

War & The Risk Society

Christopher Coker

“We have no future We have only risk management.” (William Gibson, Pattern Recognition)

As Clausewitz tells us, war is a social activity. We have to understand a society’s fears and anxieties, norms and values and even religious beliefs. All of these will be reflected in its conduct of war.

We live in an age of anxiety and that anxiety is manifest even when we send expeditionary forces to countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq. In the former Coalition efforts from the start lacked coherence and were subject to national caveats, over 110 in all, 70% of them with operational consequences. Grotesquely, government officials were prevented from deploying outside secure bases, and military units themselves were subject to more and more restrictions to avoid incurring ‘risk’. A British training team in Iraq was prevented from leaving its base in 2016 on similar grounds, which diminished severely its ability to achieve its ‘advise and assist’ mission. The desire of our politicians to conduct military operations without a significant human footprint may be an aspect of our society’s risk-averse and casualty-shy aspirations. Work at the Oxford Research Group has suggested that the use of semi – autonomous drones to wage war on enemies might be a western symptom of our age.

The ultimate risk management weapon is the drone. To quote Michael Hayden, a retired 4-Star General, “Targeted killing has become part of the American way of war”. I think we really do need to adopt a broader historical and cultural perspective, to re-connect with Clausewitz’s insight that war is part of the province of social life. We have to grasp that every technology has a ‘social history.’ John Ellis’s brilliant book *The Social History of the Machine Gun* explains why this is so. The machine gun in the minds of the societies that manufactured it was clearly the product of a rational culture, because it embodied the industrial principle of serialisation. It also embodied another principle dear to the modern age: productivity (greater output for less input - in this case the serialisation of death). It was what we would call today a ‘force-multiplier’; it enabled very small forces to conquer half the world. It was used to persuade the ‘natives’ to see reason. It followed also that since they could not match machine guns with their own any resistance was not only futile, but irrational. In other words, if they continued to resist they were plainly being ‘unreasonable’ and inviting their own fate.

Drones have a social history, too. They allow the powers that have them the illusion of omnipotence: we are above the struggle, literally and morally. We enjoy ‘strategic persistence’ in default sometimes of strategic thinking. They also cater to our penchant for risk-aversion, as well as our principal military pre-occupation, risk management. Drones are a technological quick-fix for a society that fears commitment.

The Risk Society

We find ourselves living in risk societies, term popularised among others by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck. Economists are obsessed with risk capital; our societies are obsessed with children at risk; sociologists analyse ‘high-risk’ behaviour. Beck’s thesis is that we have witnessed a radical change in social life and cultural experience. The risk Society perspective is a heuristic device that allows us to observe and probe the peculiarities of our own world.

Standing amid the ruins of Nagasaki in November 1945 the British scientist Jacob Bronowski found his imagination dwarfed by the extent of the catastrophe. It was, he later recalled, “a universal moment: the modern age face-to-face with its own consequences.” 20 years later we began to wake up to the effects of pollution and environmental degradation – the risk age was the stepchild of environmentalism. We now know that everything we undertake involves *consequences, both unforeseen and unintended*. *Consequence Management, accordingly*, has become one of our principal management tools.

In tackling terrorism and insurgency we have to confront unintended consequences. Take the concept of ‘blowback’, a CIA term for creating the very monster you are fighting. We can trace the rise of Islamic terrorism, for example, to America’s support for Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which has been characterised by one writer as an American Jihad against Communism. Blowback involves reaping what one sows: a suitably Biblical metaphor for paying for the previous generation’s bad judgement.

If you prefer another term, think of side-effects. We live in a side-effects age. Every time you visit a chemist and self-prescribe medication, you find a leaflet in the box telling you to consult your GP before taking the tablets. In a word, the side-effects could be worse than the malady from which you are suffering. And war has side-effects too. You win a battle but encourage the defeated to mount an insurgency (as in Iraq after 2003). You mount a Surge that successfully deals with the immediate insurgents, only to find that from the 80,000 prisoners of war taken, an organisation worse than Al-Qaeda, ISIS, emerges to wreak havoc. And the side-effects are now global. In its short lived thousand days the Islamic Caliphate managed to launch 51 terrorist attacks against the West.

What do side-effects and blowback have in common? Principally this – cause and effect has been replaced by cascading effects. That’s the real importance of social media. Take the ‘smart mobs’, who meet together spontaneously as a result of text messaging. In Seattle in 1999, the anti-globalisation protestors interrupted a WTO meeting using mobile phones, laptops and hand-held computers. Thousands of citizens brought the UK to a halt in 2000 by blocking fuel deliveries at selected service stations to protest against the sudden rise in fuel prices. All this was made possible by CB radios in taxi cabs, emails from laptop PCs and mobile phones. As the first British suicide bomber to blow himself up for ISIS remarked in a letter he left his family: “It’s better than Call of Duty.” Social media encourages self-starting terrorists; an ISIS game modelled on *Grand Auto Theft 4* is designed for 9 year olds. In other words, the politics of all this is becoming both very complex and very challenging. In Rene Girard’s interpretation of Clausewitz escalation is *mimetic*.

Beck makes another point when he adds that we are all ‘social constructivists’ now,

whether or not we buy into social constructivism as a philosophy. Constructivism, for Beck, is a *social fact* as well as a philosophy of social science. So why are we all social constructivists? Because security is all about how we imagine our social life – threats are real, immediate and out there – a ‘clear and present danger’. Risks are imagined and constructed.

Anxiety for that reason is the defining theme of modern life. As one of the 9/11 commissioners wrote, “It would be good to take the terror out of terrorism”. It would indeed, but for the fact that we can’t. In 2008, the UK’s National Security Council report invited the reader to imagine the possibility of a terrorist organisation engineering an existing and dangerous pathogen into a more virulent strain. A day after the publication of the report a panel of experts informed the US Congress that a biological terrorist attack on a nation was likely by 2013. In other words, we are frightening ourselves to death.

Anxiety is different from fright and fear. It is internalised, projected into the future. We are anxious about what might happen tomorrow rather than what is happening today. And anxiety is highly subjective: we can be argued out of our fears by the evidence; but it is more difficult to be argued out of our anxieties.

Take an episode in August 2002 when a pair of snipers killed 10 people in the Washington DC area. They chose their victims at random. They did not profile them ethnically or racially. They killed largely on a whim. The response was remarkable. Some citizens bought bullet-proof vests in which to do their shopping and mow their lawns. School districts forbade 1m schoolchildren from going out to play at lunch. The DC soccer league involving more than 5,000 players, called off its games at the weekend. This was of course a massive over-reaction. If the snipers had killed just one person every three days, the statistical risk of being shot would have been 1:100m. The snipers posed less of a risk than the risks associated with everyday life – such as smoking two cigarettes a day, or drinking 30 diet sodas a week, or driving 100 miles to Virginia for fuel. What accounted for the anxiety was the fear of gun-related crimes, which was heightened in turn by the fear of terrorism after 9/11. Which was heightened as well by even higher levels of anxiety.

What is the upshot of all this? It’s a constant reminder that we prefer storytelling to probability analysis, a fact that has been made time and again by economists such as Daniel Kahneman. Statistically it’s much more likely that you will be drowned in the bath than be killed by a terrorist, but the human mind prefers narratives to numbers, and the downside of storytelling is that it encourages worst-case thinking.

Which brings me to another aspect of our post-Weberian age. We no longer act on knowledge, but suppositions and estimates and computer models. Max Weber, as a good 20th century rationalist, assumed that societies would only act on the basis of conclusive proof. Risk societies today are overwhelmed with data and information. And the information largely comes from experts who hypothesis risks.

The importance of experts is that they are very different from what Anthony Giddens calls “the guardians of knowledge” of the past. 50 years ago we thought that the doctor knew best. Now we are in a position not only to seek a second opinion, but to go on the web and diagnose our own maladies, or talk in chat rooms to fellow sufferers. All knowledge, in a word, is contested. Experts make money by disagreeing with other experts. They get their

TV appearances and business consultancies by attacking other experts representing different governments or corporate interests. They sell themselves to special interest groups – they are, claims Jan Myrdal, the ‘whores of reason’. Tune into any TV panel discussion of nuclear power and who do you believe: both sides sound convincing; both have attended the same universities or engineering schools. A striking example is what happened in 1998 when India and Pakistan almost went to war, the British government sent a delegation to Washington to discuss how many people might die in a nuclear exchange. On the basis of computer modelling, the American and British scientists came up with very different conclusions. The British predicted that radiation would go east with devastating effects all the way to Singapore. The Americans that it would go west, eliminated Iran as a viable political unit. Experts, like the rest of us, are often guilty of wishful thinking.

The same is true of intelligence estimates on which we increasingly rely when deciding whether to intervene or not. When Gen Stan McChrystal ordered his chief intelligence officer to assess the situation in 2009 his report was scathing: “8 years into the war in Afghanistan the US intelligence community is only marginally relevant to the overall strategy”. If you look at other areas the situation is not encouraging either. We knew that Libya had a nuclear programme but we did not know how extensive it was until it disclosed the full extent of its programme. We didn’t know that Syria had a nuclear programme: we did not know we did not know. The Israelis however, did, and disabled it in 2008. Or take Iran. In 2005, US intelligence agencies expressed ‘high confidence’ that Iran had abandoned the programme. In 2014, they expressed ‘high’ confidence that it was pressing ahead. The point is this: intelligence gathering is rather like weather forecasting. It cannot be the basis for going to war or declaring ‘peace in our times’. It can only be a guide for medium-term decision making. The buck as usual stops with the politicians who have to trust to their gut instincts.

But there is a problem that runs even deeper than this. The point about nuclear proliferation is this. A minor problem today can become a major dilemma tomorrow. Hence the debate about sanctions/military action to shut down Iran’s nuclear programme. Every country in the world claimed to be opposed to it, including Russia and China. But the question of what to do: sanctions or military action – divides expert opinion. For both involved horrendous consequences. This is what Beck and others call the Risk Trap: doing too little and doing too much can both be ruinously costly. Doing too much may produce a crisis today; doing too little may invite a crisis tomorrow. In a sense, every decision we take will be wrong. Politics is about managing the consequences of the wrong decisions we take. There is no good management or bad. Politics often involves managing two equally bad outcomes.

Managing Terrorism

One final example: the way we manage terrorism both at home and abroad, is based largely on a methodology that has dominated Western society since the 1980s with respect to the management of crime. It was only recently that we have given up on the 19th century idea of eliminating crime by addressing the social and economic conditions that are held to produce it. Social rehabilitation as a model of penology has gone. As one criminologist wrote

in 1980, “No-one now seriously pretends that rehabilitation has any utilitarian value in the general reduction of crime”. Why the pessimism? In a word: recidivism. Criminals tend to re-offend, often within 48 hours of being released. And here, too, we find a boomerang effect: rehabilitation can have unfortunate consequences. One example is that violent psychopaths who are taught social sensitivity and interpersonal skills often put their new social intelligence to work on release with unintended and often fatal consequences. They become even more efficient predators. Then there is the genetic/environmental evidence of the resilience of criminal classes. 5% of males from the 1956 cohort in the UK have committed 70% of all recorded offences, and are responsible for 70% of all violent crimes. And they are the ones new philosophy in the United States: three strikes and you’re out. America now has the largest prison population in the world, and the largest in its history. And even when we let prisoners out of gaol we continue to take precautions. We have introduced electronic tagging. There is no such thing, in a word, as unsupervised freedom. The same is true of terrorism. We know people would be radicalised even in prison – so we are planning to build prisons purely for the most suspect groups.

Here are some other features. Target devaluation: reducing the opportunities for crime is part of the new methodology. We apply zero-tolerance. We move suspected offenders from areas where they are deemed to constitute a risk: the financial areas of a city, or tourist sites. We quarantine criminals in sink-estates and urban ghettos where they can internalise violence (trashing their own neighbourhood, but not ours). And then there is surveillance. The UK has more CCTV cameras than any other industrialised country. A Londoner is on camera on average 300 times a day. Corporations monitor consumer choice every time a credit card is swiped. Every time a Londoner uses an Oyster Card on the underground the state knows where he is to be found. GPS can track mobile phone users and the same goes for GPS systems in cars. And CCTV cameras are about to get face recognition algorithms that can identify certain anti-social groups, such as football hooligans or anarchists in anti-globalisation protests. It is called ‘knowledge brokering’ and ‘social sorting’: both are central to the management of risk and both will become even more central to social management as ever smarter computer algorithms enhance the possibilities of ‘predictive analytics’.

What’s this got to do with terrorism? Quite a lot. Take target devaluation – what Bush used to call ‘draining the swamp of terrorists’. Our preferred methods of nation-building and regime change are both have lost their appeal. We going the drone strikes. How can we organise the defence department for manhunts, asked Donald Rumsfeld the day after 9/11 and man hunting is not a bad metaphor for the use of drones. Take social sorting. We identify certain countries as members of an Axis of Evil – such as Iran, Iraq, Libya and North Korea. We provide country risk profiles. And we impose sanctions to stop them from getting Weapons of Mass Destruction, or persuade them, as in the case of Col. Qaddafi, to abandon their programme. And finally, there is surveillance. Satellites track the actions of rogue states, or pariah states, or what, in the more diplomatic vernacular, the US State Department prefers to call ‘states of concern’. But this is only a beginning. Remember the film *Minority Report* (2002)? Set in the 2054, the police have a pre-crime division. A central computer can access a criminal’s brain and see the genesis of a crime (a criminal thought) before the criminal has

decided to commit the crime. This is not science fiction, by the way. In making the film, Steven Spielberg put together a team of experts for a 3-day think-in: they anticipated the future based on trend analysis. Who would have thought that by 2002 1.2m Americans would be under 24-hour state surveillance? Even pre-crime is here. It is called FAST – Future Attribution Screening Technology: a body-screening system can detect mal-intent (the mental state of an individual who intends harm to others) by employing sensors to detect physiological and behavioural cues. It is an example of how we are pushing policing into the 21st century based on ‘predictive analytics’. It is the algorithm, not the policeman that now determines ‘probable cause’.

All of which brings me to a final conclusion. Risk societies are especially vulnerable to terrorism and insurgency because of their fear of incurring risk. Terrorists and insurgents terrorise us by deliberately courting risks; they are not interested in the consequences of their own actions. They don’t do consequence management. They or their masters spin the dice and wait to see what happens. When they let off a bomb on a metro they cannot predict what will happen because the authorities themselves do not know how they will react until they have to. *This is asymmetrical warfare at its most profound.* One culture is excessively risk-averse; another confronts the greatest risk of all: death. Let me end with an observation by the American novelist Don DeLillo: “*the danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous*”.