

How We Lost the High-Tech War of 2020:

A Warning from the Future

By Charles J. Dunlap, Jr.

Editors Note: Security is much more than not losing, but it is predicated on not losing. Our focus with the writing competition can reasonably be seen as addressing a subset of a broader concept of security. This entry didn't answer directly address that subset question, but it surely framed the challenge and presumptions in which the question exists. We were happy to receive it and to publish it here. Our thanks to the author, Major General Charlie Dunlap, and to other like-minded thinkers and contributors to Small Wars Journal such as Colonel Gian Gentile, for challenging group think and forcing intellectual rigor.

The following is a transcript of a secret address delivered by the Great Leader to the Supreme War Council late in the year 2020.

IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE AND THE PARTY, I welcome my comrades to this celebration of our great victory over our most arrogant enemy, America. A little over ten years ago they crowded about how their entire armed forces were "adapting" to wage what was then known as "irregular warfare". They were guilty, as so many before them were, of preparing to fight the last war instead of the next. We observed their error and exploited it into the victory we honor today.

The core of their miscalculation was the belief that conventional war against powerful nation states - what they called "peer competitors" - was passé.

With great fanfare, the Americans issued a new manual for counterinsurgency, and many of their national security elites embraced it as if it were a panacea for all possible conflicts. To our delight, they restructured their entire military to conduct such low-tech operations. We had no intent to fight that kind of war, and did not do so when the time came.

Popular American thinking at that time expressed a grand vision that irregular wars, like the insurgencies they fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, would be the primary challenge for U.S. forces for the future.

Of course, no one disputed that such conflicts would persist in the 21st century. Still, why American policymakers thought that there was an appetite among their electorate to put massive numbers of U.S. troops on the ground in another "Iraq" or "Afghanistan-like" situation is a mystery to us, but that is what they instructed their planners to concentrate upon.

They ignored such evidence as the fact that significant majorities of their people still concluded it was a mistake to have waged war in Iraq and Afghanistan, despite such military success as they enjoyed. The American people - and their politicians - were rightly wary of another such operation. Their own experts calculated the material cost well into the trillions of dollars and the human cost played out on their television screens nightly.

When some of their generals tried to warn that their military needed to be prepared to confront adversaries like ourselves, their own Secretary of Defense mocked them as suffering from "Next-War-it is."

We cheered when it was mandated that in order to "remain viable" any major arms program "will have to show some utility and relevance" to irregular operations. The implementation of this meant that the weapons we feared the most were never built in the numbers that might have deterred us. It seems that their strategists never fully distinguished between the serious concerns irregular conflicts raised and the truly existential threats presented by 'regular' war.

We also celebrated when their Department of Defense announced that "nation building" and "stability" operations were being put on equal footing with warfighting. Such a diffusion of focus eroded the fighting ability of their once mighty military machine. No longer was it exclusively centered upon what their Supreme Court once said was their purpose, that is, to "fight wars or prepare to fight them should the occasion arise."

This obsession with using the military for nation building and stability operations was strange to us. Americans apparently never really understood it was a mistake to make their military, the most authoritarian, undemocratic, and socialis-

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tic element of their society, the "face" of their country to peoples struggling in failed or failing states.

Yes, the U.S. military did succeed in stabilizing some of these countries, but they imprinted the people with the belief that only the armed forces could get things done in a society.

In truth, the power of American society was a product of its civilian institutions, not its military. It was the free enterprise system, not a military structure, which produced the freedom and economic vitality that the U.S. enjoyed, and that gave its military its supremacy. Yet with the bulk of the U.S. military devoting itself to nation-building, the nations they "built" around the world established themselves with uniformed people, not civilians, as the movers and shakers in their society – exactly like their American military mentors.

It is no surprise that capable and secure civilian-led governments never permanently emerged from these efforts. Of course, we were glad to deal with military strongmen in these newly "built" governments. They pragmatically accepted – no, welcomed – our political ideology that recognized that Party leaders knew what was better for the People than did the people themselves as true democracies preached.

In devising their defense architecture in the post-Iraq/Afghanistan era, the Americans also never really understood that although insurgencies could inflict great harm to their interests, they could never present a genuine threat to the existence of the United States as superpower. Only a nation such as ourselves, capable of fielding not just one or a few nuclear weapons as an insurgency or terrorist organization might, but hundreds and even thousands of them, could truly threaten America's very survival.

Some Americans believed that conflict with us was implausible because of the economic links between our countries. To them, war was "illogical" and, therefore, wholly improbable. Apparently, they were unfamiliar with the British economist Norman Angell who, a few years before the outbreak of the First World War, wrote a popular book that promoted just such a theory. Of course, he was profoundly wrong, as were the Americans of 2010 who thought similarly.

Actually, the logic of economics is more a cause of war than a promoter of peace. Our case is illustrative. In the early part of the 21st century, we enjoyed tremendous economic progress because we were able to exploit the wage advantage we obtained by turning the proletariat into ex-

tremely low-cost factory workers. Because we offered cheap labor, manufacturing of every type flowed into our country. This produced a meteoric rise in exports, and our nation was awash in profits. Our international prestige sky-rocketed.

The march of technology, however, did not favor us. The marriage of nanotechnology and robotics produced automated manufacturing systems of increasing sophistication. As more and more such machines were developed, their cost – like so many other computer-based products – continued to drop. In an amazingly short period, machines could economically replace the low-wage workers that had favored us so much for several decades.

We watched with alarm as the productivity of these advanced robots rose. In time, they became even cheaper than the cheapest of our laborers. Increasingly, it was cost-effective for the developed countries to have their own factories close to the point of sale. Such local factories also did not suffer the transportation expenses our products incurred. In short, the new fully-automated local factories of the developed nations soon held an almost insuperable advantage.

That left controlling the cost of energy and raw materials as the only other factors in the manufacturing process that we could hope to control to maintain our dominance. This, as you know, led to conflict with the Americans.

You recall how: with respect to energy, we increasingly were forced to rely upon cheaper but environmentally unsound sources such as coal and other fossil fuels. The world took notice, mainly because advanced analytical techniques permitted scientists to trace pollutants back to our country.

As various international organizations criticized us and even imposed various sanctions, our message to our people was unwavering and resonated with our history. We told them that outsiders were once again trying to subjugate us, and this began the drumbeat of nationalism that we would use so effectively later.

Likewise, we sought to control key sources of raw materials around the globe. When tough commercial negotiations failed we bribed – and, when necessary, threatened – the leaders of many of the nations into granting us concessions at a huge discount. By the time their own people realized what was happening, we had our own forces in place to "protect" our citizens and our "property." When the international community tried to stop us, we fought them.

The Americans, especially those who naively believed that we shared their values, were slow to realize how we intended to deal with the crisis. They thought that we were a peaceful people more interested in commerce than conflict.

Clearly, the Americans proved their naiveté. Why? They tend to "mirror image" peoples who, in reality, do not reflect their culture or ideals. Americans too often are inclined to believe that all peoples think as they do. In our case, they did not appreciate how pervasive and deep-seated the resentment of past foreign domination was among our peoples.

That resentment easily translated into war-supporting nationalism. Our Party used our country's always latent nationalism as a powerful tool for energizing the People. It was not difficult for our Information Ministry to paint a picture that once again foreigners were seeking to reduce our nation to subservience. Support for the use of force was wide and deep not just among Party members, but the proletariat generally.

We would not have dreamed of using force if the Americans still had their capabilities they once possessed to dominate high-technology war. Interestingly, too many Americans miscalculated how quickly once-backward societies like ours could integrate new technology into war-making systems that could defeat the U.S. even without resorting to nuclear weapons.

Our steady increase in defense spending on high-technology paid off – especially as the Americans underfunded or even terminated the programs we most feared. Without a doubt, the U.S. underestimated the investment and effort that would be required to maintain the military superiority they enjoyed at the beginning of the 21st century.

For example, a capability that really concerned us was American airpower. In particular, it was the U.S.'s ability to project that airpower anywhere in the world at almost any time. However, the ability to do so depended upon aerial tankers that re-fuel its warplanes during long flights. America's air force was repeatedly frustrated by political and legal difficulties from renewing and expanding its tanker fleet. In our system, of course, we have no such problems where national security is concerned.

In the end, the U.S. had too few warplanes to contain us. We mastered getting inside their "acquisition loop" and deployed newer systems before they finished buying already obsolescent ones.

Because we could manufacture the most advanced electronic components in our country, the American military no longer possessed a monopoly on the most sophisticated weaponry available.

WORSE YET FOR THE AMERICANS, besides believing that "irregular warfare" reduced the need for high-technology air, space, and naval combat capabilities, they dramatically reduced such forces in favor of increasing the numbers of trendy "counterinsurgency" units.

These were filled not with warriors specially trained for high-intensity combat but rather with a curious kind of "soldier" described in their counterinsurgency manual as one who "must be prepared to become...a social worker, a civil engineer, a school teacher, a nurse, a boy scout." As you know, we slaughtered these "boy scouts" by the thousands!

Americans prided themselves in the fact that they transformed their military into a multitude of "culturally-sensitive" social workers who knew much about our history and customs. What they knew too little about was how to fight an aggressive, high-technology power who knew much about the ways of war. Our troops were amused when captured American troops begged for their lives in our own language. Of course, it did them no good.

In any event, we found we could contend with the light, low-tech counterinsurgency units that comprised most of America's battle forces. Early in the 21st century the U.S. added over 92,000 ground troops. We cheered! We wanted the Americans to be spending \$40 billion a year on troops instead of technology. We never feared America's ground forces because we were a nation that could easily put millions into the field to oppose them. And we did so when the time came.

What we did fear was America's high-technology forces because they had the potential to block our ability to project power. That is why we were thrilled when it became chic in the U.S. to denigrate the role of technology in war. If anyone spoke approvingly of a high-tech weapon, they were immediately condemned as an out-of-fashion "Cold War" thinker.

Strangely, even though it was widely known that we were building a high-tech, globally-capable force, the Americans seemed to ignore that in their planning. While we were building fifth-generation fighters, they were turning their fearsome military into a 'soft power' collection of do-gooders skilled mainly at winning hearts and minds. Our missiles and bombs had no hearts and minds to win, and

the Americans paid with their lives accordingly. Our strategy was based on force, theirs on hope.

WE CONSTANTLY LOOKED for imaginative ways to undermine the U.S.'s defense establishment as it had evolved in the 21st century. For example, America had become increasingly dependant upon its reserves and National Guard not as a strategic reserve as originally intended by their Founding Fathers, but as a force they depended upon to meet current operational requirements. This policy hurt them in a number of ways.

It became the fashion in U.S. defense circles to say that part-time troops were the equivalent of regulars every way. They made any departure from those assertions appear to be questioning the patriotism and dedication of the part-timers. No one wanted to accept that modern war is so psychologically daunting and technically complex that it is best waged by full-time professionals. These truths were simply candid and frank analysis of military requirements, not assessments of people's character, but they were politically unspeakable in America.

So America continued to pour costly incentives into maintaining their part-timers, and even created "missions" so as to justify their numbers. It became so attractive to serve as a part-timer that many full-time professionals opted into that status. Why make all the sacrifices to be a regular when virtually the same benefits were available to part-timers who could choose where they wanted to live and, often, how frequently they wanted to serve? The denigration of the full-time professional in favor of the part-timer proved disastrous.

What is more is that this policy underestimated the importance of homeland security in the minds of America's state governors. The threat of terrorism, as well as the increasing expectations of the electorate when natural disasters struck, caused governors to insist that these troops not be deployed overseas at times of crisis. Consequently, as I will discuss in a moment, we did our best to create as many terrorist incidents as possible. When the Guard became politically 'undeployable', it hobbled the U.S. military in the ability to confront us.

The Americans had also come to depend upon a whole range of contractors to run their war machine. Many American policymakers seemed to think that anything done by private companies was inherently cheaper and more efficient than government. It is true that the competition of free enterprise will, in most cases, produce such results. However, warfighting is the exception that proves

the rule. Specifically, the mercenary values of the marketplace do not sustain people in the crucible of war.

People in business make decisions based on cost-benefit analysis. We recognized that no amount of money makes it 'worth it' to any company or, more importantly, any individual to die. Of course, we aimed our most sophisticated and vicious attacks on these contractors, and we enjoyed much success. What is more, is that when we captured contractors, we designated them as unlawful combatants and tried them for their crimes against our People and The Party. It did not take many executions before the contractors were walking away from their contracts, crippling the American military at the worst possible time.

We used the indirect approach again by attacking other vulnerable targets both inside and outside the United States. For example, our agents acquire interests in companies around the world. When the time came, they refused to trade with the U.S. More importantly, we controlled many financial institutions though our huge investment holdings. We were amazed at how naïve the Americans were to overlook our activities for the decade preceding the war.

YOU KNOW THE REST, comrades. Our high-tech forces often defeated the Americans on the battlefield, and we were able to inflict such punishment on their homeland that they were soon pleading for peace at any price. With their military shattered, their economy reeling, and their people demoralized, their defeat was complete. Their will was broken!

As strong as our determination was, we would not have triumphed if America had not deceived herself about the nature of future war. She bled herself dry waging an endless series of 'irregular wars' while her ability to fight 'regular wars' atrophied. She deluded herself about her conventional superiority, and failed to realize the overarching importance of readiness to meet existential threats.

Had America paid attention to the growing capabilities of militaries such as ours, she no doubt could have maintained such dominance that nations like ours might not have dared to oppose her — we keenly understand brute force and its consequences.

Now the Americans beg for scraps. So desperate are they that they send their children here to be our servants. We control their future! That is

the cost of defeat! Let us praise the Party and the People!

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Charles J. Dunlap, Jr. is an active duty Air Force major general, and is the author of the essay, How We Lost the High Tech War of 2007, published in

the January 29, 1996 issue of the WEEKLY STANDARD from which this essay gets its inspiration.

Additional biographical data, and official photo are all publicly available at <http://www.af.mil/information/bios/bio.asp?bioID=5293>.