

**Joe Haldeman.** *La guerra: passat, present i futur*  
Diumenge 19, 11.30h. Canal Alfa. Anglès, amb traducció simultània

War -- Past, Present, and Future

by

Joe Haldeman

I want to start with a short article I wrote for Omni magazine at the end of Gulf War I, "Desert Storm", twelve years ago. The magazine folded before it could see print.

It occurred to me that very little would have to be changed for me to recycle it now, but I'd better do it soon. Gulf War II is going to last longer and be a lot more expensive -- in lives, in money, in America's international stature, and in our own sense of worth as a people.

But let's go back, as they say in the movies, to the thrilling days of yesteryear  
....

Desert Storm as Science Fiction

by

Joe Haldeman

The war had a lot of the elements necessary for good fiction -- a beginning, a middle, and something like an end; a certain amount of suspense, interesting characters in an exotic setting . . . and of course violence, and even a little sex, since a picture of a pretty girl inspecting a rifle is sexier than no pretty girls at all.

There was an obvious science-fictional twist to the war, too, with all the high-tech mayhem. But it's not just hardware. It's interesting to reconsider the war in terms of the various attitudes and metaphors familiar to science fiction readers.

What came to my mind, as I watched (from a London hotel room) the daily reports from Baghdad, was H. G. Wells's The War of the Worlds, where hordes of aliens roamed the landscape, invulnerable inside their awesome machines, destroying people and real estate with absolute impunity. That image is deeply ingrained in our culture, thanks to Orson Welles's radio play as much as the book -- and thanks to George Pal's movie, at least to people about my age -- but I don't think we were ever inclined to see ourselves as the martians. The story ends, of course, with the monsters having ingested, in the course of wreaking havoc, the seed of their own destruction. If we want to find a similar metaphor in our current situation, we do have to stretch. Maybe reach back to an earlier literary tradition, and find hubris as the bug we take back to our home planet. Maybe the next bunch of humans won't be so easy to conquer.

Another science fiction classic that comes to mind is 1984. We certainly had our share of Newspeak, with phrases like "collateral damage" and "friendly fire," but the official description of war damage always requires euphemism. What was much more disturbing was the perception of the press being virtually an arm of the government, relaying the official party line without question, for fear of being cut off from official sources.

For weeks we watched the same two pieces of footage showing how smart our "smart bombs" were, one going in the front door without knocking and the other zipping through a skylight. Did they forget to turn the cameras on during the other 20,000 sorties? Or is the underground press accurate in claiming that most of those super-sophisticated weapons missed their intended targets and often killed innocent people? (One positive note in favor of the military's news management: no one

pretended that "collateral damage" didn't translate into "dead civilians." In my war, Vietnam, once a civilian was dead, he or she was magically transformed into a Viet Cong insurgent.)

Star Wars was certainly there, in the different incarnations of both of those great 20th Century fantasists, George Lucas and Ronald Reagan. Lucas's "gang that couldn't shoot straight" alien bad guys were recapitulated in the pathetic sight of the skies of Baghdad continuously ablaze with futile random anti-aircraft fire, while stealthy jets and missiles slip in and nail their targets, or at least come close. And those two pictures of the smart missiles going in through the proper window are an apotheosis of Reagan's Star Wars -- proving conclusively that we can magically pinpoint a target at least two times out of 20,000 tries.

I was reminded of a now obscure but fascinating series from Analog magazine in the sixties -- Mack Reynolds's "Mercenary" stories. Those were about a world where gangs of professional soldiers fought carefully delimited wars, partly to resolve corporate conflicts, and partly to provide the televised "circus" part of the "bread and circuses" philosophy that kept the masses content. The epitome of this aspect of Gulf War I was the University of Oklahoma student who reportedly said, "Hey, I'm gonna go pop some popcorn and watch the war." He and a couple hundred million others.

There's even a touch of The Day the Earth Stood Still, with George Bush telling Saddam Hussein "Klaatu barada nikto," more in sorrow than in anger. (That phrase is Arabic for "Surrender your arms or you won't be able to find your country under all the rubble!") I also hear an uncomfortable echo of Starship Troopers behind the rhetoric praising our troops, and the xenophobia that informs hundreds of interchangeable novels and movies about "brave-Earth-soldiers-versus-the-inexplicable-wogs-from-Planet X."

Finally, the ecological terror tactics, millions of barrels of oil spilled and 500 gushers of flame and smoke, recall John Brunner's ecological horror novels Stand on Zanzibar and The Sheep Look Up. They also remind me of a story I planned to write for an anthology of alternative pasts. I never got around to it, but I think maybe now I will, because it has renewed relevance.

The year was 1906. This part of it actually happened: Henry Ford went down to the flat sands of Ormond Beach, Florida, to participate in a race. Some crucial parts for his car never arrived. But he was in the crowd that watched, awestruck, as a Stanley Steamer "Rocket" set the world speed record at 127.6 miles per hour. In 1906.

The alternative history that I proposed for the story simply had Henry Ford, impressed by the race, abandon the internal combustion engine in favor of steam. He still would change the face of the country over the next decade, and much the same way -- because it wasn't the superior design of the Model A through Model T that made Ford a millionaire; it was the factory techniques that put a lot of cars on the road, and a marketing and service philosophy that insured their profitability for all concerned.

Europe was already well on the road to gasoline power; Daimler and Benz had been making such vehicles since the 1880's. So my alternative history would develop that way, with Europe more and more dependent on imported oil and America needing none -- in fact, America, with no domestic gasoline market, exports so much oil that it becomes the leader of OPEC !

Meanwhile, we stayed out of WWI -- if oil wasn't a big factor in that one, why do you think they fought in Gallipolli? For the climate? We stayed out of WWII long enough to make an obscene profit and then stopped it with two nuclear weapons. (You can make up your own science fiction story by deciding where we dropped them.)

Since I'm not too interested in utopias, which are uplifting but boring, I think the story would end with a *Pax Americana* that suspiciously resembled the Thousand-Year Reich. But that's just a story, "just" science fiction. I hope that the kernel of truth in it is clear enough.

If George Bush the First had really wanted to build a new world order, or just wanted to make America safe from people who stand around in the hot sun in heavy blue robes, he could have taken an amount of money equal to the cost of the 100-hour war and dedicated it to the not-too-gradual conversion of America into total energy independence. We know how: conservation, natural gas, solar power, renewable energy crops, even exotics like wind and tide power and thermocline generators in the cold ocean currents. Make a deadline and make it stick, with punitive taxes on energy imports that increase exponentially as we approach the deadline.

That's real science fiction, of course, or fantasy, since so much of Bush's fortune, and his friends' fortunes, is tied to imported petroleum. But maybe some day, some less wimpish president might take a swing at it. Maybe some day before it's too late.

###

Isn't that interesting? Twelve years later, I can tell much the same story by inserting a W between "George" and "Bush."

Of course this second try was not over in a hundred hours; not in a hundred days. Not with house-to-house fighting in cities where every window can sprout a gun that fires and then disappears. (I had two days of house-to-house combat training

before the army sent me to Vietnam, and it made me glad that I wound up fighting in the jungle. There are lots of places to hide behind when the bullets start to fly.)

Before this iteration of the war, I was one of the millions who marched in the streets in protest. I'd done it before his father's war began, too, and it was equally effective both times. We walked along with our signs, and the police walked along with their guns, and then the government did what it was going to do anyhow. It was infuriating both times, but an interesting sociological demonstration -- freedom of expression can thrive in a police state, so long as the police and the demonstrators know the protocols and behave, and as long as no one really expects the government to respond to the protests.

Of course the clear difference between this war and the first one is the difference between a 100-hour war and a Forever War. Ignorance and hubris and mismanagement, and an unprecedented pattern of outright lies, turned what should have been an even easier war than the first into a potentially interminable guerilla situation.

This is certainly one face of war in the future. I wrote about it in my 1997 book Forever Peace, where the industrialized nations were fighting a diffuse war against guerilla forces representing a dozen different countries and transnational political groups. The war had been going on for a long time, and there was no end in sight. There had been one nuclear exchange, but basically the war was conventional guerilla tactics versus high-tech super-soldiers, one of whom was my book's protagonist. They were virtually unkillable, because the actual soldier was hidden underground hundreds of miles away, operating a huge robotic soldier by telepresence -- he thinks about doing something and the robot instantly does it. If the robot's destroyed, they bring another one out of storage.

The American army actually began planning a similar strategy soon after that book came out -- a lot of my military readers sent me journal clippings,

congratulating me on my predictive ability, but it was actually a pretty obvious thing to predict.

There's no such thing as telepresence yet -- the American army postulates, instead, a super-soldier inside a suit of high-tech armor, impervious to conventional weapons, with his or her strength and senses amplified mechanically. I predicted that in The Forever War, thirty years ago.

Let me digress a moment and consider the role of prediction in science fiction. If science fiction's only value was predicting the future, it would have a dismally poor record. Nobody predicted the internet; no one even saw that the first landing on the Moon would be a political demonstration. We aren't flying around in personal aircars or eating meals concentrated into handy pills.

Science fiction is usually about the present, using the future as a metaphorical tool. Thus The Forever War was largely about the effect of the Vietnam War on American society; Forever Peace is an extension of the Powell Doctrine to an absurd degree.

(To a soldier on the ground, the Powell Doctrine translates to minimum troop loss with maximum high-tech force. But Colin Powell's actual Doctrine justifies war only as a last resort, backed by strong public support and only undertaken with a well-defined national interest at stake. It should be executed with overwhelming force and a clear exit strategy. The only one of those five criteria satisfied in the latest war was the use of overwhelming force, which obviously was not enough.)

It's also pretty timid to predict that we will see more and more terrorist activity like the Madrid rail bombing and the 9/11 attack on America. In fact, I've racked my brain trying to come up with a believable science fiction story where it didn't happen, and terrorism dwindled away. But I can't make such a future believable.

It may seem odd, since I was a draftee and am a war protester, but the armed forces often call on me to participate in think-tanks about the future of warfare. I may be the only person around who's a combat veteran/science fiction writer/MIT professor, so they just overlook my pacifistic shortcomings.

Anyhow, this June I was asked to participate in a think-tank that was thrown by the CIA and the NSA, America's spy agencies, about national and international security in the near-future period 2005-2020. It was as interesting as I had hoped, and as scary as I had feared.

The "spooks," as we call them, are not sanguine about the next fifteen years. They believe that Al-Qaeda are jazzed up over their success in influencing Spanish politics -- that may be naive, but they are not politically sophisticated -- and plan to do the same thing in America before the November election, escalating the terror by using a weapon or weapons that will cause more deaths than 9/11. The spooks think it will be bacteriological or chemical, though there is some chance of a "dirty bomb," one that uses radiological material for its toxicity, rather than in an explosive device. That could wipe out and render uninhabitable a large part of a city, or all of a medium-sized town.

A curious aspect of this is that no one is certain what effect an act of mass terrorism would have on the election. Would people blame Bush and not vote for him, or would they respond to patriotic and bombastic rhetoric, and vote for him because he promises to go after the people who did it? Maybe this time he could actually find the right country.

It sounds like a good year to spend October and early November out in the country, or out of the country. *[Translator note -- if the second idiom doesn't translate, it could be left off.]*

The spooks know they will have plenty to worry about even after the American elections.



The probability of a terrorist organization eventually not using a dirty bomb, or even an actual nuclear weapon, is very small. There is enough radiological material unaccounted for to make hundreds of dirty bombs -- not from military sources, but from medicine and industry. And although a terrorist organization could never put together the technological base to manufacture a nuclear weapon, they could well put together the money to buy one. You don't have to invest in a missile or a B-52, either; just float it into New York Harbor in a boat. Or up the Thames, or the Seine. America is only the biggest target. The terrorists want to be feared by everybody.

A story I wish I'd never written is called "To Howard Hughes: A Modest Proposal." In it I describe how a wealthy man could use nuclear terrorism to blackmail the world into peace.

It was published in a science fiction magazine with a fairly large circulation. Of course few people read science fiction magazines. Perhaps they should.

The mayor of Los Angeles received a letter from a man who said he had constructed a small nuclear weapon. He detailed how he had gathered the fissionable material; how he was able to construct the bomb with less than a critical mass of uranium; how it was delivered and shielded against detection -- all of it straight from my story, but of course no one in the mayor's office had a subscription to The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. He called in his science advisor and asked whether it was feasible, and of course it was; I do my homework.

The blackmailer demanded a million dollars in cash, to be packed in a suitcase and left in a downtown park by a mailbox at noon on Saturday. The mayor's office did it -- but of course everyone in sight of the suitcase at noon was a plainclothes policeman.

As soon as they set down the suitcase, a pimply-faced teenager came out of the bushes and snatched it -- whereupon he was himself snatched.

This is an old-fashioned story now, of course. Any idiot who knows how to use Google can find directions for making nuclear weapons -- or a bathtub of botulism toxin, or a truckload of bargain-basement high explosive. If knowledge is power, the forces of evil are more powerful than ever before in history. And it can only get worse.

The CIA had come up with some truly scary possibilities that I can't discuss in detail. For a few million dollars, terrorists could close down every major harbor in America, which would cause economic chaos all over the world. One researcher told of a project where his team was to come up with a way that ten men with ten million dollars could, in ten days, permanently change the government of the United States. Four of them came up with four separate ways.

Cities, obviously, are particularly vulnerable to terrorist action, a fact that could quickly change the nature of civilization. A dirty bomb could make the central cities of Paris, New York, London, Singapore, Madrid -- any or all of them -- uninhabitable for generations. Government, commerce, and education would decentralize in short order -- it's likely that most large cities would empty out after the first one was essentially destroyed. But every modern civilization revolves around its largest cities; they provide an economic and intellectual driving force and give a culture its identity. Imagine a Spain with the Prado entombed in perpetual radioactivity, along with all of downtown Madrid. It would still be Spain, and you would still be Spaniards. But it, and you, would be something very different.

Is there any way to stop it, any way to win a War on Terrorism? The geniuses currently in charge think you can do it by killing terrorists. That just makes new terrorists, especially when your weapons destroy more civilians than warriors. The strategy also ignores what we know is true about fanatics -- not just Muslim; fanatics of any stripe. When your enemy doesn't care whether he lives or dies -- when he desires death if it means killing you as well -- violence may not be the logical answer.

All Americans remember where they were on 11 September 2001, and most can remember what they were thinking. I recorded my thoughts in a poem, which I won't burden you with here, because it wouldn't translate. But this is the essence of it:

George W. Bush claims to be a fundamentalist Christian, so his main tool for considering moral issues is to ask "What would Jesus do?" Jesus was very clear about what he would do in this situation, but Bush's religious instruction seems to have stopped short of the Sermon on the Mount [*Translator: Sometimes "Sermon on the Plain," Luke 6:20 ff.*]. If someone smites you on the cheek, offer him the other. Love your enemies, be merciful; judge not, that ye not be judged.

This is pure fantasy, but what if Bush had said, "As a fundamentalist Christian, I am forbidden to avenge this deed. The man who did this also claims to believe in the literal truth of his holy book; I challenge him to justify the murder of innocents in its words.

"Millions of people are rejoicing in this cataclysm; from them I would like to know what they feel we have done to deserve it, and how we could change to assure that this will never happen again."

Of course Bush would be impeached the next day and wind up incarcerated in an insane asylum. But that silly story does provide a metaphorical arrow in the direction of a way to end -- not win, which is impossible -- the War on Terrorism.

Why does a parent applaud a son or daughter who straps on a bomb and walks into a market or a mall to commit suicide in hopes of killing a few civilians? They do it because life is hopeless, and no reasonable action will change things, so have to do something desperate and brave. It's not because they're Moslems; a Jew or Christian or Shinto or Hindu will do the same, in hopeless desperation.

The way to stop terrorism is to banish hopelessness from the world -- and not for some hypothetical reward in Heaven or because it will make us feel good. Do it because the people who now have Kalishnikovs and car bombs are soon going to have

Weapons of Mad Destruction. *[Translator: I feel your pain at the pun.]* Science and technology don't take sides; it's probable that revolutionary research in areas like the Human Genome Project and nanotechnology will produce weapons of unprecedented power, and perhaps of subtle and fatal selectivity.

You banish hopelessness by giving hope. That means literally sharing wealth and opportunity with the weak and marginalized.

Plain money would go a long way in this regard. Money can't buy happiness, the saying goes, but poverty makes hope a distant goal. You don't just give it to them, of course; you hire them to rebuild their own surroundings, their own lives, according to their own desires.

Education runs a close second. Fanaticism flourishes in ignorance. Teach them about the real world that they're invited to join.

No one likes to say this, but it has to be said: detoxify religion. This might be the hardest one. You can't do it by force, or by legislation -- that just makes the True Believers more determined to take their religion to the grave, and perhaps you with it. I think it has to be an eventual byproduct of education and exposure to other people's ways of life -- and comfort. If this world is pleasant, you might be less eager to seek the next one.

Many organizations are moving in these directions already, churches not the least of them. But we need more, and we need it fast. It's not socialism or communism or do-goodism. It's plain survival for ourselves and our children. The next generation of terrorists will make this generation seem tame.