

## **THE FUTURE OF WAR By Sir Lawrence Freedman**

An Expert on Warfare Examines Centuries of Evolving Mayhem

By Gary J. Bass, New York Times Book Review Nov. 18, 2017

When it mattered most, the next war was too awful to imagine. In 1933, the year Adolf Hitler took power in Germany, an influential French author warned what might happen: “A hundred planes each carrying a ton of asphyxiating shells would cover Paris with a gas sheet 20 meters high, all in an hour.” To a French public preoccupied with aerial bombardment and chemical warfare, much of the appeal of appeasing Nazi Germany was that the alternative was unthinkable. To justify selling out Czechoslovakia to Hitler in 1938, Neville Chamberlain played on similar fears among the British, emphasizing how “horrible, fantastic, incredible” it was that a foreign quarrel led to “trying on gas masks here.”

In “The Future of War,” Lawrence Freedman offers a field manual to how past generations of Americans and Britons envisioned their conflicts to come. Again and again, they were blindsided by the conflagrations that upended their societies and wrecked their orderly lives — much as people today would be dumbfounded by an armageddon exploding from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Straits, the Persian Gulf or the Baltics. “History,” he writes, “is made by people who do not know what is going to happen next.”

The oracles usually got it wrong. It’s hard enough to understand wars when you’re in the middle of them, as demonstrated daily in Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen; it’s tougher still to predict what future combat will be like. Freedman — an emeritus professor at King’s College London, one of Britain’s pre-eminent strategic thinkers and a former member of its official Iraq war inquiry — argues that the prognosticators often expect to limit the destructiveness of the next war through a surprise knockout blow. But they tend to overlook what happens if that first salvo doesn’t win a quick victory, underestimating the salience of demographics and economic capacity while overestimating citizens’ willingness to keep on fighting and dying in a prolonged struggle. Bloody stalemates at the front can spark revolutions, mutinies or civil wars at home.

Insightful and opinionated, Freedman charges from the interstate wars of the 19th century to the Cold War to attempts to make sense of civil strife in the 1990s, ending with current fears about clashes with great powers like Russia or China using high-tech weaponry. He expertly covers centuries of evolving mayhem, from brutal European colonial wars to present-day counterterrorism, cyberwar and urban gang violence. Two of the seers who pop up in Freedman’s fascinating pages are Defense Secretary James Mattis, then a Marine Corps general puzzling over how to fight against irregular forces, and Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, now the White House national security adviser, appearing as an acidic skeptic about military technology. Another one is Freedman himself: With no small British coyness, he quotes and praises a major doctrinal speech about military intervention by Tony Blair, burying in an endnote the fact that he helped the prime minister to write it.

Freedman is eclectically curious not merely about the predictions of generals, spooks and nuclear strategists, but also novelists, from Arthur Conan Doyle — who in 1914 wrote a prescient potboiler about German submarines sinking British civilian ships — to a chilling 1958 novel of nuclear annihilation that became the basis for Stanley Kubrick’s film “Dr. Strangelove.” The greatest of these futurist authors was H. G. Wells, an antiwar progressive who in the early years of the 20th century dreamed up a battle

tank and imagined German airships bombing American cities. His famous “War of the Worlds,” about a Martian colonization of England, was a caustic parable denouncing European empires. After recently waging “a war of extermination” on outgunned Tasmanians, Wells wrote, how can we “complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?”

Having spent a lifetime studying wars, Freedman doesn’t expect to see the end of them. Resolutely skeptical, he’s particularly tough on those who believe that war is becoming obsolete, from the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Norman Angell — whose popular book arguing that warfare was economically futile came out a few years before the outbreak of World War I — to the excellent psychologist Steven Pinker today. Sobered by the ferocity of nationalist passions, he’s wary of idealistic efforts to criminalize warfare and supplant power politics with international law. He’s unimpressed by the prominent conventions created at The Hague in 1899 and 1907, which to this day remain a foundational legal limitation on belligerents at war, arguing that their logic “was not to outlaw war but to make it more palatable by smoothing down its rougher edges.” Military necessity will override legal restraints.

Richly exploring American and British futurology, the book has less to say about strategic forecasting elsewhere. Do the Chinese, Indians, Russians and Egyptians stumble into the same mental traps? There’s an important Asian case in point, mentioned only briefly here, that strongly supports Freedman’s warnings against delusions of knockout battles: Japan in World War II. Plotting their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese militarists hoped to win some quick victories and then negotiate peace on more favorable terms. Gen. Hideki Tojo, then the army minister and later prime minister, said, “Occasionally one must conjure up enough courage, close one’s eyes and jump off the platform of the Kiyomizu” — a lofty ancient temple in Kyoto. When, as more prudent Japanese officials had feared, the war degenerated into an unwinnable competition against overwhelming American industrial power, the militaristic leadership kept trying and failing to score one decisive battlefield victory — not at Saipan, nor Luzon, nor Leyte.

Today the allure of a swift victory comes packaged in new military technologies combining information with more accurate targeting from afar, killing enemies without endangering American soldiers. Freedman is unbeguiled by our current tech obsession. While studies of the evolution of warfare have often concentrated on newfangled weaponry like machine guns, nuclear submarines or artificial intelligence, he spurns the “constant temptation to believe that there were technical fixes for what were essentially political problems.” Although he sees tactical advantages to aerial drones — they can hover over a remote target for hours, and they don’t get scared or traumatized if a nearby drone gets blown up — it still takes old-fashioned armies to hold territory and establish order. In Afghanistan and Iraq, American troops have found themselves mired in counterinsurgency campaigns amid the civilian populations, getting killed by low-tech improvised booby traps. At the same time, terrorist groups have also innovated, with Hezbollah modernizing itself into a hybrid force of guerrillas, anti-tank fighters, information specialists and armed drones.

This book makes especially disquieting reading under a president who acts like an overwritten character from those dystopian novels. It’s likely enough that Donald Trump will get into a war, possibly a sizable one, as did Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush before him. A military crisis will pose strategic, cognitive and ethical challenges far beyond the elementary presidential chores Trump has already botched. Doomsday statecraft and battlefield clashes are hellishly difficult to control even for a president, like the elder Bush, who spent decades assiduously preparing for the job. Facing

potentially catastrophic confrontations with China, Russia, North Korea and Iran, Trump doesn't know how much he doesn't know about the unknown unknowns. If you can't stand to imagine him at war, this book shows why the reality could be a lot worse.