fought Desert Storm, we are learning to insulate ourselves as never before from the inefficiencies of the non-West. This is the first, unavoidable step toward an enclavement of our civilization that excludes the noncompetitive.

Resource scarcity will be a direct cause of confrontation, conflict, and war. The struggle to maintain access to critical resources will spark local and regional conflicts that will evolve into the most frequent conventional wars of the next century. Today, the notion of resource wars leads the Westerner to think immediately of oil, but water will be the fundamental need of some states, anti-states, and peoples. We envision a need to preserve rainforests, but expanding populations will increasingly create regional shortages of food--especially when nature turns fickle. We are entering the century of "not enough," and we will bleed for things we previously could buy.

Gross overpopulation will destroy fragile possibilities for progress in much of the non-Western world, and much of this problem is the West's fault. Our well-intentioned introduction of relatively crude concepts of sanitation and disease control, combined with our determination to respond generously to local famines, has allowed populations to explode. Changes in public health so small a Westerner would not notice them can have spectacular effects in underdeveloped societies. For instance, reductions in infant mortality can occur swiftly, but it takes generations for societies to adjust to the value-challenging concept of family planning--and some refuse to adjust. Thus, populations increase geometrically as behavior lags technology. These population increases lead to greater urbanization, as the countryside and traditional structures cannot support the additional surviving offspring and the city appears to offer economic opportunity and a more attractive lifestyle. But few economies outside of the West-plus can create jobs as quickly as they are creating job-seekers. Even rates of economic growth that sound remarkable leave Third World countries with ever-greater unemployed and underemployed masses. The result is an even further breakdown of traditional structures and values. In the end, the only outlet for a lifetime's frustration is violence.

Now and future plagues are the present nightmares of choice on the bestseller lists and movie screens of the United States. The general scenario has a new disease exploding out of its previously isolated lair in the Third World and hopping a flight to Gringoland, where it behaves with the random destructiveness of an inner-city teenager. Certainly, this is a plausible scenario, and one against which we must guard. But the real threat to this planet's future may be just the opposite: disease is one of nature's many corrective mechanisms. *Our battle against disease may prove too successful*, resulting in populations the earth's resources cannot sustain and precipitating literally endless human misery and conflict. While the pandemics of the past were tragic for countless individuals, they were only rarely tragic for societies or cultures--and never for mankind as a whole. Indeed, epidemic disease may have been our dark, unrecognized friend, not only as a population regulator but even as a catalyst for dynamic change. Certainly, there has never been a single disease, not even the oft-cited Black Death, that seriously threatened to wipe out mankind--only

human beings know how to do that.

So what does it all mean? There will be fewer classic wars but more violence. While conventional war will remain the means of last resort to resolve inter-state confrontations, the majority of conflicts will be asymmetrical, with a state or coalition of states only one of the possible participants. The rise of non-state threats is a tremendous problem for Western governments and militaries because we are legally and behaviorally prepared to fight only other legal-basis states--mirror images of ourselves--at a time when state power and substance is declining worldwide.

"Survivalists" in North America have it exactly wrong. While they fear a metastasizing, increasingly intrusive, globalizing state, the world is fracturing, and our own government has less control over the behavior of its citizens than at any time during the 20th century. *The survivalists fear excessive lawfulness, when the problem is exploding lawlessness*--or the inability to enforce existing laws. While our state occasionally falters, foreign states are collapsing, and we face constituencies of the damned, of the hopeless, from whose midst arise warrior classes for whom peace is the least rewarding human condition. As we in the West enter the post-modern age, much of the non-West (starting at the borders of the former Yugoslavia) looks like the Trojan War with machine guns . . . and, perhaps eventually, with nuclear weapons.

What will future conflicts look like? Traditional forms of warfare will remain, with the Middle East and the Asian landmass as their primary cockpit, but these conventional wars will be supplemented with new and hybrid forms of conflict. *Civil wars*--usually distinctly uncivil in their conduct--are a growth industry, as cultures and societies attempt to resolve their threatened, globally incompetent identities. While these civil wars will intermittently threaten Western interests, rule-bound military interventions will not be able to bring them to closure. Today, many human societies are cultural ecosystems striving to regain equilibrium, often through gruesome civil wars. The introduction of powerful foreign elements only further upsets the equilibrium and guarantees exaggerated bloodshed after the intervening power has withdrawn.

Dying states will resort to violence against their own populations in last-gasp efforts to maintain power, spawning expanded *insurgencies*. Elsewhere, state inefficiencies and the lack of ethnic or cultural harmony will spark revolts and terrorism. Massive criminal insurgencies are a new method of challenging the state through violence. In Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle and in the Andean Ridge, druglord insurgencies have moved from defying laws to denying great tracts of territory to the state. In Russia, a confluence between organized crime and government in lucrative spheres constitutes a quiet criminal coup. Nigerian criminality looks to exceed oil income as the primary revenue of the state in the future. In the past, insurgencies were easy to recognize--the rebels marched on the presidential palace. Today, some of the most threatening criminal insurgencies in the non-West will be conducted by officials already *inside* the presidential palace. We cannot respond to such top-down insurgencies under international codes of law designed for a world run by Woodrow Wilsons.

Aftermath instability is already a pernicious problem and will worsen. In the wake of high-level agreements to resolve conflicts, most broken states or territories cannot reabsorb the human detritus left behind by waves of violence. With a previously inadequate infrastructure further degraded by conflict, even individuals who desire to live in peace often cannot find shelter or adequate food, much less employment. For those who have become habituated to violence and its quick rewards, post-conflict societies often have nothing to offer that can wean these warriors back to constructive patterns of behavior. As populations expand and hatreds deepen, we will find that while a swift, determined military intervention may bring a formal end to some conflicts, informal conflict will persist indefinitely, destroying any hopes for local societal healing.

Intercultural struggles, with their unbridled savagery, are the great nightmare of the next century, and a great deal has been written about them, either warning of the "Clash of Civilizations" à la Huntington, or in outraged, well-intentioned responses that assure us that everybody will get along just fine if the West sends money. While we may dread the moral and practical issues intercultural competition poses, this struggle is already upon us, with parties hostile to the West forcing the issue to the extent of their still-limited competencies. If present conflicts evolve toward open warfare, this could be the defining struggle of the next century--as ideological competition was for the 20th century. The question is whether we can manage such conflicts with nonmilitary means, or if they will deepen and spread until they require a general military response. At present, it appears likely that our military will find itself drawn

into intercultural struggles in future decades--if only because it will be impossible to appease challengers bent upon supplanting us, punishing us, or destroying us. If there is a single power the West underestimates, it is the power of collective hatred.

Cataclysm response will continue to demand military participation. Traditional natural disasters, short of world plagues, are ultimately manageable, and do not fatally divert military resources. Manmade cataclysms are another matter. Even peacekeeping is a form of cataclysm response--and a very expensive one. Further, the proliferation and terrible condition of nuclear facilities in much of the northern hemisphere make Chernobyl look like a precedent rather than an anomaly. We also will see a growing cross-fertilization between cataclysm and conflict, with one feeding on or aggravating the other. While past wars often spread famine or plague in their wakes, we may be entering a period of renewed spoils-taking or even wars of annihilation. From Kuwait to Rwanda, the comfortable modern boundaries between manmade and natural disasters already have begun to break down in post-modern confusion.

The strategic military implications are clear--at least in part. But those implications can be more easily discussed than practically addressed. First, we will see an *expeditionary West*, condemned to protect its distant interests. Given our finite resources, we will have to weigh national interests against human interests, not only in asking ourselves whether or not to intervene for humanitarian reasons, but because our national interests may be contrary to non-Western human interests. We are not going to get off easily in the conscience department. We often will have to redefine victory in an era of unwinnable wars and conflicts. Sometimes the dilemma will be whether or not there is an advantage to an intervention that only delays resolution. We may have to recast traditional military roles when faced with criminal insurgencies or foreign corruption so wildly out of control it threatens our national interests. We will face a dangerous temptation to seek purely technological responses to behavioral challenges--especially given the expense of standing forces. Our cultural strong suit is the ability to balance and integrate the technological with the human, and we must continue to stress getting that balance right. We must beware wonder weapons that offer no significant advantage in a changing world.

There are practical military considerations, as well. We will fight men who do not look, think, or act like us, and this can lead to a dangerous dehumanizing of the enemy, just as it will make it more difficult for us to understand him. We will fight in cities, and this brutal, casualty-prone, and dirty kind of combat will negate many of our technological advantages while it strains our physical and moral resources. Technology will continue to pile up new wonders, but we will find that there are sharp limits to what technology can add to our effectiveness in asymmetrical conflicts. The quality of leaders and soldiers will become even more important as we fight in smaller increments, whether on an "empty" post-modern battlefield or in the overcrowded, dysfunctional cities of failing states. We will encounter unprecedented densities of noncombatants stranded in the maelstrom of urban combat. And we will try, whenever possible, to cocoon our forces in "moveable fortresses"--not classic fortresses with physical walls but transferred environments, with electronic, missile, and fire barriers, antiseptic support environments, and impenetrable information structures. This will work best in conventional warfare, but our efficacy in setting the terms of involvement will deteriorate the farther down the scale of organized conflict we must descend. No matter how hard we try to take our world with us, we will still find we sometimes must fight the enemy on his ground, by his rules. This is the hardest form of combat for the United States, because our own rules cripple us and, at worst, kill us.

The new century will bring new weapons, and some of those weapons will bring moral dilemmas. For example, suppose that discoveries in fields as seemingly diverse as evolutionary biology, neurology, complexity studies, advanced sonics, computerization, and communications allowed us to create a "broadcast weapon" that could permanently alter human behavior without causing physical harm. We would immediately face protests from concerned parties to whom it would, paradoxically, be more humane to kill an enemy than to interfere with his or her free will.

Other new weapons will require the military to expand its skill range, and leader-to-led ratios will need to be increased in favor of low-level leaders, due both to those new skills required by technological advances and because of the compartmentalization effect of urban combat and the dispersion of the conventional battlefield. The oldest forms of warfare, such as in-close individual combat, will coexist with over-the-horizon cyberspace attacks. And, again and again, we will face well-intentioned interlocutors who insist that, since the military never did that, they shouldn't be allowed to do it now. An enduring tension between expanding missions and traditional strictures will hamper military operations. We will face repeated situations in which we are asked to send our soldiers into conflicts for which they

have been physically well trained, but in which the rules we impose upon them leave them practically defenseless. We must learn as a country to identify that which we truly need to achieve, and then to assess honestly the necessary means of getting to that achievement. It is the duty of our military leadership to inform that debate.

How will our 21st-century world look? For the successful, it will be an age of nontraditional empires. The United States in particular, and the West in general, currently possesses a cultural and business empire that touches all parts of the globe. It is far more efficient and rewarding than any previous form of empire has been. The Russian Federation is trying to build an empire on the cheap, in a less-benign form, in which regional political, military, economic, and resource hegemony take the place of large armies of occupation, waves of colonization, and expensive local administrations. Traditional colonies have disappeared not because of liberation ideology but because they were ultimately unprofitable and too difficult to manage. The new empire largely manages itself.

As noncompetitive regions decline, wealth enclaves will emerge, primarily in the West-plus. The "colonies" of the future will be controlled economically and "medially," not politically, and will focus on resources and markets. The political and then the military arms of West-plus governments will become involved only when business encounters disadvantageous illegal behaviors or violence--today, the flag follows trade. West-plus governments will police physical and digital "safe corridors" for resource extraction, general trade, and information ranching, but in failed countries and continents, the West-plus will be represented primarily by post-modern traders.

The great dangers that could spark broad conventional wars will be resource competition and cultural confrontations-- or a volatile combination of both, which could arise, for instance, in the Persian Gulf/Caspian Sea macro-region. Worldwide social bifurcation will lead increasingly to a triage approach to diplomacy, aid, and interventions, and a sobered West will prove necessarily selective in its military deployments, concentrating on financial interests and lifestyle-protection.

By the middle of the next century, if not before, the overarching mission of our military will be the preservation of our quality of life.

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