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“You may not be interested in war...but war is interested in you.”

[Check against delivery]

Thank you for that kind introduction — good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

I’d like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

Leon Trotsky once famously said:

“You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.”

This conference asks us to look ahead to war in 2025; to be interested in war, interested in a war so near it will definitely and personally be interested in me and all of you.

I sense a renewed concern in the world for the potential for state-on-state conflict, so that’s where I’ll focus this evening.

And what I want to specifically discuss is our collective conception of that war.

Before I do, let me set a few basic assumptions:

First: in capability-development terms, 2025 is essentially today, and we’ll be fighting with today’s ADF and our inter-agency partners.

Second: I expect we’ll be in alliance and coalition, Australia has never fought alone, and it’s the worst place to be in a war.

Third: Any conflict will last longer than we expect, and will cause many more casualties — military and, sadly, civilian — than we expect. And in materiel terms, as major platforms are lost or disabled, they won’t be replaced in any militarily useful timeframe.

Finally: Our commitment to war will be the last time we have control of the conflict dynamic.

My point is: state-on-state war is the last and worst-case scenario: one that the ADF must prepare for but which we should all strive to avoid.

So let’s start ... in the grey zone of political warfare ... where our worst nightmare will first emerge, where it has already commenced, and where it’s all been done before...

Back in February 1944 — seventy-five years ago — German authorities were apprehensive.¹

Allied leaflets were littering the streets of occupied Europe.

Reports rolled in to German headquarters;

¹ Streatfield, YM (1949) *The Major Developments in Political Warfare Throughout the War, 1938–1945*, p.53.

“The enemy is trying, with unheard of hatred with ever-changing tricks and ruses ... with lies and falsehoods ... and with everything however mean, to undermine the morale of the German people.”²

For Operation Overlord to succeed, the Allies knew conditions on the Continent had to be right.

That meant attacking enemy morale — and bolstering the Resistance.

In what was known as the, *‘Outline Plan for Political Warfare’* — intended to prepare the way for Overlord — strategists believed Germany was brittle.

Political dissent across Europe was growing.

“To render the maximum assistance to Overlord,” the plan stated, “political warfare must ... exploit and canalise these political ferments.”³

So they did — for months.

And when D-Day finally arrived, so did the next stage of the political warfare plan.

Special programs were initiated, radio stations redoubled their efforts, strikes and guerrilla actions were launched, communication lines were disrupted ...

Confusion reigned.

Then there were the leaflets: thirty-four million of them during the immediate invasion period.⁴

As they fluttered down, night after night, one German report recalled:

“Political instruction cannot ...and must not be ...neglected, any more than the cleaning of a rifle or gun.”⁵

Political warfare subverts and undermines.

It penetrates the mind.

It seeks to influence, to subdue, to overpower, to disrupt ...

It can be covert or overt, a background of white noise or loud and compelling.

It’s not limited by the constructs or constructions of peace or peacetime.

It’s constant and scalable, and most importantly, it adapts.

Political warfare has a long and fascinating history.

More than 2,000 years ago, Sun Tzu declared that, “subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.”⁶

² Ibid.

³ *The Outline Plan for Political Warfare — “Overlord”* (20 May 1944).

⁴ Streatfield, above, p.53.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cited in Babbage, Ross (2019) *Winning Without Fighting*, Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

Clausewitz insisted that political warfare was simply warfare without the overt use of force.⁷

Mao taught that, “warfare is politics with bloodshed; politics is warfare without bloodshed.”⁸

And US diplomat, George Kennan, offered a sweeping definition in 1948:

*“[Political warfare] uses every means at a nation’s command — short of war — to achieve national objectives.”*⁹

In forming their ideas, these noted strategists drew on examples of past conflicts.

Conflicts such as the Peloponnesian War, the clashes between Protestants and Catholics during the sixteenth century, and the political espionage that pervaded Europe following the Napoleonic Wars ...

Conflicts that all tended to coincide with ideological and great-power rivalries.

So if that’s what political warfare looks like, I think it’s worth asking if political warfare arises from the nature of the State — and its conception of war.

I want you to picture a spectrum of states.

At one end you have states that perfectly serve the people — utopian democracies you might say. And at the other end, you have people who serve the state — totalitarian regimes.

Those are the two extremes — and, in between those extremes, all modern forms of government exist.

Now, depending on where a state sits on that spectrum, war tends to mean something different.

Those leaning towards utopian democracy generally have a narrow conception of war, and their actions reflect this.

Conversely, those positioned more towards totalitarian regimes tend to have a much broader conception of war.

And it’s these states, I would argue, that are typically better able to harness political warfare methodologies ...

... to harness the skills and direct the actions of their people, in a more controlled sense.

While a totalitarian state’s position tends to be fixed, democracies do move along the spectrum when compelled by existential threat;

...history shows this to be the case.

In 1942 — the year that Singapore fell, and war reached Australia’s shores — Prime Minister John Curtin said:

⁷ Correspondence with Professor Michael Evans, Australian Defence College, 11 April 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jensen, Benjamin (2017) ‘The Cyber Character of Political Warfare’, *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 24(1), pp. 159–171.

“Every human being here is henceforth at the Government’s service, and every material thing in the country can be diverted to war purposes at the Government’s direction.”¹⁰

States, in short, can remake themselves - even temporarily - and what is generally abhorred, can by necessity, temporarily become acceptable.

Taken together, these ideas – political warfare, the nature of states and their conception of war – are something worth exploring.

For those of us in the West, the notion of ‘political warfare’ has never sat comfortably ...

... and while it’s as terrible a label as ‘grey zone’ or ‘hybrid warfare’ ... at least I didn’t just make it up!

Operation Overlord remains one of the most prominent — and successful — modern, operational-level examples of a violent-conflict campaign that incorporated political warfare by the West.

It was also the warm-up act to the Cold War.

But despite this pedigree, we tend to dismiss political warfare as distasteful: a black art that’s rarely justified.¹¹

We also view it — as George Kennan said — as something short of war.

The reasons for this are less than straightforward.

According to some, it comes down to the West’s fascination with decisive battle, and kinetic force.

The historian, Victor Davis Hanson, spoke of a distinct, deadly Western way of war — one that was “birthed by the citizen soldiers of classical Greece.”¹²

Think of the honour accorded to Achilles and Hector — two doomed champions — in contrast to the distaste expressed by his peers for Ulysses’ successful trickery.

Battle should be heroic and definitive — returning us to *peace*; our preferred state of being.

Of course, the irony of Troy’s ten years of bloodshed reminds us of the actuality of war.

In the young French 1st Republic of 1792, Thomas Paine argued that, “a state founded on democratic principles must also be, fundamentally, against war.”¹³

By our culture, our norms, our perceptions — we prefer peaceful relations with one another.¹⁴

We distinguish sharply between what is peace, and what is war.¹⁵

¹⁰ <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/john-curtins-war-review-john-edwards-on-the-pivotal-leadership-in-world-war-ii-20180208-h0vrsx.html>

¹¹ Barnett, FR & Lord, C (eds.) (1989) *Political Warfare and Psychological Operations: Rethinking the US Approach*, National Defence University Press: Washington DC, p.23.

¹² Porter, Patrick (2009) *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes*, Hurst & Company: London, p.5.

¹³ Gates, S, Knutsen TL & Moses, JW (1996) ‘Democracy and Peace: a more sceptical view’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 33(1), p.6.

¹⁴ Gates, above, p.2.

¹⁵ Barnett & Lord, above, p.22.

Peace is a natural state of affairs, and war is only a temporary interruption: there's little room for anything in between.

For those of like-mind, we seek to resolve disputes by negotiation ... consensus ... bargaining ¹⁶

We don't regard the existence of tensions, disputes and contests as compromising the fundamentals of 'peace'.¹⁷

It's only when forces clash — when kinetic violence is unleashed — that 'war' occurs.¹⁸

We see war as an expression of our values¹⁹ — values we find difficult to reconcile with political warfare.

As Professor Michael Evans wrote back in 2002, Australia's political and strategic cultures are "deeply Western in character."²⁰

Our Federation was based on the characteristics of utilitarianism, egalitarianism and collectivism — or, put in more familiar language; mateship and a fair go.

And Evans thought Australia was likely to continue fighting for our interests — but, also, in accordance with our values.²¹

It's those values and the nation they have shaped that place us in a position — to go back to the spectrum of states I spoke of earlier — where we have a narrower conception of war.

Australian society tends to see war in hard, binary terms — as do our allies.

But as I've said, none of this is fixed. Because when an enemy is sufficiently formidable, the more palatable political warfare's indirect methods become.²²

Shortly before his inauguration as US President in 1953, the man who spearheaded Operation Overlord gave a speech in San Francisco.

"Today," Eisenhower said, "the appliances of combat are not military forces or military weapons; nor is territorial occupation the object of combat ...

"We must employ methods other than armed combat so as to make mankind believe in freedom and democracy."²³

Until the mid-1960s, political warfare was widely acknowledged in the US as an important instrument of national strategy.²⁴

¹⁶ Babbage, above.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Porter, above, p.76.

²⁰ Evans, Michael (2002) 'Towards and Australian Way of Warfare', *Quadrant*, July–August, p.9.

²¹ Evans, above, p.15.

²² Porter, above, p.76–7.

²³ Huang, Chih-Hsing & Chen, Ying-Leu (1955) *Psychological Warfare: Theories and Application*, The Chi Hsing Press Branch: Hong Kong, p.vi.

²⁴ Barnett & Lord, above, p.13.

For many US political and military leaders, the Second World War convinced them that a political and psychological dimension of conflict was critical in the contemporary world.²⁵

They had seen it work.

And of course the Soviets were both formidable opponents, and masters of the art.

But then, gradually, political warfare techniques went into decline, as bungled operations, congressional oversight and media scrutiny combined to demand better of the West — and particularly of the US.

Containing the Soviets through achieving technical dominance became the focus. Black propaganda was almost completely halted in the mid-1970s and '80s.²⁶

Congressional investigations shut-down covert operations, much to the chagrin of embittered advocates of the dark arts.²⁷

In 1990, a former US army officer insisted that “political warfare” had little use or meaning in his country. Another said it had been reduced to, “orphan-like status in the peacetime armed forces”.²⁸

Two years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US Army’s doctrine manual stated:

“The [American] people expect the military to accomplish its missions in compliance with national values ...

“[They] expect decisive victory ... they prefer quick resolution ... “Their values and expectations must be met.”²⁹

This rejection of political warfare has only been reinforced over the last thirty-or-so years as we have demanded and expected greater transparency, scrutiny and critique of government.

We have embraced our Western virtue and — at the same time — contrasted it with the willingness and increasing ability of other states to control information, people and events.

Typically, these states cluster at the other end of the spectrum: where the *people serve the state* — as does the law — and all the other elements and institutions of society and state.

States with limited or no built-in constraints, and which often rely on deception for survival.³⁰

These are the states that, as I said earlier, are better able to harness political warfare methodologies. They know how to align and control all the instruments and potential of the state to serve its purposes.

Often built on the reality or rhetoric of revolution and looking out to the ‘Other’ as enemy, their conception of war is “markedly different”³¹.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Radvanyi, Janos (ed.) (1990) *Psychological Operations and Political Warfare in Long-term Strategic Planning*, Praeger Publishers: New York, p.2.

²⁷ Id., p.1.

²⁸ Id., p.5.

²⁹ Cited in Evans, Michael (2002), above.

³⁰ Barnett & Lord, above, p.xii.

³¹ Babbage, above.

They see war in much broader terms. Its reach extends from what we would see as ‘peace’ right through to nuclear war.³²

In other words, it’s a constant of life.

For these states, the strategic landscape requires a never-ending struggle.³³ It’s a struggle that has been maintained throughout history, and it’s a struggle that’s happening right now.

Today a new, modernised version of political warfare has emerged.

It mixes the old with the new.

In a world that’s becoming more connected, these activities range from information campaigns, cyber operations and theft of intellectual property ...

... to coercion and propaganda.

Grey-zone operations that subvert, erode and undermine, breaking international rules and norms, but ones that, in the eyes of the targetted state, fall short of requiring a war response.

It is, according to Prof Ross Babbage from the US Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, an “unprecedented challenge”.³⁴

In his paper, *Winning Without Fighting*, Babbage points out that authoritarian regimes “[find] the environment for new-generation political warfare to be permissive and enticing”.

They see the line of least resistance, and they exploit it.

Western societies are open, diverse, organic and liberal; in a word — exposed.

Despite this, until very recently the US and its allies saw many of these actions as unconnected — and only mildly irritating.

In short, they were simply not worth the risk of escalation.

Under these circumstances, says Babbage, as long as regimes:

“... did not trigger Western governments to switch from ‘peace’ to ‘war’ and confront them directly with conventional force, they could dominate the political warfare battlefield with little, if any, resistance.”

Russia’s actions are a case in point.

In 2013, General Valery Gerasimov — the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces — outlined a new doctrine with six phases of conflict.

Essentially, he sees conflict as opening with a covert phase — intensive information and political operations — which then continues to and combines with other phases ...

... including economic and escalating non-kinetic measures.³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Babbage, above.

In most situations, Western countries take few, if any, actions during the first two phases.³⁶

And it's typically only at the end of phase three — just before crisis point — that diplomatic and economic steps are taken.³⁷

By then, to the Russians, the war is half fought — and, perhaps, already won.³⁸

Political warfare is triumphant.

Now, some have argued³⁹ that this doctrine is simply a well-articulated version of what the Russians have always done ...

... and, certainly, the actions of the former Soviet Union back that up.

But how it is practised — the nature and intensity of the actions — are orders of magnitude greater in scale, reach and sophistication.

The Ukraine Crisis in 2014 was an example of this.

We saw masked Russian Special forces — the “little green men” — and Russian-backed para-military groups seize buildings and infrastructure in Crimea.⁴⁰

This “masked warfare” was a nod to Soviet-style disruption.⁴¹

But it was also accompanied by computer attacks, manipulation of social and mass media, collapse of the national financial system, and other deceptive operations.⁴²

Together, they paralysed the Ukrainian government, and the international community.⁴³

No effective action could be taken.⁴⁴

On this, it's worth pointing out a recent analysis by Hasan Suzen, from Beyond the Horizon International Strategic Studies Group.⁴⁵

Among Russia's *overt* direct and indirect actions, Suzen lists energy blackmail, economic manipulation and white propaganda, and military build-up in various eastern locations.

Russia's *covert* direct and indirect actions are no less broad.

There's black propaganda and diplomatic support to oppositions, cyber and troll attacks, mobilising locals and arming civilians, exporting corruption, and employing Trojan horses.

Meanwhile, the only covert action in the NATO column was cyber defence — and back then it was accompanied by a question mark.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ McKew, Molly (2017) 'The Gerasimov Doctrine', *Politico Magazine*, September–October.

⁴⁰ Suzen, Hasan (2018) 'The Rise of Political Warfare: Russian New Way of War against the West and Western Counteractions', *Otoritas: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan*, 8(2), p.105.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Id., p.106.

Instead, NATO and EU counteractions have, according to Suzen, been “based primarily on public diplomacy, strategic communication, and limited economic sanctions and assurance measures.”⁴⁶

It’s this environment that has some suggesting that we need to “reconceptualise [our] understanding of conflict.”⁴⁷

The character of war — they claim — is clearly changing.

In this world view:

war is likely to be less about open conflict and the use of kinetic force,⁴⁸

it will be about undermining adversaries, with no domain off limits, and

war is now ... it will always be political warfare ... and it will occasionally become violent.

This is challenging for many of us.

As I’ve said, we believe — rightly — that peace should always be the natural state.

We distinguish sharply between peace and war.

This has, however, led to a total mismatch between us and authoritarian states, according to Babbage.

“The West,” he says, “is operating within a far more rigid, more reactive and less strategic paradigm.”

For him, it’s time for Western countries to address our “shallow” understanding of political warfare, and to develop a “coherent strategy” to respond to such intense campaigns of competition.

This isn’t a call that I’m here tonight to make or to endorse.

That’s not the purpose of this address.

But it’s important that here — at a conference like this — these ideas are discussed and reflected upon.

Because they raise important questions ...

... questions that many of *you* need to consider and, eventually, *we* all need to answer.

Questions such as:

Are we, indeed, too rigid in our conception of war?

What parts of our state deter, or defend us from, modern forms of political warfare?

Can modern, open democracies conduct political warfare?

Will the brinkmanship of political warfare inevitably drive us to violent conflict?

⁴⁶ Id., p.107.

⁴⁷ Babbage, above.

⁴⁸ Jensen, above, p.168.

Or, perversely, is it actually an element of state-on-state competition that helps keep us out of violent conflict?

Are we, as some scholars suggest, ignorant and naive? Ignorant of our history, naive of our competitors?⁴⁹

I encourage you to think deeply on these questions.

Because ... to return to Trotsky...

... while, right now and in the war of 2025, you may not be interested in political warfare ... political warfare is most certainly interested in you.

Thank you.

END

⁴⁹ Barnett & Lord, above, p.22.

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