

Seeing It Coming

Revitalizing Future Studies in the US Air Force

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Why didn't we see any of this coming?" The secretary of defense's question echoed in the general's head as he walked out of the heated discussion in the executive conference room. As his footsteps echoed down the Pentagon hallway, he wondered, "Were we so fixated on the future we were trying to create that we failed to perceive the future being created around us?" The remainder of 2020 would now prove very different than the Air Force chief of staff had planned. As he considered the ramifications of the current situation, the chief could not help wondering what else might soon happen in this "new future" and what he could have done to prevent these surprises.

As the chief of staff contemplated the path ahead, his mind turned to the decision in 2010 to close US Joint Forces Command. Although this action appeared fiscally sound at the time, the hasty elimination of this institution, created by the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces in 1997, seemed particularly myopic. Instead of narrowing mission requirements, leadership chose to target the source of joint lessons learned, experimentation, and future studies. The plan called for migrating these responsibilities to the Joint Staff, but an already taxed staff simply could not handle all of these functions. As a result, the focus on future studies disappeared, and forecasting became more the domain of service programming and budgeting and less an equal partner in strategic planning. The present state of affairs did not occur because leaders ignored future trends but because an organizational culture did not value future studies and, consequently, failed to identify relevant tendencies and incorporate them into planning processes.

Future Studies

Strategic surprise, rarely a welcome event for organizational leaders, is especially undesirable for those charged with providing national security. Even without knowing the nature of the strategic surprise alluded to in the beginning of this article, one can easily imagine catching the sluggish defense system, despite its expansive intelligence apparatus, off guard. To make progress, we must go beyond simply acknowledging this vulnerability and must avoid the skeptics of futurology, who would have us continue lumbering along in a reactive state.

By nature, the development and execution of strategy for the US Air Force are directed at the future. As a discipline, future studies include both forecasting and planning—the former representing the cognitive aspect that determines the plausibility of futures and the latter the action side that creates the desired future.¹ Practitioners must “forecast the cause-effect relationships that will underlie the strategic effect [they are trying to achieve].”² In this way, executing strategy is the emergent process of testing a strategic theory based on the hypotheses generated from forecasting. Like its sister services, the Air Force is a bureaucracy dominated by a strategic planning culture, but, to ensure a balanced strategic approach, we must equip this culture with an equally strong forecasting capability.

Some futures will naturally appear more plausible than others, but the point is not probability but possibility. As with all organizations, the military benefits the most by thinking deeply about the range of future possibilities and considering how the current strategy and force structure would fare in the various environments. Futurist Edward Cornish writes that “the goal of futuring is not to predict the future but to improve it. We want to anticipate possible or likely future conditions so that we can prepare for them.”³ However, in some cases, the military needs to actively take a role in working to kill possible futures. Instead of simply preparing for this future, James Canton, another futurist, advises aggressive action: “You envision future scenarios that are con-

ceivable yet so bleak that, if left unchecked, could destroy all that you've created."⁴

Future Trends

Although the number and diversity of prognostications about the second decade of the twenty-first century cause many individuals to dismiss the process as mere speculation, both the identification process and presentation of futures have great value. The majority of futures efforts in the Air Force exist apart from mainstream discussion, partitioned in analytic or programmatic sections of the Air Staff. Though functional, this placement does not foster the necessary, continuous dialogue among Air Force leaders that will incorporate forecasting into the leadership culture.

In an attempt to cultivate change in this approach, this article offers the skeletal outline of five separate trend lines for the next decade (see the table on the next page). In each case, a connecting thread from the current environment provides a temporal bread-crumbs trail leading to a plausible future. The omission of detailed causal chains and full explanations helps prevent the "fighting the scenario" problem and limits the emphasis to core aspects of the trend. Even though some futures are more plausible than others, each scenario flows from current realities and has the potential to create future surprises that the chief of staff of 2020 would like to avoid. By no means are these tendencies either comprehensive or mutually exclusive; rather, they simply depict some of the plausible scenarios.

These brief depictions do not approach the level of the "Gulliver's Travails," "Zaibatsu," "Digital Cacophony," and "King Khan" scenarios developed in the Air Force's *Alternate Futures for 2025* study of 1996, but they do offer a glimpse of future possibilities that deserve consideration.⁵ Furthermore, like the 1996 study, the true intent here is not to predict the future but to encourage discussions about it and rekindle the connection between forecasting and strategic planning.

Table. Trends for the next decade

	Current Trend	Future Trend / Events
Force Fracture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhausted military personnel and equipment • Strained reserve structure • Unconstrained requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gradual demise of the all-volunteer force • Collapse of the Total Force construct • Creation of contract military units • Movement toward a single-component military
Caliphate Rising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamic radicalism • Lack of unity in Islam • War on “terror,” not radical Islam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamic nations rally together around Egypt after major attack on the United States / Israel • Recurring Islamic terrorist attacks on US soil; nuclear attack threatened
Foundational Cracks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smaller military / fewer bases • Less than 1% of population in military • Decreased service advertising • Public resentment over costly wars and large defense budget 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public respect/confidence drops significantly, becomes adversarial • Rising tensions between civilian and military leaders • Increasing US isolationism and domestic pressure to reduce the military
Panda Express	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rising China • Uncertainty in Korea/Taiwan • Asia taking the stage from Europe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collapse of US influence across Asia • Japan isolated; Taiwan coerced • China calls in US debt
State of Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue-red ideological divide • Domestic discord evidenced in Tea Party, debt pressures, unemployment, immigration, health care, privacy, homeland security (Transportation Security Administration), and environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collapse of confidence in republic • Increasing political fractionalization and radicalization • Emergence of political violence • Use of martial law and active duty military to quell domestic unrest

Implications

Although completing the forecasting process for any of these potential futures would require significantly more detail, one could readily imagine how each could nurture conditions that could produce a strategic surprise for the Air Force and the nation. Despite the remote likelihood of any particular scenario emerging, as long as it remains within the limits of plausibility, it warrants consideration in the strategic calculus. By including these and other possibilities as planning factors, Air Force strategists can shape the future and reduce the risk of undesired outcomes. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry argues, “As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it.”

By advocating a renewal of future studies in the Air Force, this article does not seek to exchange the current myopia for apocalyptic schizophrenia. As the model created by Charles W. Taylor illustrates, the realm of plausible futures does not contain all possible futures (see the figure on the next page). Taylor uses this “cone of plausibility” to bound the future landscape yet include a wide range of alternatives. Through this process, leaders can assess existing plans and understand deviations when they occur. Keeping this full range of futures in sight instead of becoming preoccupied with the Air Force’s vision (desired future) will ensure that leadership sustains the peripheral vision to avoid major surprises.

Taking Action

Although people may not have viewed it from a futures perspective, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s recent and repeated warnings about the possibility of the military’s becoming a “hollow force” is a deliberate attempt to “kill” an undesirable but plausible future for the US armed forces. Based on his previous knowledge of the “hollow” military of the 1970s and attention to current trend lines, Gen Martin Dempsey foresaw a future where military readiness was drained to the breaking point. His actions over the last year through advocacy and process change have amounted to specific attempts to kill the future of the hollow force.

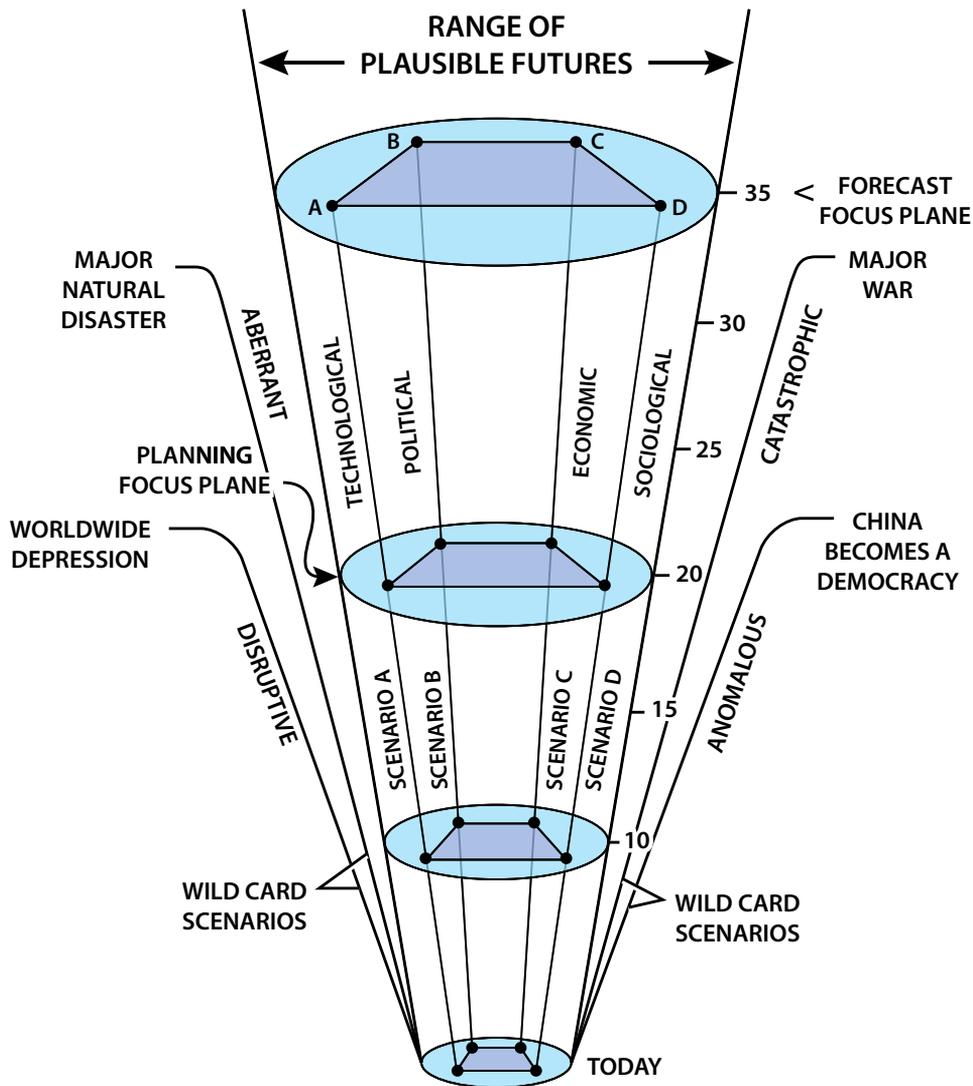


Figure. Cone of plausibility. (Reprinted from Charles W. Taylor, *Alternative World Scenarios for A New Order of Nations* [Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1993], 5, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub245.pdf>.)

Senior military leaders must begin embracing future studies on par with current strategy and planning. However, doing so will demand a culture change from the often rigid world of military planning: “Deal-

ing with the ambiguity inherent in strategic foresight requires an attitude different from simply providing the right data or information.”⁶ Planners have long understood that the real value of planning is not the plan itself but the intellectual illumination that occurs during the planning process. Similarly, scenario planning’s greatest value comes from the process of exploring the future. However, worthwhile strategic foresight is not simply an exercise in structured brainstorming: “The goal of strategic foresight is to make better, more-informed decisions in the present. Forecasting lays out a range of potential futures to consider so that the organization can act effectively now.”⁷ Strategic foresight can produce tangible benefits for military leadership by enabling the connection of current resources to promote or eliminate specific future end states.

The military’s classic ends-ways-means can now be grounded well over the horizon and offer a deliberate path, even during times of significant instability. We should not abandon the time-tested skills of military planning and strategy, but the confluence of rapid change and risk demands the adoption of new skills to improve agility and confidence. As Bill Ralston and Ian Wilson remind us, “the real value of scenarios . . . comes not from giving us more accurate forecasts but rather from improving our understanding of the dynamics of the world around us, seeing the range of possible ways in which the world could evolve, providing us the courage and confidence to make difficult decisions, and quickening our response time to events.”⁸ Defense leadership must start now to embrace the discipline of futuring as a necessary tool for both creating the future and killing it in order to guide the department into times of uncertainty.

Conclusion

In the Department of Defense during the first decade of the twenty-first century, a contrast existed, on the one hand, between intellectual emphasis on transformations, revolutions in military affairs, and next-generation warfare, and, on the other hand, the realities of insurgents

on horseback and renewed piracy on the open seas. We must not allow ourselves to use the failure to anticipate the current “alternative future” of 2012 as a condemnation of future studies. Instead, the repercussions of this unexpected shift should motivate the Air Force to turn away from the myopic tendencies that have become so prevalent and renew its focus on future studies. Anticipation of the next decade promises to be equally challenging, but service leaders must cultivate the disciplines of forecasting and planning to prepare themselves for the possibilities ahead. ★

Notes

1. Peter C. Bishop, “Framework Forecasting: Managing Uncertainty and Influencing the Future,” in *Second Prague Workshop on Futures Studies Methodology*, ed. Martin Potůček and Barbora Slintáková (Praha, Czech Republic: Charles University, Center for Social and Economic Strategies, 2005), 94, http://www.ceses.cuni.cz/CESES-20-version1-sesit05_10_potucek.pdf.
2. Stephan Frühling, “Uncertainty, Forecasting and the Difficulty of Strategy,” *Comparative Strategy* 25, no. 1 (January–March 2006): 21.
3. Edward Cornish, *Futuring: The Exploration of the Future* (Bethesda, MD: World Future Society, 2004), 65.
4. James Canton, *The Extreme Future: The Top Trends That Will Reshape the World for the Next 5, 10, and 20 Years* (New York: Dutton, 2006), 11.
5. Col Joseph A. Engelbrecht Jr., PhD, et al., *Alternate Futures for 2025: Security Planning to Avoid Surprise* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University, September 1996), 21–93, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA319867&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>.
6. Andy Hines, “Strategic Foresight: The State of the Art,” *Futurist* 40, no. 5 (September–October 2006): 19.
7. *Ibid.*, 21.
8. Bill Ralston and Ian Wilson, *The Scenario-Planning Handbook: A Practitioner's Guide to Developing and Using Scenarios to Direct Strategy in Today's Uncertain Times* (Mason, OH: South-Western Educational, 2006), 45.



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