

## **James Der Derian on imagining peace**

Massive Change Radio is a project by Jennifer Leonard, Bruce Mau Design, the Institute without Boundaries, and CIUT FM, Toronto.

## **You talk about the military's use of information as a force multiplier. How is that?**

It's a term that originally signified a sort of propaganda – psychological or psy-op – that you would have as an adjunct to the soldier in the field, officers who would provide leafleting, or even bullhorn. Consider the example we saw in *Apocalypse Now*, preceding battle by playing Wagner on your loudspeakers when the air cav is coming in. These are all forms of intimidation. Contemporary tactics have moved beyond that. It's no longer about simply increasing the effect of command and control of the battlefield. It's also about bringing to bear computers, new communication technologies, new intelligence, and multiple media, in a battle for reality in which you're shaping – in addition to the outcome on the battlefield – the opinion, beliefs, and decisions that are part of any temporary struggle that lasts longer than the usual one or two-week international conflict. The military use of force multiplying effects is about the ever-increasing coupling of science systems and weapons systems.

## **Is Sun Tzu's notion of military force based upon deception now more true than ever before?**

I'm sure he could only be envious of the tools we have at hand now, compared to the gongs and drums that he would use to multiply the force of conventional arms back in 500 B.C. But if you go to military doctrine now, they call for something called “full spectrum dominance,” which means using every single available technological information tool to deceive. That's deception on a tactical level. We need to also consider the levels beyond tactics and strategics, and the extent to which we have new levels of dissimulation taking place, on the levels of decision-making, how we read the images, and how the public is informed about foreign policy.

## **How does Paul Virilio encourage us to think about military technologies?**

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He gets into the empirical detail of how these new technologies emerge in a coterminous, coeval way – the way that, for instance, the machine gun and cinema are interdependent on the same technology. Or even how viewing reality for the first time out of a steam locomotive train alters our way of seeing the world. Virilio's very good about looking at how the war machine has led, unfortunately, to much of the innovation in how we see the world. In some cases, this interdependence is symbiotic. In other cases, the military is the avant-garde, the leading force. The military has taken these relatively crude technologies and refined them for the purposes of killing people. Then, in the same way in which you'd use them to prepare and execute for war, you use them to represent the war back to your populace – through the first-time use of aerial reconnaissance and high resolution images, all the way back to the Civil War, when bodies were posed on the battlefield to make it look more real, to how people are reading the images that are now coming out of Baghdad.

### **What is the meaning of “virtuous war?”**

I like to believe it's a felicitous oxymoron, in the sense that you have this tension between people who believe you can use war to achieve ethical aims – that's the virtue part of it – and the virtual, how you can fight wars now from a remote distance and have minimal casualties, on your own side. But the harm, I think, and the reason why I attempted to capture this contradiction of virtuous war, is the belief that you can use military violence to resolve intractable political problems. If you have the technological superiority, and you believe in your ethical superiority, these factors combine to a very nasty effect, which is that you defer civilian diplomatic action and give the military the opportunity to step into this vacuum and offer up solutions.

It's military policy to prepare for the worst-case scenario. They have all these incredibly meticulous computer simulations and war games and training exercises that can be taken off the shelf, while diplomats or our political leaders are wringing their hands wondering what to do.

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**With respect to the virtual reality training simulations for soldiers, what is the meaning of the video game once the virtual invades reality?**

When I used to go out on these war games and interview soldiers at all levels of command, I'd come across some private or specialist up on a hilltop in the Mojave Desert, and I would ask, "What are you getting out of this war game?" He'd look around and make sure there was no superior within earshot and say, "I'm getting a good suntan, that's about it." There's a sense that these games aren't like reality among people going through the paces. When I interviewed the survivors of the Mogadishu raid, their line was, "This wasn't like what we trained for. We thought we'd come in, shoot them up, take casualties, and get out." It's a famous line of various generals that if we really understood how horrific war was, or is, we wouldn't go to war.

**Should we be wary then about the U.S. Army and Hollywood relationship?**

It's not just the Army and Hollywood. It's the Army, Hollywood, the Academy, and Silicon Valley. It's what I call the military-industrial-media-entertainment network. We know that military strategy can wag the dog of civilian policy making. We see the same thing with the creation of incredibly high fidelity virtual realities, where the real thing starts to pale in comparison. If you have these virtual environments based on worst case scenarios, which indicate how we're going to represent the enemy, their threats to us, and how we respond quickly, because speed is of the essence, then all of the human attributes – deliberation, empathy, and experience – become secondary to a machine-like response. Yes, there's cause to be wary.

**How do we break out of these military worst-case scenarios that hold us in cycle of killing and destruction?**

For me, this is the central dilemma. Reproducing a reality through technical means that doesn't allow for imagining alternatives to take hold stultifies the imagination. People say

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9/11 was the failure of intelligence. Well, it was a failure of many things, including our ability to imagine beyond the confines of computer simulation.

**Tell me about the idea of not infowar but infopeace.**

One of the biggest challenges facing us at the Watson Institute is trying to make infopeace a robust concept. Let's face it, war is more ubiquitous; it's sexier; it's more thrilling. This is why there are thousands of books written about war and only a handful written about peace. Trying to vitalize notions of peace means getting more directly to individuals who embody it. Why do we keep going back to Gandhi and Martin Luther King? Partly because we don't have powerful peace movements today.

There have been episodic peace movements that have been effective. The anti-nuclear movement had a profound effect. The anti-war movement for Vietnam did also. We're still working on the anti-interventionist, anti-terror movement.

So there will be an increasing interest in having a critical tool. Infopeace is a tool we're trying to develop, both through the multiple media of video documentaries and video teleconferences. We make efforts to bring together people at the Watson Institute to get into a dialogue – military officers, the media, academics, and NGO activists. Finding a common language is usually the first step, but you'd be surprised at how, at the end of two or three days, people are intensively interacting. Real shifts occur. Not radical worldview transformations. But the dialogue has certainly begun.