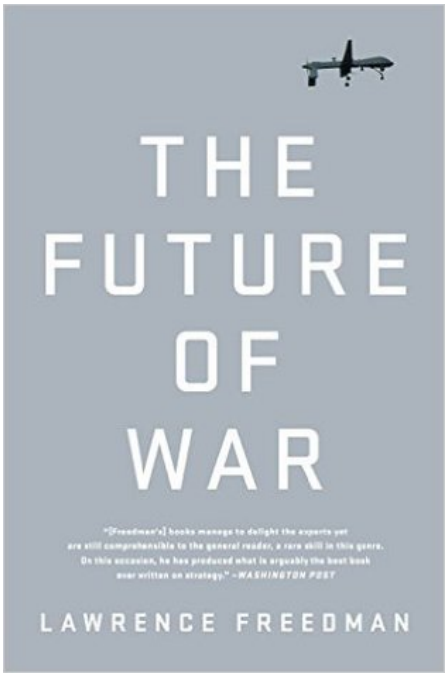

The Future of War: A History

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In 1912, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, wrote a short story about a war fought from underwater submersibles that included the sinking of passenger ships. At the time, it was dismissed by the British generals and admirals of the day not because the idea of submarines was technically unfeasible, but because no one could imagine that any nation would be so depraved as to sink civilian merchant ships. The future of war more often than not surprises us less because of some fantastic technical or engineering dimension but because of some human, political, or moral threshold that we had never imagined wanting to cross.

As Lawrence Freedman shows, the future of war has a past and a present. Ideas of war, strategies for warfare and its practice, and organizing principles of war all have rich and varied origins which have shaped the minds of those who conceive the next war. Freedman shows how war can be studied systematically and empirically to provide a firm foundation for enlightened policy.

The Future of War—which covers civil wars to as yet unknown nuclear conflicts, proxy wars (real) to the Cold War (not), fashionably small wars to the War to End All Wars (it didn't)—is filled with insight and fascinating nuggets of military history and culture from one of the most brilliant military and strategic historians of his generation.

The Future of War: A History Details

Date	:	Published October 10th 2017 by PublicAffairs (first published March 22nd 2016)
ISBN	:	9781610393058
Author	:	Lawrence Freedman
Format	:	Hardcover 400 pages
Genre	:	History, Nonfiction, War, Military Fiction, Military, Military History, Politics

From Reader Review The Future of War: A History for online ebook

Tammam Aloudat says

Whoever remembers history books from school being a dry boring recitation of old events with little thrill and character hasn't had the pleasure of reading good history books. What I mean by good histories is those that are critical, interesting, selective yet comprehensive, and written beautifully to address not only the past but the present and the future.

This is the first book I read of Lawrence Freedman, I have wanted to read his book on Strategy for a while but didn't get to it yet. I am happy I picked this one. The book is beautifully written and well organised to address themes rather than a strict timeline and gives sufficient details and background to be understood and interesting.

The concept is new to me. I picked the book of the shelve first because I thought it was a prediction or an analysis on how wars would progress. It is not that but a history of the idea of future of war going through the many stages of war progression from the chapters about decisive battles to indecisive battles and then total wars all the way to hybrid wars and cyber wars. Freedman uses histories, field manuals, sci-fi novels, and philosophy to explain how people thought wars of the future will be only to tell us about the many times they were mistaken and the rare occasions they were right.

Leroy Rodriguez says

Interesting and thoughtful study on the development of thinking about war. The acedemic thoroughness almost makes you forget that the sacrifice of women, children, and the underclass are the textbooks for this thinking.
I expect the thinking of pre-emptive first strikes and acceptable losses is a way of naming the beast to try and control it but it feels like I’m looking in on feeding time at the demon’s cage.
Fascinating....

Bill Shavce says

Despite the title, this is not a prediction of warfare in the future. Rather, it is a synopsis of how thinkers believed future wars would play out at different points in history. Freedman uses works of fiction, along with other governmental sources, to describe how we envisioned future conflicts given recent war experiences and technological trends. Freedman illustrates that these predictions almost always proved disastrously wrong. Examples include the expectation that, after the Franco-Prussian War, future wars would feature initial decisive battles that would determine clear winners and losers. They failed to envision the static, prolonged fight that we saw with the First World War.

Chris says

The book is a review of the literature on how the future wars were historically predicted to be. I found the result disappointing, as I was left with the impression that the author intended to get it over with as I read through the chapters. I found the approach in the Balkan wars of the 90s superficial and I was surprised to find a couple of outright wrong dates on conflicts other than the major wars.

Bastiaan Huesken says

Most worthwhile.

Ben Babcock says

Not actually my cup of tea, *The Future of War: A History* is a massive data dump and analysis of what we used to think about the future of warfare. Lawrence Freedman has clearly Done the Research, and I have to hand it to him: there's compelling stuff here. Thanks to NetGalley and Public Affairs for the eARC.

I love the premise of this book. It kind of merges my passion for literature and my mild interest in history. It is very easy for us to interpret the actions of people in the past through our hindsight and our own cultural lenses. Freedman reminds us what any good historian tries to remember: people in the past had a very different conception of the world, and as such, their motivations might be hard to unravel if they didn't write them down. To us, the multitudinous causes of World War I and the line connecting it to World War II seem *obvious*. To someone living in 1920 or 1930, not so much. To us, the outcome of the Cold War and its influence around the world is just a matter of fact now—to someone living in 1950 or 1960, with the spectres of Hiroshima and Nagasaki still lingering in recent memory, it's a very different story.

Freedman's survey of the literature is thoughtful, perceptive, detailed, and critical. He intersperses the literature between arguments for an overall thesis—which basically seems to be that, following the end of the Cold War, we've reached a point where it is increasingly difficult to predict the "future" of war, simply because we have yet to settle on a redefinition of the word.

One part of the book that really jumped out at me is where Freedman explains the intense efforts put into statistical analysis of wars. In particular, he describes late-twentieth-century attempts to compile casualty databases. He points out all the assumptions that necessarily went into this work, since it is difficult to define what *war* is, how long it lasts, or what counts as a "death" or "injury" attributable to the war. As such, while these sources of information are invaluable for discussing war and the related politics, they are also flawed and biased. Freedman reminds us that methodology in these situations is so tricky—it's not a matter of getting it right, but of understanding that there is no one *right* way to collect and interpret the data.

I also really enjoyed the first part of *The Future of War*, where Freedman analyzes what people were writing prior to and then following the First World War. I liked the glimpse at war fiction, from people like Wells and others whose names aren't quite as well known today. And it's interesting how Freedman draws connections between fiction and its influence on the population, as well as politicians. Later on, he recapitulates this by recounting President Reagan's reaction to Tom Clancy's first novels.

The last part of the book was less interesting, for a few reasons. By this point, I was getting fatigued. This is a *long* book, and more to the point, it is incredibly dense and detailed and technical. A student of history will find this a useful resource; the casual reader, like myself, might start feeling bogged down. Also, the incredibly globalized nature of warfare in the 1990s, the sheer number of internecine affairs, means that Freedman has to cover a lot of ground in comparably few pages. Like, entire books have and can be written about small parts of each of these conflicts. So it all starts to feel overwhelming, but rushed.

None of this is Freedman's fault in particular. *The Future of War* is quite well-written and informative. It is a little drier and less engaging than I typically want my non-fiction to be, but I can't really hold that against it. I'm just not quite the target audience. History buffs, though, particularly those who want to learn more about how we used to think about war, might have more patience and inclination to really dive deep into this.

Tony Selhorst says

It is in the title what the book is about: what mankind in the past envisioned the next war to be... what methods and wunderweapons would be used.... how the discussion on the next war informed their military and political leaders to invest in their armies.... and what the next war really looked like. The book starts in the near past, around the US Civil War and Franco-Prussian war at the the second halve of the 19th century, and ends with current day new methods (hybrid) and weaponry (cyber). An easy read for everybody interested in current day discussions on the changing nature of warfare.

James Murphy says

You might ask how a book can be about both the future of war and a history of it. Lawrence Freedman, one of today's leading academic thinkers in military affairs and the nature of war, has given us this book explaining how nations of the recent past and today expected to conduct the wars they understood they were going to have to fight. His primary lesson is that it's always different from what's expected, both by the militaries whose mission it is to keep their forces ready as well as by those who only imagine war, like novelists and filmmakers.

Freedman spends considerable time describing how the countries who fought the big wars of the 20th century expected them to be over quickly and therefore were forced to make major adjustments in resources and doctrine when they were drawn out. Many wars during the period he writes about, the past 150 years, might've been avoided if leaders had known they were going to go on so long and drain resources and societies. But he thinks this underlying optimism is a fundamental trait of those who plan war.

Another major topic is the reasons many of the post-WWII conflicts have been relatively small. He explains the rise in the number of civil wars in recent decades, and he writes about how the growth of mega-cities may breed violence--as in Central America today--between competing factions outside the control of the national authority.

The final chapters deal with new doctrines and methods in use today and being readied for the next wars: cyberwar, robots and drones, and doctrines incorporating climate change. The end of the book is a brief

survey of what today's think tanks and academics see as potential flash points in the near future. Freedman is convincing in his argument that we can't begin to really know the future of war without knowing its history.

Joseph Stieb says

A little bit more of a textbook than I was hoping for, but nonetheless an interesting, thorough, and concise look at the future of war and the history of thinking about the future of war. Most of the book is a topic-by-topic rundown of key aspects of post-Cold War international security and warfare. This was a useful section, especially for undergrad type courses, although I didn't learn a ton of new stuff. More compelling were his criticisms of political science's usefulness in understanding modern security issues. Freedman has a great discussion of the COW and other databases, and he shows that basically produce such general outcomes that they aren't much use in predicting or understanding conflict. I always thought you could just predict where conflict is going to by less by correlating and more by, you know, watching other countries' politics and stuff.

His more substantial criticism of political science, and the general idea of predicting the future of war, comes in his first section about thinking about the future of war going back to the 1870s. He argues that strategists, futurists, and even novelists all focused overwhelmingly on technology in their predictions of future war because that's the one thing that can really be projected into the future. Political contexts, alliance, where the conflict will be, the national mood, diplomacy, etc, all these things that have an enormous impact on the conduct of war, are all far less predictable. This is ultimately Freedman's argument for caution in prediction and the value of history, which seeks to take in events in all of their complexity rather than reduce things to the "true" causes by comparing tons and tons of cases.

I'd recommend this book for anyone looking for a relatively brief overview of security issues and military history. I appreciated that Freedman brought in a wide variety of thinkers about the future of war, not just the classic folks like Mahan or Douhet. I'd also recommend this to people teaching modern warfare or security studies type classes who are interested in accessible course readings.

Othón León says

This is the second book from L. Freedman that I have read (being "Strategy" the previous one). As nations are always predicting what the next war will be like, Mr. Freedman, an expert in military strategy, explains how is that this process has evolved throughout the years and he does it in a fascinating way.

He explains both, the British and the American ways of going to war, beginning in the 19th century, when a consensus arose that wars were decided in a decisive battle (the idea of Waterloo or Midway). Then, the Cold War implied that wars between nuclear powers became impossible. Then, after 9/11, it became clear that traditional military methods were out of date. Cyberwar appears and also remote ways of killing (drones).

Mr. Freedman mentions worldwide, real cases. At the end, he reviews the "other" kind of wars, such as the so-called "war on drugs" in places like Mexico and finally, the probable role of China in future conflicts. Great book if you are interested in global affairs, strategy, etc.

John Plowright says

The study of History cannot be justified on the grounds that it teaches ‘lessons’, as the past “is infinitely various, an inexhaustible storehouse of incidents from which we can prove anything or its contrary”. So said Sir Michael Howard in his Inaugural Lecture as Oxford Regius Professor of Modern History and it is to Howard as ‘Teacher, Mentor, Friend’ that Lawrence Freedman dedicates his book ‘The Future of War’. One might, then, expect Freedman to detail how all efforts to predict the nature and course of future conflicts have failed.

The past is certainly littered with plenty of examples of generals assuming that the next war will be like the last one and thus devising strategies or tactics that seem bound to fail. A classic example is the Maginot Line. The French assumed that a Second World War would be like the Great War and accordingly devised a set of fortifications on the Franco-German border which represented a more elaborate version of the Western Front’s trench system, failing to appreciate that changes to warfare (to say nothing of the failure to extend the Line to the Channel) would render it virtually obsolete by 1940.

But hang on a minute – if Maginot represents a failure to conceive the future of war by the French, shouldn’t the German proponents of Blitzkrieg, like Guderian, building on the insights of Basil Liddell Hart and J. F. C. Fuller into the potential of armoured warfare, be credited with correctly piercing the veil of the future?

And isn’t Ivan Bloch an even better example of an accurate prophet of future war? It was Bloch, remember, who in the six volumes of his book ‘La Guerre, published between 1898 and 1900, stated that the lethality of modern firepower would drive men to dig trenches and that warfare would result in stalemate because frontal assaults against entrenchments would prove too costly.

This is, then, the central problem with Freedman’s book. He has no difficulty showing that many military experts and some gifted civilian amateurs (such as Bloch and H. G. Wells) expended considerable energy musing about future war from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (when war became increasingly destructive and changes to technology and weaponry begged the question of how they would be employed militarily). Nor does he have any trouble in detailing how the way in which “people imagined the wars of the future affected the conduct and course of those wars when they finally arrived.” What he does not do, and in the nature of History cannot do, is provide a satisfactory overarching explanation of how a few got the future right but most got it very wrong. Hence the book concludes that, “If there is a lesson from this book it is that while many [future speculations about future wars] will deserve to be taken seriously, they should all be treated sceptically”.

After almost 300 pages, in which there is admittedly much interesting material about imagined futures of past wars and even speculation about the future of war as an institution, one is nevertheless bound to question whether the journey was worth making for such a trite and anti-climatic insight.

Imran Said says

The title of master strategic writer Lawrence Freedman's most latest book is titled 'The Future of War: A History'; itself an interesting premise. Instead of simply writing another prediction on future warfare as many

polemologists have done at some point in their careers, Freedman instead sought to delve into the history of how strategists, pundits, politicians, and scholars have argued future warfare would play out. His main conclusion is that most attempts to rationalize and theorize the character of future warfare were largely unsuccessful, mainly due to one reason. Most claims on future war have been prescriptive rather than predictive, more concerned with persuading those in power and influence about taking certain steps laid down by them to avoid war breaking out in the first place (or in some cases making the first move to war to avoid being caught in a weaker position), rather than a serious attempt to analyze future trends and developments in organized violence for political ends (referencing a certain dead Prussian).

There are two main contentions in Freedman's book. The first is how writing on future war has been obsessed with the idea of the sneak attack or knockout blow. As modern war became more destructive, bloody, consumed a larger amount of state resources and touched every facet of society, the pressure was on to end wars quickly and decisively. During the First World War, the goal was to mobilize your armies and get them into an advantageous position as quickly as possible. However, this pressure to strike put a limited time constraint on generals and politicians on other alternatives to resolving the tensions, meaning the rush to war became almost unstoppable.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the emphasis shifted to both the surprise attack and of the deliberate targeting of civilians. The latter was particularly influenced by the advent of airpower, and how air raids could be used to break the spirit of the enemy populace by inducing misery upon them. Of course, despite the destruction wrought on cities such as London and Stalingrad by the Luftwaffe, the British and Soviets would never buckle. The same could be said about the then enthusiasm on the surprise attack. Freedman notes that both Operation Barbarossa and the Attack on Pearl Harbor, while tactical and operational masterpieces, failed in their strategic ends. Both the Soviets and Americans were caught off guard and initially suffered grievously, yet ultimately both were able to consolidate their forces and steady their morale, ultimately inflicting crushing defeats on their respective opponents.

Despite this, as Freedman points out, Pearl Harbour would remain emblematic of the dangers of the surprise attack, and of lowering one's guard due to complacency (itself born out of both a degenerate society and a naive establishment). Every major development in the realm of warfare would allow one's enemy to negate your strenght with a knockout blow, leaving you helpless and vulnerable.

The advent of nuclear weapons could bring down an entire civilization in a nuclear first strike. The rise of terrorism (particularly international jihadism) saw frightening scenarios about terrorist groups one day getting their hands on nuclear, chemical, or biological device, forgetting the real world technical difficulties this would entail. Cyberwarfare and the targeting of vital state institutions and organs could lead to a 'digital Pearl Harbour', dismissing the strengths of modern cybersecurity and how most online attacks up to date had been more annoying than crippling.

Contemporary hysterics about so-called hybrid warfare and how enemies could use 'Cool War' to gain an edge while keeping action below the threshold of a hot war ignored the fact that hybrid warfare was rarely decisive in itself. Russian attempts to seize Crimea and Eastern Ukraine using a combination of Special Ops, proxy forces, and information warfare failed to resolve the fighting. The West quickly caught on to Russia's tricks, and Moscow's disinformation campaign unravalled as their presented narrative became increasingly fanciful, to the point where almost no one trusted Russian officials. A cursory glance at Russian piecemeal acquisition in Ukraine, as well as Chinese attempts to bolster their maritime territory in the South China Sea, have only bolstered tensions in the region and locked both powers into increasingly irretractable conflicts, thereby if anything raising the likelihood of war.

The second main theme of his book concerns how we have thought of future war in terms of its character and how we study it. Freedman is equally as critical in this regard. He points out that attempts to apply a scientific approach to the study of international relations and conflict has often failed due to flawed methodologies. He points to the difficulties in acquiring accurate data (such as in the dreary business of collecting casualty figures from wars), as well as interpreting and categorizing them. A case in point, he notes that while the so-called Football War between El Salvador and Honduras involved high enough casualties to warrant being labelled a proper war in a project by the University of Michigan, despite its limited geopolitical impact outside of Central America. On the other hand, border clashes between the Soviet Union and Maoist China in the late sixties was not even considered a proper war, rather a 'Militarized Interstate Dispute'. This despite the fact that it clearly had larger consequences for international relations, pushing China closer to the United States as relations deteriorated between Moscow and Beijing. To attempt to apply a scientific understanding to war, to try and look at war through data and statistics, was to wrest wars out of their political and historic contexts.

Freedman also looks into new 'trends' in war; where scholars now analyze war beyond the traditional military and political. He points out that with the end of the Cold War, intrastate conflicts have largely proliferated as many new nation-states struggled to maintain stability in the wake of decolonization. He posits there were next to nothing written about these new civil wars, and that many scholars and pundits were forced to catch up to try and understand these bewildering developments. Efforts were made to try and understand what factors were involved in creating failed states, and whether all armed rebellion could really be blanketed as simply revolutionary in character or uprisings against injustices in society.

Much was written about the role of Western military power in responding to these armed rebellions, whether in the form of peacekeeping operations (which was soon discovered to not be as clean and bloodless as many had hoped), or through direct interventions to enforce direct regime change (which seen from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya were not always great success stories). Near the end of the book, Freedman analyzes attempts to identify where the next great spark for conflict in the future could be, whether it be energy scarcity, food security and climate change, nationalism, and organized crime. In almost all cases, Freedman expertly challenges the hysterics and doomsday scenarios. It almost makes for comforting reading.

The Future of War is ultimately an expertly written book, combining that rare talent of packed with details yet still approachable to the common layman. If Freedman's main argument could be summarized as such, it would be that despite the histrionics and fancy buzzwords; war itself remains at its heart a brutal, bloody, grinding, and very much human affair. One which no amount of high-tech, fancy tech, intellectual fads, and wish-washing is going to change.

Martin Samuels says

The question is often asked whether we can learn anything from history. In this book, Sir Lawrence Freedman, professore of war studies at King's College London, takes this a stage further, asking what we can learn from how people have tried to learn from history, and in particular exploring how people from the late 19th century sought to extrapolate the nature of future wars from the conflicts of the past.

The book is divided into three parts. The first considers the different ways in which the future of war between the great powers was perceived, moving from the tensions preceeding the First World War, through the Second World War and into the nuclear age. What particularly comes out here is a concentration on warfare between sovereign states and a strong tendency to focus on the need for conflicts to start with a

surprise blow that would knock the opponent out of the war quickly. Freedman draws the important point that, although the German Schlieffen Plan, Operation Barbarossa, and the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbour were all major surprises, which became the centre of military analysts' attention for decades afterwards, none succeeded in defeating their enemy and all led to precisely the long-drawn-out war that the attackers had hoped to avoid, ending in their defeat.

The second part looks at developments following the conclusion of the Cold War, when hopes that the seeming end of great power rivalry might also see an end to war were dashed by a growing number of civil wars and the advent of the 'war on terror'. Freedman here draws attention to the paradox of Western armies achieving overwhelming preponderance in conventional warfare, in part due to their technological superiority, yet finding that the wars they actually fought tended to be low intensity conflicts, where the greatest threat was the irregular armed with an AK-47 or a home-made booby-trap.

Finally, the book concludes with a review of a number of features that may define warfare in the coming decades, especially the mixing of conventional warfare with other forms of conflict, the importance of information technology as a means of non-violent attack, robots as a replacement for soldiers, and trends and pressures that might (or might not) lead to warfare.

Overall, this is a very readable book, with the chapters short, focused and engaging. Two things stood out for me. First, the complexity of society is such that it is impossible to predict the future. There are simply too many variables. The study of history may therefore give contemporary strategists and soldiers general pointers as to the relative importance of factors and ways of thinking about issues, but it cannot give them an answer, or even a formula for reaching one. Second, there must be questions over whether the central Western view of warfare, as being centred on decisive battles, remains a realistic approach to modern realities (if, indeed, it ever was). Highly recommended.

Adam says

This is the book that I wish I had read while taking international relations for my undergraduate degree. In "The Future of War," Freedman sets out to trace the predictions about the future of war made by statesmen, scholars, and intellectuals from the late-nineteenth century through the modern era to today.

Freedman covers a wide range of theorists and futurists. Giving as much reflection to prophetic value (or lack thereof) of 'invasion fiction' and science fictions writers like H. G. Wells as he does to strategists and statesmen like Herman Kahn and Henry Kissinger, Freedman's book is as comprehensive and concise a detailing of European and American thought on war as I have ever read. I have read literature reviews of individual subjects like international security and international relations before, and I've always been particularly interested in how fiction writing can be used as an analytical tool to understand conflict, but never before have I seen someone manages to give as thorough a picture and history of the interdisciplinary study of war.

In particular, I appreciate his critical attention to both the heavy theoretical realist approaches to international relations personified by Kenneth Waltz and the more modern statistically oriented approach of scholars who use data sets like those maintained by the Correlates of War (COW) project. Freedman's advocacy for a more context-based and historical approach to the study of conflict is well taken and convincing. I always felt awkwardly more comfortable the methodologies prescribed by history and anthropology when I was an undergraduate studying international relations than I did with the large data sets and sophisticated

quantitative techniques of modern political science, the overly broad and reductivist nature of which always put me ill at ease. After reading "The Future of War" I feel less guilty about not having bought into the statistics craze in my major.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in approaching the subject of conflict in a more systematic way. If you are new to the field, then "The Future of War" will offer you the roadmap that I wish I had 10 years ago. If you are like me and have been reading books about international conflict for a while, then Freedman's book will help you put your thoughts in context and fill in interdisciplinary blindspots. Either way, this book is well worth the read.

Hall's Bookshop says

In many ways an excellent book, blending figures and evidence with contemporary literature to achieve a really comprehensive view of theories of war and peace over the last hundred and fifty years. I also liked the structure, which blended themes with a broad chronological progression - the best way to write history, but difficult to manage successfully. The style, on the other hand, soon became extremely dry and formulaic, making some sections read a little like coursework submissions. I think the book may have been written quite quickly - there is really no craft to it at all, and the final chapter ends abruptly with just a couple of short paragraphs as a conclusion. With a proper concluding chapter (which a book like this really deserves and needs), as well as more care taken to write it well, this could have been a really fantastic read, as well as an important one.

JM 09/07/18
