The Future Fallacy: A Conversation about the ‘Certainty Principle’

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Abstract

The “future of war” is a persistently present topic of discussion among national security professionals. Last year, the New America Foundation, a think tank, teamed with Arizona State University to create a “Future of War Project.”[i] Another Washington think tank—the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments—describes itself as “specializ[ing] in thinking about the future of warfare.”[ii] Peter Singer of Brookings presented a “TED talk” in 2009 on warrior robots that has garnered nearly 1.2 million online views.[iii] Both the Navy and the Army have small, specially-selected annual cohorts chartered to be novel, independent, and to “think big thoughts” on the long-term future of their respective Services, “unconstrained” by present policy and doctrine.[iv] In early 2015, the Army’s Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth sponsored a writing competition on the “future of war.”[v] The Army’s senior leadership seems to routinely probe the future when faced with a smaller Army and fewer resources than desired, and more threats than are comfortable.[vi] This essay tries an unconventional approach—a Socratic dialogue[vii]—to express a contrarian view. While not dismissing thoughtful, limited attempts to forecast the future as substantively wrong, this essay argues that even the attempt to make those forecasts—especially by those in uniform—may, under certain conditions, be misguided, distracting, and ultimately undermine the military’s credibility. The following dialogue is entirely fictional: what it may lack in realism, it may gain ground in its original take on a persistent problem.

[Scene: Elihu’s Pub & Restaurant, corner of Root Rd. and Mahan Ln., Arlington, Virginia.

Time: Thursday, 20:15]

Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [SA-CJCS]: Hey there, stranger! I know it’s late today, but thanks for sitting down with me, Tom.

Want a beer?

Professional Staff Member, Senate Armed Services Committee [PSM-SASC]: [taking his seat at the bar] Sure, Jane. Thanks. Not a problem—you know we always have time to chat. With the hearing coming up next week, I assumed you’d call.

The Committee is obviously working hard to make sure the “event” [making air quotes with his fingers] goes better than last time. You remember.
SA-CJCS: [sigh] Well, I was a back-bencher, as they say. I can’t—and won’t—take credit for that...event.
I know the General certainly doesn’t want to be put in a position like that again—he was caught between
his role as a confident and advisor to the President and the Senator’s request for a personal opinion about a
subject that was still being batted around inside the Administration.[viii]

Your guys really put him in a tight spot, you knew it, and you kept squeezing.

PSM-SASC: I got it. But understand: Goldwater-Nichols[ix] requires him to respond to Congress with
his candid opinion when asked. …the Committee has a right to know what you all are thinking in the
Building. Besides, your guy has been in a unique position—not really on the Joint Chiefs, not really in the
NSC...he’s just like Maxwell Taylor was in the early 60’s, before Kennedy made him Chairman.[x] And
you all get it wrong as often as you get it right, so Congress has a legitimate interest in…let’s say helping
the process along by injecting a little transparency.[xi]

SA-CJCS: Tom, first, you all inject a lot of things, none of which I’d say aid in “transparency.” Second,
Goldwater-Nichols does not make the Chairman, or even any of the other Service Chiefs, or really any
senior strategic leader an open back door into the President’s head on national security. Especially if
they’re still deliberative. That’s exactly what happened last time. The esteemed Senator harangued our
guy for five minutes on how he was evading the questions and trying to skirt around fully disclosing the
expert military opinion. And it was obvious what the Senator wanted to do: to spot some friction between
the military and the NSC.[xii] portray it as a divide, and pry it open for the Post and the Times.

PSM-SASC: [chuckling] Well that’s a bit unfair! I know what’s in the law, and I know how the
Committee views its role under that law. Despite what you may think, they all have good intentions—just
sometimes, I admit, it’s hard to see the long-range good they’re envisioning, and it tastes and smells a lot
like farce and “I need my sound bite this week”. …Sometimes.

…Sometimes, frankly, you guys deserve it.

SA-CJCS: Look, I don’t want argue. But we both know my guy’s going to be confirmed at the end of
the day unless he seriously steps on it. He’s had good press, the troops downrange love him, he gets along
with everybody in the Building,[xiii] and the President trusts him (if you believe the Secretary’s
memoirs). I’m just here tonight to smooth the way a bit. Is there anything he needs to be wary of? I
don’t need specifics, just don’t blindside us with some obscure reference to an Inspector General
complaint filed by a civilian GS-6 at Redstone Arsenal two years ago.

PSM-SASC: No, no. [Pausing, staring into his now half-empty bottle] I’ll tell you what, though: that
article he wrote a few months ago…you know the one about a terrorist’s dirty bomb and the follow-on
human stampede during the Kumbh Mela festival in India?[xiv]

SA-CJCS: Yeah, yeah...in Foreign Affairs. I thought it was pretty good. I mean, it wasn’t science
fiction, Tom: it was not out of the range of plausible, and it addressed issues of interoperability, regional
engagement, the Pacific Pivot, counter-terrorism. Thought it was pretty comprehensive.

PSM-SASC: …Comments about content aside, why did he write it?

SA-CJCS: [turning in her bar stool to face her friend] …You know why he wrote it. His Service got
seriously screwed during the last round of budget talks, and half the civies in the Pentagon were happy
about it; the intelligentsia of retired lieutenant colonels and lieutenant generals at think tanks in town are
penning monographs about how future war doesn’t need his particular competitive advantages anymore;
and, by the way, he spent the better part of the last five years in one sandbox or another with little to no
consistent and unambiguous political end state for him to use. He’s been beaten, battered, and rejected. I
guess he felt the time was right to express himself...he vetted it, of course. The SecDef told the VP about it before my guy was finished with the draft, and he sent over a copy to the White House the week before it came out online. No one was surprised. This wasn’t a *Rolling Stone* incident.\[^{xy}\]

**PSM-SASC.** I’ll tell you what was surprising. And I say “surprising” because your guy has a lot of credibility, even deference on the Hill—but his essay turned a few heads, to be straight with you.

**SA-CJCS:** [with a droll sarcastic grin] You mean they actually took time read someth---

**PSM-SASC:** --something beside poll numbers? Funny, but yes, they did. Or at least asked me about it.

**SA-CJCS:** So what’s the issue? He sees the writing on the wall and how it isn’t exactly painted with dollar signs for Defense. He’s concerned. He wants the job, and wanted to be sure he could articulate the basis for the arguments he thinks he’ll have to make on the Hill and in the Oval Office after he’s confirmed.

**PSM-SASC:** [nodding] He’s probably going to have to do that a lot sooner than you think. The Committee is likely to bring up the essay.

**SA-CJCS:** Alright, I’ll bite. So what? They disagree with his argument?

**PSM-SASC:** He shouldn’t have tried to predict the future.

**SA-CJCS:** He wasn’t dressed up as Nostradamus, Tom—he was making *educated* guesses and some pretty commonsense recommendations.

**PSM-SASC:** That’s just it, Jane. Guesses. We get it—he’s the four-star subject matter expert with a chest full of medals and combat scars. But you guys take that expert label and stretch it over everything that touches national security like it was pair of yoga pants.

**SA-CJCS:** [with mock indignation] I own a couple of those!

**PSM-SASC:** Seriously—he went, in the minds of some of the members anyway, a bit too far. Remember Colin Powell’s op-eds back in ’92 when he was still the Chairman? He basically applauded his boss, Bush I, and implicitly bashed the proposed foreign policy of Clinton, like a month before the election.\[^{xvii}\]

**SA-CJCS:** Well, it didn’t work, did it? Clinton got elected; we ended up with boots in the Balkans.

**PSM-SASC:** Whether he influenced the electorate or not is not my point. My point is that we again have this very well-regarded four-star general, nominated to be the senior ranking military officer in this country, arguably the most influential military officer in the world, and he’s writing about what he thinks the future of war will be ten…twenty…thirty years down the road? …Are you kidding me? There’s a problem with weather forecasting, and you know it.

Future capabilities—ours or the other guy’s—are not the same as future intentions. There are certain members of the Committee who are starting to raise the “BS” flag—or at least thinking about how that might look if they do confront him on it. Which should give you guys some serious tactical pause next time you want your general or admiral to look like Clausewitz in a three thousand word “thought piece.”

**SA-CJCS:** What is the concern? Why “BS?”

**PSM-SASC:** Alright, look. Here’s what he did. He proposed a set of hypothetical facts, right, set in some dismal dystopian future, constructed on what he asserts are reasonable, foreseeable trends, data points, and conditions that he currently observes. From somebody else’s vantage, though, the question of motivation is important. You only make those kind of predictions, when you’re positioned like the General is,
order to do one of two things. [holding up one finger] First, to justify departing from some status quo or even a proposal you don’t like. Oh, you don’t like the idea of dropping below a 500,000 Active Duty Army? Then suggest the future is sure to return to tank-on-tank maneuver and attrition warfare between nation states fighting over dwindling natural resources or access in the global commons. Say it’s the smallest standing army since before Pearl Harbor. Don’t like the idea of falling behind our near-peer competitors in advanced weapon technology while we spend our money and time fighting dirty little savage wars in the “human domain?” Then focus on trends that suggest those peers are shrinking the US overmatch gap: “Watch out, here they come! Bring me some drones!”

SA-CJCS: Come on, Tom. Aren’t you being a bit over the top? The General does not have an agenda he’s trying to work, other than setting up the Services and Combatant Commands to be in the best possible position to be ready should something warrant their direct or indirect involvement, across a range of entirely plausible “bad days.” Being conservative and aiming to prepare for the worst is kind of what we do.

PSM-SASC: Jane, sometimes being “realistic” doesn’t mean you have to be conservative. Sometimes it just means being a “realist” about what you know, what you don’t know, and why you don’t know it. Not once, just to give you an example from his essay that comes to mind, did he ever caveat that his claims were nothing much more than assumptions. Merely writing something in a declarative sentence does not, usually, turn an assumption into a fact that everybody agrees on.

SA-CJCS: Ha! That was “declarative!” …So now you’re quibbling with his writing style?

PSM-SASC: No. It’s not a stylistic complaint; it’s a substance complaint. Stating that the future will feature a combination of violent non-state actors dominating in ungoverned spaces wielding hybrid strategies and capabilities is an example that’s in his essay. Like him, we all see Boko Haram, AQIM and the Committee certainly sees ISIS. We understand the challenge that the military has if facing off against these guys. We also understand that it is a different fight than COIN, and a different fight than a coalition of the willing to oust a dictator, and definitely different than responding to a humanitarian or environmental crisis. But saying that these threats “represent” the future operational and strategic environment, and therefore our military strength should be directed at figuring out how to fight them convincingly and with some finality is hyperbole. How does he know? How can he even suppose what other countries might do—think “self-help”—if we don’t step in?

His argument is premised on buttery assumptions like (and I’m paraphrasing) that the more we know and understand, on the ground, the better we can get ahead of an escalating conflict in Phase 0 or Phase 1. The Army’s Regionally Aligned Forces idea is built on that “engagement” narrative, and it hasn’t been entirely evidenced by the record, you might say.

We’ve been in Europe for how long? Did we see Russia’s moves in Ukraine coming? How long we’re we in Iraq? Did we get ahead of ISIS? Or did we create the conditions for it? I don’t know the answer, but your General has to appreciate that his vision of the future, in all its bloody and uncertain glory, is pretty darn speculative. And oh by the way, it also seems to ignore that whole “war is a continuation of politics with the addition of other means” gospel that every colonel I know quotes at me, like I’m not familiar with Clausewitz. It’s like they think politics will trigger the military tool-of-choice, but then all politics stops whilst the armies engage. What they don’t understand is that politics is also like the crock pot that conflict slowly simmers in… Politics and policy shape how we look at the world and view our place in the community of nations.

When was the last time the President’s National Security Strategy was actually read and dissected by the uniformed guys? To them, it’s merely a reference cited in other sources, like the NMS and doctrine.
Everything written and published coming out of the services is going to be “nested” within the overall NSS, but that usually just means getting the same terms on the page, in roughly the same order, and written for a slightly different audience. But doctrine is like bedrock—it hardly ever moves, and when it does move, it does so at the margins. National policy—I mean at the Oval Office and a couple of places on Hill—is supposed to be flexible and wayward and unstable and inconsistent. It’s more like the loose soil and gravel on top of sediment. It is supposed to respond to the winds of public opinion, even if its uninformed, and it is has a lot of external audiences out there to influence. If the NSS can change every so often—even within a single Administration—why are you military guys always so shocked and upset that politics is unpredictable?

SA-CJCS: The unpredictability is upsetting because—and you’re right—doctrine is hard to move around. We live and breathe doctrine[xxxii] because it not only helps us create useful heuristics and makes planning for uncertainty easier to swallow, but it helps us stop what seems like utter entropy…the spreading disorder and chaos. …it’s about establishing coherence[xxxiii]—don’t laugh at me! …Besides, did you ever stop to consider how much of what we say in the press is theater, aimed at each other?

PSM-SASC: Fair enough. You’ve been up there, you’ve seen the members in action. Everything is theater. But that doesn’t make it senseless. The other reason why someone like the General would want to write that sort of essay is because he doesn’t actually want change—“the status quo norm is just fine, thank you very much, and my best military advice to you is to not try to fix what isn’t broken.” Take females in combat jobs, or even as Rangers, or ending Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.

One easy way to avoid uncomfortable new directions is to argue that the nothing currently justifies the change; another is to say that making the change would dismantle unit cohesion and esprit de corps, and all that slippery slope jazz. None of which, by the way, has the military ever claimed with convincing evidence to back it up. Those arguments are premised on me, the audience, believing that you are the expert in such matters and that I’m better off following your advice, lest we put national security at risk. [xxxiv] Scare tactics, dressed up as conservative realism. Part of the job of Congress is to act as backseat driver. Not all of your norms and SOPs are grounded in reality, and sometimes we need to point it out.

SA-CJCS: Wait a sec, are you saying that the Service Chiefs or Commanders are not in the best possible position to know what would happen to the institution or their units if certain fundamental changes are imposed from the outside? They may not have visibility down to a squad’s barracks, but there is a reason why we don’t promote and select our leaders from the outside. They have to be grown from lieutenant on up, and with that comes experiential learning and a feel for how a unit behaves, its networks, its motivations, and its constraints—just like your Committee Chairs…you don’t get that without seniority and experience and respect, all three of which are related.

PSM-SASC: True. I agree with you: your generals and admirals have the experience to give them their bona fides, credentials. And certainly I can understand how a commander would have a tough time making a go of it with a division if he’d never been a brigade or battalion commander. So the credentialing is important internally within the Services. But that isn’t necessarily the same thing as credibility. And without credibility, there is no trust. And without trust, well…you get my drift. They certainly are “better positioned” (to use your words) to “know” how the ship sails, the tanks fires, the plane flies, and the troops think. But they’re also conditioned—you can’t argue here—by the institution they grew up in and sacrificed for. Maybe they’re not short-sighted, ill-intentioned, or “institutionalized,” but they sure are biased—or at least it looks like that when you hear multiple voices from the same organization or Service saying or doing the same things as if were a cultural personality trait.[xxxv]

I’m not saying anything new here, Jane. I mean, consider the 1920s: Coolidge was pressured by the War
and Navy departments into court-martialed Colonel Billy Mitchell for stating the obvious truth: that our leaders were blind and unwilling to consider air power as the next major influence on war. The Navy had its traditional view and the Army had its view and neither one wanted an independent air force that owned that new “domain.” Mitchell was ultimately vindicated, but was trashed by his own team.

SA-CJCS: Mitchell never really had a team. Tom, I’ve read that bit of history too. As I recall, he wasn’t court-martialed for being a prophet—he was court-martialed for being arrogant, undisciplined, and throwing his senior leaders under the bus in a very public way in the newspapers. Besides, you’re arguing against yourself now. You’re proving my point that it takes someone in uniform to point out the current trends that signal big changes are coming and to warn the rest of us that we had better rethink our doctrine or we’ll get steamrolled and it will seem like it came out of nowhere. Mitchell may have been wrong in his “means,” but his “ways” were justified by the “ends” he had in mind, don’t you think?

PSM-SASC: So what were the General’s “ends,” then?

SA-CJCS: Like I said, he’s concerned about the “fiscally constrained environment” disabling our ability to respond effectively to future ambiguity, instability, and uncertain degrees of conflict. We don’t have a good understanding of why these threats grow, sustain themselves, and are able to fluster us with limited technical capacity, limited numbers, and a raging desire to hate anything that doesn’t reflect their vision of paradise on earth. He’s concerned, like every senior officer before him, that the politics will get in the way of a clear-sighted strategy, and that we’ll get caught unprepared. This RAF-thing the army wants to do—it may have some kinks to work out, but ultimately it is about eliminating Clausewitz’s friction and chance to the maximum extent possible…not through technology alone, but serious and substantial investment in time and presence. If our partnering abroad leads to collaboration, it increases our influence, and demonstrates our resolve and commitment, and we can exercise some better degree of control.

PSM-SASC: There’s your assumption again. You’re trying to support an argument with a statement whose truth is taken as accepted without further evidence. You said partnering increases our influence and demonstrates our resolve, and therefore gives us a stronger, steadier hand on the reigns. You’re assuming that those positives (like demonstrated commitment) will translate into a positive outcome we want (that is, control: a reduction in friction and chance). It also assumes we know where we’re going—just because we have a map doesn’t mean we have a destination. We collaborated with the Saudis in 1990 and look what it did to bin Laden. And who exactly is “partnering abroad,” Jane? The S-3 of a battalion for three weeks in West Africa, before the battalion minus shows up for three months of “mil to mil engagement”? For ninety-five percent of those soldiers, it will be the one and only time they deploy there. That’s not making a strategic mark or institutionalizing the knowledge they learn or the relationships they make.

SA-CJCS: Okay, I’m familiar with the current drawbacks in implementation, but the Army is still trying to figure what the best practice looks like. Regardless of organizational design and the TTPs, I think, ultimately, RAF is about something much larger: discriminating judgment (what to think and why), discriminating action (what to do or not to do), and discriminating lethality (what to destroy and what to build) at any and every scale of military force, across the Range of Military Operations. I grant you it’s not exactly the Special Forces model yet, but it looks a lot better than where we were in February 2003.

PSM-SASC: So it’s ambiguity and uncertainty that are bugging him the most, then?

SA-CJCS: Exactly. He was doing what every leader ought to do: first, understand the conditions you’re walking into. “Recon the future.” Know where you want to go, spot the ambush on the way, map your route through the terrain, and figure out what you need to bring with you to get there safely.
PSM-SASC: [smiling] A fine metaphor, my friend. Let me buy you another beer.

SA-CJCS: Thanks.

PSM-SASC: Ambiguity and uncertainty. But I can’t help but thinking: maybe all this is much more straightforward. I mean, who was the Greek who said—

SA-CJCS: Thucydides. “Fear, honor, interest.” Why nations go to war.

PSM-SASC: Right, and you’ve got one of your own three-stars writing op-eds and articles talking, quite persuasively, about how the nature of war has never really changed and won’t change: it’s uncertain, it’s political, and it’s human. That for all the talk of “revolutions in military affairs” in the 1990s, especially after Gulf War 1, it wasn’t a stealth bomber with precision-guided munitions that could ever hope to stabilize post-war Iraq in the 2000s. The Air Force or SOF may have been able to screw with the Taliban, initially, but what about ten years after that? Turns out you all were right about “network-centric operations”—just not that kind of network. We all know drones controlled out of Nevada, and squadrons out of Bragg, aren’t going to affect much in the human domain except a whole lot of broken things that somebody has to rebuild. That “somebody” is usually us. And those are political choices with political implications. Beyond that, making forecasts about what will happen in some hot spot over the long term, based on what see right now, is just wrong-headed and easily disproven. …And we keep doing it.

SA-CJCS: So, you said solving this was simple?

PSM-SASC: Not simple, no. The solutions are never simple. The simple thing is what your guy could have said, but didn’t. He could have written that, from his perspective, after x number of years wearing the uniform, deploying to such and such, and having been educated by so and so at this school and that, his job regarding the “future character of war” is expectation-management. Instead of donning his prophet’s hat, he should have said that every actor, with any bit of influence and power, has some animating ambition in life. Sometimes it is simply to increase his influence and power. Sometimes it is moral outrage that we simply cannot appreciate, let alone persuade them to “keep calm and carry on;” sometimes its sheer survival instinct, or retribution. Sometimes his animating ambitions put him at cross-purposes with our own. Sometimes, there is no negotiation, no reasoning to be done. That actor’s value system drives his motivation, his intent.

If he has the right resources, and the opportunity to use them presents itself, then you have the triffecta: means, motive, and opportunity. There will always be enemies of the state, lurking and building and planning, waiting for those three elements to align. It’s not always going to be an army crossing a border with tanks, or shelling a city. …But, sometimes, it will be. It’s not always going to be a mosque that gets blown up, or a kidnapped civilian teenager that incites the masses to hysterical war fervor. (There’s your Clausewitz again.) But sometimes it will be.

What I’m saying is, I think, is that you can look at the pace of communication and the ease by which we can talk to each other across the globe, and say, “Wow! It’s been accelerating, and it’s going to keep going that way—faster and faster.” And you can plan accordingly to develop sophisticated cyber tools to get ahead of message or to shape it to our will, to take down centers of gravity with finesse and a key stroke without ever putting boots on the ground. Or if you do put them on the ground, they’re of the commando/Delta/SEAL/Ranger variety because of the speed by which you can get them on station and “mission complete.”

Or, you could say something like: “the velocity of information is an interesting and impactful cultural
phenomenon. Does it mean that the Internet is the harbinger of those evil means, motives, and opportunities? Does it mean that SOF units should be the dominant tool-of-choice for future combat operations? Does it mean a revolution in military affairs, as Andy Krepinevich defines it, is afoot?[li] I don’t know, and neither do you.”

You could assume that having regionally-aligned forces with persistent presence in some corner of the world will give you better insight into the area, more warning if things sour, more opportunity to influence or exert pressure, faster response times, and greater ability to prevent war or to win one.[lii] Or, as the general could have written, it might just mean we anger a whole lot more people with these “extended reconnaissance operations”[liii] and end up hampering, not extending, our political, social, and diplomatic reach. We win in the short term, lose in the long term. There is simply too much complexity out there to allow for blanket assertions of strategy that are nothing but best-case assumptions based on present-sense impressions…what is happening right now need not describe even the near future, let alone the far future. Why couldn’t he have accepted that as a premise with as much validity as any other he asserted?

SA-CJCS: Where are you taking me with this, Tom? It seems to me that what you’re saying is that the military can’t ever make an educated guess about how conflict, how war-fighting, is going to look. That seems awfully cynical, and not really all that true. There isn’t really a war-fighting “uncertainty principle.” Didn’t Clausewitz say that we can “forecast” tomorrow’s animating will of the enemy based on what it is today?[liv] Isn’t that even more true today than it was in the 1820s? Shinseki was right when told the Senate that occupying Iraq would likely take hundreds of thousands of troops.[lv] The politicos just vilified him, lampooned him.[lvi] Even Patton wrote on article on tank warfare right after World War I, in which he sarcastically admitted to being heretical for having the gall, as a serving officer, to discuss the potential future of a war-fighting capability that was against the party line.[lvi] Patton turned out be right too. We often get the specifics wrong, but the big trends are not hard to see.[lvii] If we don’t say “wait a minute, you need to really think hard about not funding this program because of reasons A, B, and C,” then we’re not doing our job as advisors and experts.

Did you read General Bolger’s mea culpa?[lvi] He admitted that he and his fellow flag officers deserved a lot of blame for Iraq and Afghanistan for failing to question their assumptions and believe that “more time” was all that was needed to get those countries to a place we could comfortably leave.[lx] PSM-SASC: So if they had spoken up, or done so more forcefully, do you think the politicians would have bowed their heads and said, “You’re right, we’re not prepared for this just yet. Let’s go back and study modern Middle Eastern history for a few years so that we can understand our enemies?” What if the politicians had ignored them…to whom would the generals have complained? Would they have all retired and then written scathing op-eds?[lx] Would they have testified before Congress?[lxii] Or would they have executed anyway, knowing the mission was doomed and their soldiers would die for it?

Jane, I get it: your next boss is thinking about a lot more right now than a paper he wrote. I’m sure he expects the Committee to hit him hard with questions on health of the force, sex assault victims, and that new tank slash transport slash scout vehicle Scylla I saw being touted as the next big thing at the AUSA conference.[lxiii] But he needs to be cautious about his predictions, even if he thinks of himself as the smartest dude in the room on the subject of future war. It’s all too easy to debate him, to retort that he’s projecting his present anxieties onto the future.[lxiv]

SA-CJCS: Of course he’s “projecting!” How else can he drive the military, or even just his Service, to think long-term about what they’re doing? [sighing] I’m sorry I raised my voice, Tom.

…Let’s say he goes quiet, doesn’t speak up and doesn’t try to articulate that we’ll likely get bogged down, with uncertain or inconsistent coalition support, in some underdeveloped megacity fighting alongside
undertrained and undisciplined paramilitaries against ideologically-committed insurgents for long stretches…that the way in which we ended ops in Iraq and Afghanistan—that’s going to be the norm, not a definitive peace conference plus parade. That the average Joe on the ground will have to be culturally-sensitive, language-adept, and proficient with a UAV. But if the General doesn’t say these things, repeatedly, in all kinds of forums and to all kinds of audiences, how can he push, prod, or ram the military into preparing for the inevitable?

PSM-SASC: I’m not suggesting that he’s even wrong in his prediction, Jane. I’m also not suggesting that he shouldn’t talk about it. But what I am suggesting is that he must, must, must caveat his predictions. You all seem to act like there is some “certainty principle”—that, if you can just know a little bit more, you’ll be able to act first, fastest, and with proper amounts of force. You’ll somehow be able to accurately measure and quantify as many variables as you want without impacting any of them in the process. That notion is as naïve in the so-called human domain as it is in physics.

First, in my humble opinion, he should probably steer clear of definitive declarations, like saying certain undesirable conditions are “inevitable.” Just because cities are getting larger and we’ve found ourselves fighting inside them recently doesn’t make urban operations in a megacity a foregone conclusion, or even a remote possibility. Second, and related, he should readily and repeatedly acknowledge where he’s making assumptions and predictions based on what he defines as patterns that will extend into the future. Third, he should be clear about how he has come to believe such-and-such actually is a “pattern” and why—based on his experience—he thinks it is worth worrying about. Fourth—am I at number four?—he needs to understand his audience, and tailor what he’s saying to that audience. He shouldn’t have a problem with that. He doesn’t address a graduating class of cadets the same why he addresses a veteran’s group or the one or two-stars that seek out his counsel, or Congress. And even in Congress, not all are created equal; they need differentiated details in order judge something or fund something they know little about. Every audience will have its own distinct depth of knowledge, its own preconceptions, its own biases, and its own experts, and its own degree of deference to your expert.

I think it’s important, and a good thing too, that your guy vetted the essay first with OSD and the White House…it shows that he’s not detached from his “principal”—that as an “agent” he can be trusted to be candid and forthcoming, but within bounds established by his civilian superiors.

SA-CJCS: I thought you were upset about the article…now you’re saying it was the right thing to do? Have I had too much of this fine local micro-brew you’re paying for?

PSM-SASC: Funny girl. No. I personally welcomed the outside-the-box pre-mortem he wrote. I liked the creativity and that he found the time to write it himself. …He did write it himself, yes?

SA-CJCS: [shaking her head while grinning] You’ve heard him brief before; you’ve seen him lecture at CNAS; what in the world makes you think he’d let anyone else’s words be attributed to him?

PSM-SASC: …Thought so. [motions for bartender; orders two shots of bourbon] I guess what I was saying was that he needs to carefully identify what “principal” he’s advising under the circumstances when he writes something like that. Was it the administration? Was it his Service? Was it the Joint Staff or other Chiefs? Was it Congress? Was it the media?

SA-CJCS: Not to speak for the General, but I’d guess he was aiming it all of the above.

PSM-SASC: Okay. Okay, I think I know what I would do—if I were in his shoes.

SA-CJCS: Oh, by all means, share!
PSM-SASC: Look, you said yourself that he’s most concerned with ambiguity and uncertainty; that he feels some compulsion or duty to shape the future readiness of the military; and that he’s “firing for effect” on a large and diverse audience. Right?

SA-CJCS: Sure.

PSM-SASC: Thanks for playing along [smirking]. So, if those three things are true, then—as Herr Clausewitz wrote—everything in war is simple [lxxi] Instead of making predictions and forecasts about what the future of war will look like, such a wide variety of audiences and a broad purpose suggests he would have been better off breaking the idea down into its most basic and fundamental elements—those basics that will never change.

SA-CJCS: And those would be?

PSM-SASC: Well, try to imagine a war…strike that: any scale of armed conflict, at any time, between any set of belligerents….doesn’t matter if they were states, terrorists, or gangs of marauders! Hmm, even better: imagine you were designing a war game completely from scratch—you had no directions, no guidance, no examples. You want to create a dynamic in which multiple agents use various tools they have available to achieve some objective, which may or may not seem aggressive or threatening to another agent and its interests. It strikes me as fairly obvious that any war, at any scale, over any period of time includes some population of belligerents—even in a cyber war, somebody is writing the codes for the software and somebody’s ability to do something downstream is going to be affected.

That’s what scares you so much: the reality that war, from the large to the small, can we waged by those who are never exposed to physical danger or proximity to harm, and would never look like a conventional, traditional combatant.

Then there’s the sub-population of civilians and non-combatants—the bystanders, the refugees, the innocent or ambivalent on-lookers.

That leads me to think of audiences again. Somebody, somewhere, is watching what you do and how you do it—whether it’s an ally in support, or an undecided party waiting to see who is worth supporting. They’re the spectators. Some have an interest in what you do, some think they do not. The media too, obviously, which could enable or disable your local tactics or long-term security by how they report, what they report, and the impression they leave on others. You’ll laugh at me, but I liken it to the Tonight Show: you have the host and the guests bantering back and forth, you have a live audience, and at home watching on television; you have the mainstream media reporting on any lively or unexpected incident during the show; you have the not-so-mainstream media posting, tweeting, and sharing clips of the show; you have the crew manning the teleprompters, cue cards, stage props, wardrobe and make-up, and cameras; you have the network executives and corporations watching the ratings. Every single person in those various types of audiences have a role and potential impact on the show—either directly and immediately (say, a wrong cue card, a bad joke, no laughing) or indirectly (pulling an advertisement, hiring a new host, inviting new guests, airing at a different time).

And there’s got to be some form of an adversary…of course, antagonists come in many flavors and degrees, so I can’t say that it will always be a clean-cut “us versus them” situation.

Clearly, the conflict happens somewhere…a geographic place is going to be impacted, even if it the fight isn’t over territory per se. It might be contiguous and local, or widespread. Even some of your generals weigh in and say geography is affected by climate change, so even that has some elemental role too.[lxxii]

…Some form of weapon will be used. You’re rolling your eyes at me! Again, I’m generalizing here to
illustrate my point about generic conflict at any scale. I suppose I mean broad categorizations of weapons: conventional or unconventional. The means may be highly technological, sophisticated, or simply a cell phone taped to an artillery round on the side of an unpaved canal road. Nothing says that each party has parity, or that each party sticks to one kind or another over the course of the conflict.

Then, there’s going to be some standard or typical practice in how those means are employed—the tactics used—which of course might vary over time and location and might very well be as asymmetrical or unconventional as the means used.

Finally, I think an important piece that is always there is information…I don’t mean just propaganda or psy-ops, but really any and all data about the conflict and its players, what they know about each other, what they think they know about each other, what they want to know, and what they might not ever know. So, I’d sum it all up as a stew of people, locations, adversaries, means, tactics, audiences, and information, stirred by big spoon of uncertainty.

…But [chuckling] I don’t really know! I do know that the General could help untangle some of this thorny problem by giving each of those basic elements some kind of weight…some normative value that is relative, based on context. Any rational decision, I would think, would factor in one or more of those elements in order to do anything resembling the use of force—or even its threat. …Even the art of command is a function of information and applying systems (be they weapons, sensors, or people) to manage info, shape it, or produce it for some effect. That’s where his expert knowledge and experience comes in. He could then describe, given a desired strategic goal set by the politicians, how he would adapt his military to that element and describe how that adaptation would work (or cost) if that strategy or policy or expectation changed…as they’re wont to do given enough time.

[staring down at his empty glass] …I have had entirely too much to drink.

SA-CJCS: You probably have! But as you were talking just then, you mentioned adaptation, and I think that has to mean something much bigger than a platoon on the ground adapting to new tactics.

PSM-SASC: I agree…

SA-CJCS: You mentioned “means, motive, and opportunity” earlier. Maybe that’s how you can judge the relative value or weight of each of those basic, self-evident, elements in context. It doesn’t really allow you to predict what they’ll do next, but I suppose it widens the menu of what they might do, and why. What you’re saying is that all that the military can do is adapt, and do so in a way doesn’t affect the apparent or actual legitimacy of the politics that wields the sword in the first place.

You know all this talk about how the nature of war never changes but the character of war probably does change? How if we don’t understand those changes—who fights, who is victimized by the fighting, the tools used to fight…let’s say, for example, how ISIS swept through north-western Iraq so easily…then we’re stuck playing catch-up, which leaves us at the defensive disadvantage. Or, let’s say, we get ahead of those changes…say, the use of precision-guided munitions during the first Gulf War, or stealth technology, or armed drones…then we’re at the cutting edge and trying to prevent everybody else from catching on to the new rules of the game we just wrote.

But that division between “nature” and “character” is artificial and misleading. It takes one surprising event to convince everybody learned on the subject that yet another “revolution in military affairs” is taking place. But all that has really happened is that some other actor had a different motive, opportunity, and means. Given their motive, and given the opportunity, they used whatever means they had available and the net effect under the circumstances was some snowflake-like aggregation of information, tactics,
people, weaponry, adversaries, and locations—all your “self-evident” components of conflict. That, my friend, is the so-called changing character of a conflict, nothing more…

…Saying that there is something akin to a generic character of war that is nearly universal at a particular time period but also subject to change, and that this change is both subject to diagnosis is like saying the same silly thing about a disease! Can you imagine the Centers for Disease Control saying something like “Folks, no need to be alarmed: we know that this particular strain of flu has begun to mutate and is resistant to all currently available vaccines…but there’s hope: the nature of flu never changes, and we’re hard at work identifying the traits of the particular character of this strain, so we’ll be fine in the end!” The doctors may be able to create a new vaccine, thereby ending a pandemic. But from the perspective of each unique patient, or prospective victim, with their own unique combination of general health, immune system strength, exposure to the virus, access to care, and preventative steps they might take, those blanket descriptions do very little in terms of fair warning, medical advice, or diagnosis. I think you’re saying the same is true of combat at a small scale or war at a larger scale.

PSM-SASC: Yes, I suppose that is what I’m saying. I’m glad I’m not as incoherent tonight as I feel. I think I might be aping off what I read of John Warden—his “five rings”—infrastructure, populations, military, command and control, organics…[lxxv]…I can’t take credit for originality.

SA-CJCS: Well, Warden’s rings were really just classes of potential targets of offensive operations—some more vulnerable than others and each had certain merit or priority as a target.

But what you’re saying is another level of abstraction up, I guess you could say. It isn’t just about knowing your enemy’s vulnerability. It’s about understanding how each of the universal basic elements are networked together—how they relate to one another and how they influence one another over time, based in part on what we do to that system, which in turn should be a function of what we know or want to know about that system.[lxxvi] Reminds me of Sun Tzu: stimulate your enemy to discover its patterns of behavior.[lxxvii]

PSM-SASC: Oh, going Eastern Zen on me now?

SA-CJCS: Adaptation—if it means something more strategic than updating battle drills on the fly—comes in two directions. First, it can be internally-oriented adaptation. You identify your own mistakes (including misinterpreting policy constraints or policy latitude you think you have). You correct those mistakes in order to either (a) regain the status quo ante or (b) to gain an advantage. You also identify own successes. You act in a way that attempts to keep that knowledge or behavior that was successful in order to either (a) sustain the advantage or (b) increase your relative advantage.

But I suppose there is also externally-oriented adaption too. You ID the mistakes of your adversary. You try to exploit that mistake, in order to either (a) regain the status quo ante, or (b) capture an advantage you didn’t already have. You also have to ID your adversary’s successes. You then adapt by neutralizing the effect of that success, or acting to prevent its repetition.

You know when you first mentioned “adapting,” I thought you were saying we should be reactionary. But the more I think about it, adaptation is really reactive and activist. I guess you could say its giant feedback loop, or really two feedback loops.[lxxviii] How you set yourself up to create stable loops, those in which you can readily see and interpret the signals accurately enough to base your adaptations on, is the key.

PSM-SASC: Right. And I think all your General had to do was to explain that it is his job—the job of the senior leaders in the military—to create those crystal-clear feedback loops that give maximum time and maximum space for the policy-makers to think, decide, react, or be proactive. …and it isn’t the military’s
job is to decide when enough time or enough space is there—they don’t get to define “maximum.”

I picture it in my head like a giant box, and the four outer walls of the box are the bounds of legitimacy. The four walls might be *dashed* lines in reality, and they might shrink or expand the area inside the box over time, or unexpectedly, but they mark the known limits on the use of force: the how, where, when, the “with what,” and the all-important “why.” Of course that box is going to dilate over time. But if the military steps *outside* the walls, it violates the sacrosanct rule of civilian policy control: it has become its own political force, not just a pressure group or interest group. But as long as the military stays *inside* the four walls of that legitimizing frame, if you will, then it is responsive and leashed appropriately to the political decision-makers.

From our perspective on the Hill, the military’s job to create and then preserve the political freedom of maneuver and freedom of choice. I know that’s anathema to the Services, who teach their youngsters about being apolitical, staying out of the debates, being objective, so they don’t appear critical or subversive of civilian authority. But I guarantee the senior generals and admirals get it. Knowing how and why the military ways and means mesh with the existing, future, or even possible, “ends” of politicians is not heretical at all—it’s smart leading. Anything that you do, whether it’s a “strategic corporal” on the ground or the Chairman on Sunday morning talk show, that restricts those freedoms is going to look like you’re boxing in your bosses.

SA-CJCS: I don’t disagree with you. …not sure I *agree* with you either. I suppose I could argue that sometimes, sometimes, the politicians need to be boxed in but those most aware of the danger they are placing the nation in. If the military doesn’t cry foul, who will? …But maybe I’ve had too much to drink. Trust me: I’m not speaking for the Chairman right now, or the General who expects that job soon.

PSM-SASC: No worries. And you know I’m not speaking for the Committee. I don’t know exactly what direction they’ll take the General in next week, but I just wanted you to know—*my dear friend*—that the usual praise mixed with posturing will probably touch on the future of war as the General sees it. *Nobody* really wants to see someone like him get lectured by a senator on his core competence. Just don’t let your guy back right into it—his assumptions will make that a lot easier.

SA-CJCS: Well…as always, thank you, Tom. You certainly took advantage of this “opportunity” tonight, and your “motive” was pure… [smiling] Your “means” on the other hand…

PSM-SASC: I know. I talk too much and start get all metaphorical. Blame the bourbon!

SA-CJCS: [standing up] I know you too well to blame the drinks! Besides, that’s why you’ve worked for the Committee for so long.

PSM-SASC: [shaking Jane’s hand, standing up, and laying out a few crumpled dollar bills on the bar] …Did you watch the game last night?

How about that interception? …Couldn’t believe it when I saw the replay…and they replayed it from every angle over and over and over…

SA-CJCS: [nodding and walking Tom out of the bar] It was a great catch. But you were wrong, by the way, earlier. …Clausewitz did say “everything in war is very simple.” But he also said “the simplest thing is difficult.” …And we don’t get the luxury of a replay video in slo-mo.

**End Notes**

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of Staff of the Army’s Strategic Studies Group Fellowship (2013-14), and was the first judge advocate or lawyer selected for this strategy Fellowship. He has previously published in *Small Wars Journal*, *Military Review*, and several peer-reviewed legal journals. Special thanks to Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster for comments on an earlier version. All mistakes are the author’s alone, and the views presented in this essay are his alone, and do not reflect policy or positions of The Judge Advocate General’s Corps or the U.S. Army.


[iv] The Chief of Naval Operations’ Strategic Studies Group, working out of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and the Chief of Staff of the Army’s Strategic Studies Group, working out of Arlington, Virginia. Both organizations are staffed by small, platoon-sized interdisciplinary teams of junior and senior officers and civilians, reporting directly to their Service Chiefs. The author served as a Fellow on the Army’s Strategic Studies Group from 2013-14.


[vii] See, e.g., Rebecca Goldstein, Plato at the Googleplex (2013), at 4-5, 40-41 (suggesting that Plato’s literary use of the dialogue to expose presumptions and false certitudes served artistic and rational philosophical purposes: to “render violence to our sense of ourselves and our world, our sense of ourselves in the world . . . [to be] disorienting”).

[viii] See, e.g., *Nominations of Gen Martin E. Dempsey, USA, for Reappointment to the Grade of General and Reappointment as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and ADM James A. Winnefeld, Jr., USN, for Reappointment to the Grade of Admiral and Reappointment as Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Before the Senate Comm. on the Armed Forces*, 113th Cong. 782-85 (2013) (statement of General Martin E. Dempsey), http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/2013/07/18/nominations.


[x] Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (1993), at 183; compare H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (1997), at 10-17 (describing the former Army Chief of Staff Maxwell Taylor’s role as
the “Military Representative to the President”).


[xiii] Euphemism for the Pentagon.

[xiv] The Kumbh Mela is the world’s largest religious festival. The festival lasts two months and occurs only once every third year, rotating among four Indian cities. It is notable not just for its infrequency, but also for its population. On the outskirts of Allahabad in northern India, where the Maha Kumbh Mela festival occurs only every twelfth year, a megacity of forty-five million faithful Hindu pilgrims temporarily blossoms in a ten square mile patch of earth at the confluence of two heavily polluted rivers. This urbanization springs out of nothing, on ground that just months earlier had been submerged beneath the Monsoon-engorged Ganga and Yamuna rivers. In late autumn, the rivers recede and the floodplains become ground zero for the rapid building of an impermanent civilization. See Laura Spinney, “Karma of the Crowd,” National Geographic (Feb 2014); Romit Guha, “Why We Shouldn’t Be Surprised by the Kumbh Mela Stampede,” The Wall Street Journal (11 Feb 2013), available at http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2013/02/11/why-we-shouldnt-be-surprised-by-the-kumbh-mela-stampede/; see also Tarun Khanna, “Studying India’s Maha Kumbh Mela Festival,” Harvard Business Review Blog Network (25 Jan 2013), available at http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/01/a-closer-look-at-one-of-indias/; as well as the event’s official website: http://kumbhmelaallahabad.gov.in/english/index.html. The reference to a “dirty bomb” is entirely fictional, and refers to the character’s use of the Kumbh Mela festival as the hypothetical ground zero for an international armed conflict.


[xvii] Carl H. Builder, The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis (1989), at 22 (suggesting that a key element of the Army service “personality” is its choice to “measure” itself (i.e., its readiness to fight) in terms of personnel “end strength” of its Active Duty force, rather than number of deployable divisions or tanks).


Andrew J. Bacevich, *Breach of Trust* (2013), at 91-93 (discussing the Army leadership’s propensity, in the early 1990s, to declare that the Persian Gulf War was both a validation of its post-Vietnam War preparation to fight conventional armies [i.e., the Soviets] and a harbinger of things to come in the 21st Century).


Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations V-6, Figure V-3* (Aug. 11, 2011), http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_0.pdf.


Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (1989), at 4, 7-8, 12 (“[t]he institutional self-interests are most evident in peacetime and among the senior officers of the services. It is the ‘fathers’ of the institution who must look after their institution’s well-being, for they have been entrusted with its care”).

David E. Johnson, *Fast Tanks and Heavy Bombers* (2003), at 87-90.


The senior staff officer responsible for plans, training, and operations.

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures.

Regional Alignment of Forces.


Special Operations Forces.

Robert A. Johnson, Predicting Future War, Parameters 44(1) (Spring 2014), 65, 66.


Clausewitz, On War, 89.

Andrew F. Krepinevich, “Cavalry to Computer: The Pattern of Military Revolutions,” The National Interest, No. 37, Fall 1994 (defining them as “the application of new technologies into a significant number of military systems combines with innovative operational concepts and organizational adaptation in a way that fundamentally alters the character and conduct of conflict . . . [m]ilitary revolutions comprise four elements: technological change, systems development, operational innovation, and organizational adaptation. Each of these elements is in itself a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for realizing the large gains in military effectiveness that characterize military revolutions”).


Andrew J. Bacevich, Breach of Trust (2013), at 169 (referring to engagement as “persistent meddling”).

Clausewitz, On War, 78.


Robert A. Johnson, “Predicting Future War,” Parameters 44(1) (Spring 2014), 65, 68.

Ibid, at xv-xvi.


The Association of the United States Army (AUSA) holds an annual meeting and exhibition in Washington, D.C. See http://ausameetings.org/2015annualmeeting/.


Unmanned Aerial Vehicles; also known as Remotely-Piloted Vehicles; also known as “Drones.”


Office of the Secretary of Defense.


See, e.g., General Ray Odierno, “The Force of Tomorrow,” *Foreign Policy.com* (Feb. 4, 2013), http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/02/04/the-force-of-tomorrow/ (highlighting the speed of information access and dissemination, the advent of groups linked by ideology working in “ungoverned spaces” or “failed
states,” and the local influence of regional powers displacing that of global powers); see also Hew Strachan, “The Changing Character of War,” Europaeum Lecture, November 9, 2006, at 10-11, available at http://www.europaeum.org/files/publications/pamphlets/HewStrachan.pdf (proposing five enduring elements, or nature, of “war:” the use or threat of use of force; “contention” between two or more actors; some intensity and duration to the conflict; a public, not private, legitimacy or sanction for the use of force; some aim or goal).


[lxxvi] Michael Handel, Masters of War, at xxiii (“war will remain a dynamic and reciprocal activity in which both sides adapt to successive challenges”).

[lxxvii] Sun Tzu, Art of War, 192-93.


[lxxxi] Clausewitz, On War, 119.

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About the Author

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