Cheap War and What It Will Do
Comments on Latiff's *Future Peace*

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Abstract: Major General Robert H. Latiff's exploration of the automation of judgment in future warfare is urgently relevant. In this review of his book *Future Peace*, I argue that technological advancements make war appear cheaper and thus more attractive and thereby increase the likelihood of war—just as previous innovations that allegedly democratized access to increased combat capacity have done. I suggest viewing this as a problem of distribution: how can the burdens of warfare be communicated to the public more clearly and shared more fairly? Hence, I explore the idea that war should be subject to a plebiscite, which is then linked directly to a draft.

Keywords: Latiff, Robert H.; future of warfare; automation of judgment; artificial intelligence ethics; military ethics; technological determinism; political economy of war; ethics of conscription.

In his book, *Future Peace*, Major General Robert H. Latiff tackles the complex and urgent issue of how technology is changing the nature of war and what the implications of these changes mean for the future.[1] While the book risks overwhelming readers due to its density and interconnectedness, it raises important questions about the role of technology in warfare and how to prevent war from seeming so cheap and easy that it becomes an attractive solution for addressing a growing number of geopolitical challenges.

Some Takeaways

The principal theme of *Future Peace* is that several interconnected trends are conspiring to make warfare to appear cheaper, easier, and more attractive, while also making it more likely to erupt unexpectedly and unpredictably. This includes the increasing interconnectedness of warning, command, and control systems, their increasing reliance on inferences and patterns illuminated by artificial intelligence—which is itself lightning quick, yet fragile and opaque—the strategic ambiguity on the part of leaders, and the rise of bellicose and aggressive rhetoric and actions.

The book risks nurturing a helpless pessimism as the problems seem too great and too pressing; the solutions are too distant or unrealistic, leaving the reader with few easy answers regarding what is to be done. Partly this is due to the book's rhizomatic interconnectedness and density: Everything refers to and relies upon everything else. For this reason, I shall highlight just a few themes in my remarks.

The first of these themes is the automation of judgment: the idea that more and more human decisions, which require the delicate application of critical

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[1] Robert H. Latiff, *Future Peace: Technology, Aggression, and the Rush to War*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022. [Henceforth cited as *FP*]

thinking and time for reflection are being handed off to machines; machines that respond instantaneously, and that are incapable of feeling the weight or seriousness of what they are tasked with—and are not given the time to reflect, even if they were able to do so.

The automation of the epistemic and moral dimensions of warfare is plagued by a host of challenges such as, for example, classification and categorization, determining causal structures and connections, attributing hostile intent, calculating proportionality, considering necessity, and so on. Latiff argues that "combat is highly unstructured and unpredictable" (*FP* 26). These are exactly the kinds of situations that artificial intelligence systems struggle with.

A looming question is how much judgment one should cede to machines, for which tasks, and in which contexts. The Department of State declared earlier this year that states should "maintain human control and involvement" over decisions to employ nuclear weapons.[2] Presumably that is the result of a cost-benefit analysis—but this implies that incorporating artificially intelligent features into other weapons systems might also fail to pass that same test. There is no obvious reason to think that nuclear weapons are *sui generis* in a category of their own.

Cheap Speech and Cheap War

My main interest here is thinking in economic terms about the problem Latiff describes. Simply put, when a commodity becomes cheap, the demand for it increases. When war becomes cheaper, it becomes more likely.

This analysis is inspired by Eugene Volokh's prescient 1995 paper, "Cheap Speech and What It Will Do" which forecasted some of the effects and "possible dark sides" of the Internet on music, advertising, and speech.[3] Volokh predicted the strengthening of extremist speakers and fringe groups, given the newfound ease of reaching larger audiences for the purposes of online organizing and fundraising. All

of these were predictable results of making speech much cheaper.

Latiff diagnoses a similar problem regarding war. Much of the content of his book—both in terms of the causes Latiff outlines and their potential effects—can be understood through the same economic lens that Volokh applied. For Latiff, new technologies "make war easier and are making matters worse" (*FP* 3).

By lowering the cost of a good or service, its demand will increase. The Internet lowered the cost of speech quite literally, since users no longer needed access to a radio broadcasting tower or a printing press in order to reach hundreds or thousands of people. Economists agree that when the cost of a good falls, demand for it rises. As Thomas Paine said,

> what we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly.[4]

To be clear, the financial cost of war has not fallen—and Latiff is explicit about the ballooning costs of American wars, now measured to be in the trillions of dollars.

But the cost of war has fallen in other ways. First, while the financial cost has risen, the appreciation of those costs by those who have the power to affect war, that is, citizens and politicians, has atrophied. This is a kind of sleight of hand being played by mortgaging the future, borrowing trillions of dollars to finance equipment, materials, salaries, benefits, medical treatments for veterans, and so on.

Second, most literally, the risks of bodily harm that citizens bear in the United States in terms of deaths and injuries, are borne by a small sliver of the populace: a volunteer army that comprises approximately one percent of society.

Note this is also an objectionable problem of distribution. It is not only that warfare has become cheap; in addition its costs have been shunted into the future and shifted onto the vulnerable—presumably out of sight and out of mind.

Latiff points out rightly that making warfare seem cheap and easy benefits the so-called military industrial complex, the politicians, and the media, and in turn they nurture arrangements that feed into this apathy, such as hollowing out public education—and denigrating what is left of it.

2 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, *Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy*, February 16, 2023, https://www.state.gov/political-declaration-on-responsible-military-use-of-artificial-intelligence-and-autonomy/.

3 Eugene Volokh, "Cheap Speech and What It Will Do," *The Yale Law Journal* 104/7 (May 1995), 1805-1850, here p. 1848.

4 Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis, #1, December 1776*, Research Triangle Park, NC: National Humanities Center 2010, https://americainclass.org/sources/makingrevolution/war/text2/painecrisis1776.pdf.

In sum, as the risk of injury and the financial cost of war are not borne by the wide public, the public has grown blasé. Because the public has grown blasé, the political cost of war has fallen. Politicians risk little when threatening warfare or indeed going to war. The outcome of all of this is that war has been sold to the public as being a quick and easy matter; and the great majority of citizens have been insulated from its costs, which has created a widespread apathy toward war that is likely to make war more common.

A Modest Proposal Regarding the Cost of War

One way of making war less common, or reducing the threat of war, is to raise its cost. Latiff considers the idea of instituting a draft. I suspect that he is drawn to this idea as a way of raising the cost of war for citizens, and of bringing home that cost in order to undermine the ease with which citizens and politicians play with the idea of going to war. Latiff writes:

> The simplest solution, if we are going to continue to fight endless wars, might be that the US have some form of conscripted service. [*FP* 127]

I agree with Latiff that this solution is simple and straightforward. But I also agree with him that it is politically infeasible.

Universal conscription is politically costly because it subjects everyone to risk. A volunteer military is a politically easy—but morally problematic—way for only those who sign up bear the most direct costs of war. In contrast, the following two-part proposal offers a solution that splits the difference:

1. The decision to go to war is submitted to a vote by the entire military-aged populace. Only if a majority of fifty percent plus one of the voters endorse the war would war be declared. The Ludlow Amendment was proposed several times between 1935 and 1940 and would have had this effect.
2. All and only those who vote, "Yes" become eligible for conscription into the military, at least for the purposes of the respective war. This portion of the proposal has been floated in more than one novel by Robert Heinlein, and I suspect he did not invent it.[5]

The benefits of this proposal include:

* It makes it more difficult to declare war, insofar as submitting anything to a vote by the entire country makes it less likely to succeed than vesting that power into the hands of the elected officials in Congress.[6]
* The citizens come to understand in a very real way the cost of war. Those who are convinced that a war is just agree to subject themselves to the risk of harm by fighting that war. In Latiff's words:

> if citizens better understood the costs of war to themselves…they would be better equipped and might be more willing to push back against the rush to military force. [*FP* 136]

* It ensures that the costs of war are shared justly. While having an all-volunteer army seems just on its face, the fear is that military recruiting is rife with undue inducement that tends to prey on those with limited options, which is to say, the arrangement is exploitative. If this were true, it would significantly undermine the moral force of consent. This proposal shares the costs of war more broadly across the populace, that is, by at least fifty percent of the populace. Second, rather than being imposed universally, the costs are imposed only on those who have effectively volunteered.

Possible Objections to the Proposal

One might worry that this election procedure would make warfare practically impossible to declare. However, I agree with Jeff McMahan, who has argued in a different context that if there were to be a war that were clearly just, there would be no trouble in persuading the populace to vote to authorize it.[7] Likewise, the Ludlow Amendment made an exception for the United States or its territorial possessions being attacked. (Representative Ludlow seemed most concerned to discourage wars of foreign adventurism).

Others might object that the proposal is unfair. All other things being equal, if this problem of social coordination can be solved entirely by voluntary means—which entails that some citizens bear a

5 Robert A. Heinlein, *For Us, the Living: A Comedy of Customs*, New York, NY: Pocket Books 2004, pp. 69–72.

6 The proposal quite possibly places the "Yea" side at a disadvantage, insofar as access to classified information, which the public would not have, would make the resort to war more compelling.

7 Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 75-6.

serious burden including mortal risk—that seems desirable. However, relying on a volunteer combat force has serious drawbacks in terms of the resulting distribution of burdens and the resulting incentives for politicians, as has been discussed above. Instead, it is worthwhile to consider whether the burdens of citizenship could be shared equally by all, which would require universal conscription. If this aspect also seems problematic, then the citizens could split the difference by providing room for a widely shared burden of military service, spread among only those who endorse the resort to the war in question.

Perhaps even more problematic about this way of proceeding is that voting, "No" becomes a *de facto* way to dodge the draft. It is not enough to think the war is just in order to justify conscription: a voter must think the war is just and they must be confident enough—and courageous enough—to back up that claim with a commitment that endangers their life. Yet it is perfectly coherent to think, "This war is just, but I do not want to be the one to fight it." The motivation for the proposal is to confront the would-be soldiers with the gravity of the decision to go to war by reminding them that it could be they who are drafted. This effectively attaches a profound cost, for the voter, to voting one way rather than the other. Indeed, these are hardly the conditions for a fair election. On the other hand, supporters of the proposal could argue that the cost attached to voting to declare war just is the cost of carrying out the policy itself. Put in general terms, it is not obviously unjust to suggest that those who support a costly policy should be first in line to bear that cost.

Toward the end of his book, Latiff writes:

> We must change policies that allow politicians to involve us in wars with little explanation, and we must ensure that our systems are built to avoid conflict as a first priority. [*FP* 108]

I argue that my modest proposal achieves both these goals. If politicians ever hoped to go to war, they would have to convince at least half of the populace that it was just. This imposes a significant cost on politicians and ensures that war will not be a first priority.

Conclusion

When reflection is necessary, speed becomes counterproductive or even dangerous. Hence, policy makers will need to search for responsible ways to increase the "friction" in military decision-making processes. The challenge will be finding a way to preserve or enhance the United States' military advantage by virtue of technological development without at the same time reducing the psychological threshold to war. I am here reminded of Emmanuel Mesthene's dictum that technologies have good and bad effects "*at the same time and in virtue of each other*."[8]

Clearly, any desire to roll back the clock, that is, to make warfare analog and slow is counterintuitive. Somehow, humans must find a way to upend the rational calculus that leads to an arms race of technologies set on a hair trigger and aimed in a circular firing squad.

In the end, *Future Peace* stands as a stark reminder of the intricate and perilous interplay between technology and war. The complexities associated with it demand full attention and intellectual engagement on a global scale. As citizens, our role is not merely to act as spectators but as participants in shaping the future of warfare and, by extension, the future of humanity. Latiff's book is not merely a resource; it is a call to action.

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8 Emmanuel G. Mesthene, "Some General Implications of the Research of the Harvard University Program on Technology and Society," *Technology and Culture* 10/4 (October 1969), 489–513, here p. 492.