

Review - The Future of War

Written by Jack Howarth

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JACK HOWARTH, FEB 29 2020

The Future of War
By Lawrence Freedman
Penguin, 2018

In *The Future of War: A History*, Lawrence Freedman addresses how societies over the last two centuries have tried to predict war's future. He moves through Bismarck's surprise at French tenacity during the Franco-Prussian War, early twentieth-century arguments that the world wars would be won using organised cavalry charges, the unexpected end of the Cold War, and the futurologists of the 1990s who insisted that the USA's next major world power rival would emerge out of Asia – and would be Japan (pp.265-7).

Freedman demonstrates that such predictions tend to share common motivations and usually serve a political purpose, making any prediction 'about the present as much as the future' (p.286). Overall, he concludes, attempts to predict the future have not gone very well – 'virtually without exception, they get it wrong' (p.264). His conclusions are timely: confident predictions abound today about the role of artificial intelligence in future conflicts, the likely parties involved, and which crisis in the Middle East will prelude a race to war. It may serve us well, then, to bear Freedman's work in mind when confronted with these doom-laden forecasts.

Besides serving as a reminder to the present about the fallibility of predicting the future, *The Future of War* is also a valuable contribution to the histories of war and of government planning. Adopting his now-characteristic interdisciplinary approach, Freedman shows an impressive command of literature, from classical myth to H.G. Wells, using these alongside abundant historical case studies. Freedman also engages with the historiography of topics which have been absent from his previous work, such as the logic of civilian targeting in war and Mary Kaldor's definitions of 'New Wars' (Kaldor, 2012).

Later chapters build on these definitions to cite various examples of how the modern world failed to predict, and thus struggled to prepare for, the increasing incidence of intrastate conflict and the developments of insurgency and counterterrorism as methods of warfare. He points out, for instance, how British figures assumed that their experiences of conflict in Bosnia and Northern Ireland would be suitable preparation for entering the Iraq War. In each case, Freedman argues, the 'inherited scripts for future war were inadequate' (p.222).

Present-day predictions

As a former Professor of War Studies and for decades a prominent voice on contemporary conflict, serving as the official historian of the Falklands Campaign and a member of the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War, it comes as no surprise that Freedman weighs in on what he expects to come next, making his own predictions for the future. Freedman explicitly disagrees with Steven Pinker's 'better angels' hypothesis that war is in decline, arguing instead that war has evolved (pp. xi-xiv), using as evidence the substantial growth of civil wars in recent decades. While he acknowledges optimism elsewhere in the literature about the 'long peace' (Gaddis, 1989) and the absence of open great-power conflict since 1945, Freedman clearly believes – with some justification – that war 'has a future' (p.285).

Indeed, even the apparent absence of great-power conflict is, according to Freedman, part of global-scale

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machination to keep conflict 'deliberately below the threshold that would spark a major war', which has the consequence of ensuring today's revived spheres of influence (p.276) remain locked in a so-called 'cool war' (p.285). This is a perspective on the modern world that has the potential to be enormously influential should it be more widely adopted across the literature and by those whose actions may impact upon the balance of power. Especially so as Freedman foresees this 'cool war' continuing, though he is cautious about stating this with certainty – all predictions, he asserts, amount only to 'speculative possibilities' (p.xx).

Predicting the future

As in his acclaimed work *Strategy: A History* (Freedman, 2013), Freedman laments the overconfidence of those who think they can predict the future. He gives one notable example of a research project which attempted to build a predictive model for civil conflicts between 2010 – 2050 (Hegre et al., 2013). The model had to be substantially revised after its first results, published in 2009, failed to predict the Syrian conflict which began in 2011.

Numerous further examples are given of those in power being wrong in their predictions. Neville Chamberlain thought he could avoid war in the 1930s, and appeased Hitler as a result. Almost every Cold War-era prediction was 'rendered obsolete' when the Soviet system abruptly fell (p.108) and this led to the world stage being totally unprepared for the abundance of civil wars and ethnic conflicts which would soon come to 'dominate the agenda' (p.109). One Marine General in 1999, Freedman recounts, spoke before Congress to confidently assert that the "days of armed conflict between-nation states are ending"; twenty-five years later, the number of armed conflicts taking place in the world had risen to forty (p.xiv).

Most of all, Freedman rails against those who persist in believing in the 'classical model of war' (p.7), which returns to Clausewitz's conception of war as 'policy by other means' (Clausewitz et al., 1993) – and which places great strategic emphasis on decisive, knockout blows (p.278). For Freedman, this belief causes states to neglect any real strategy for what might happen should their initial attack fail, causing them to become mired in overly long conflicts with no foreseeable endpoint.

These claims have resonance today: recent works focus heavily on the importance of technological knockout blows. Indeed, one critical rebuttal of *The Future of War*, penned by two representatives of the US Department of Defense, argued that there is 'no disputing the fact that whoever has significantly superior technology will emerge as the victor in a future conflict' (Michael Brown and Pavneet Singh, 2018). Freedman, however, anticipated their critique, stating that it is 'easier to anticipate the hardware than the politics' (p.xviii). He agrees that technologies like artificial intelligence, drones, and automation likely will play a role in future combat (p.xxi), but this only answers the *how* of a future war, and not the *who*, *when*, *where*, or *why*. He points to the Vietnam War, as well as recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, to make clear that technological development dictates not the terms of engagement, the conduct of the war, nor its duration.

In earlier work, Freedman identified 'elemental features' of good strategy: it should not look too far ahead, should be adaptable, and should be based on one's present circumstances rather than one's end goal. Placing too much faith in predicted futures, as he cites research on expert prediction to demonstrate (Tetlock, 2006; Tetlock and Gardner, 2015), can often cause a strategy to fail. These are issues that Freedman has been expounding throughout his career, and they have clear relevance to *The Future of War*. In strategizing for future conflict, policymakers face an immense challenge. The elemental features remain the same, but planners must not only account for future technological developments and what they wish to achieve through their own policy, but also the actions of all the other parties involved – none of which ever remain static.

The predictions of others

Often, works in this field focus solely on the technical challenges of a future war – the roles that autonomous weapons or artificial intelligence may play for instance – and overlook the conclusion reached by Freedman, and of similar research penned by the likes of Robert Johnson and Colin Gray, that 'predicting the future is immensely problematic' (Gray, 2008; Johnson, 2014) and inevitably multi-faceted.

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While the need to prepare is ever-present, Freedman warns that all predictions should be 'treated sceptically' (p.286). Predicting which technologies may be used does not illuminate from where a war may arise or how it may unfold, and the incompleteness of the picture must be borne in mind. There have been some attempts to address this: Håvard Hegre's early work, criticised by Freedman, has evolved into a considered project which aims to produce conflict forecasts '36 months into the future'. Others take less data-centred approaches and claim, on the basis of political analysis, that the United States is on the verge of war with China and Russia through various methods such as cyber warfare and campaigns of espionage.

Freedman, though, might regard such sweeping predictions as 'works of imagination' (p.287), related as much to present politics as they are to the future. One scathing review of an earlier work put it bluntly: '[it is said] that political analysis is as unreliable as weather forecasting. This is an insult to weather forecasters' (Lebow, 2003). Planners will inevitably make efforts to predict what their next move ought to be, but such predictions should always be treated with the wariness that history demonstrates they deserve.

The Future of War is a welcome addition to a growing literature examining how authorities prepare for the future. It underscores the need to look to the past when devising strategy, and to make provisions for developing contingency options should a favoured plan fail. Freedman concludes that more often than not, beliefs about future wars have been false, and that, even when using the soundest methodology for prediction possible, the future will always be 'full of surprises' (p.123).

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About the author:

Jack Howarth is a graduate of the University of Exeter and BPP University in London. He worked in the security and defence industry for several years and is currently a postgraduate at Oxford Brookes University, having been awarded the de Rohan Scholarship to continue his research into contemporary history. Jack can be reached via email.