



PAST VISIONS OF FUTURE WARS

By Adam Seipp, Tom Bruscano and Ron Granieri November 17, 2020
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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri**, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It is a pleasure to have you with us. One of the surprise bestsellers of 1978 was *The Third World War: August 1985*, written by a former NATO general Sir John Hackett and his colleagues. Describing a future conflict between the Warsaw Pact and NATO forces, largely, but not exclusively, in Europe, it offered a harrowing yet ultimately hopeful narrative in which NATO (spoiler alert) successfully resisted the surprise Warsaw Pact invasion, though only after engaging in a major buildup recommended by the authors of the book who hoped to offer with it both entertainment and instruction. The book may not be a literary classic, but it sold quite well thanks to a breathless ad campaign that included the blurb quote: "this book occupies a place under the Bible on President Carter's desk." Apparently, Carter's copy was a gift from British Prime Minister James Callaghan. Hackett's book is a particularly important historical document of the late 1970s reaction against arms control in detente in certain circles who feared that NATO and the West were falling behind the Soviets. It is also, however, a famous example in at least two popular literary genres: the military, techno-thriller and the Cold War apocalypse story. Hackett is both the heir to Pat Frank and Neville Shute and also the ancestor of Tom Clancy and so many others, and his work retains interest for just those reasons. Today we have with us two guests to discuss Hackett's work and its place in those various genres. One of them is **Professor Adam Seipp** whose 2019 essay in the *Journal of Military History*, "Visionary Battle Scenes, reading Sir John Hackett's, the Third World War," inspired this discussion, and our own **Dr. Tom Bruscano**, Associate Professor in the Department of Military Strategy, Planning and Operations here at the U.S. Army War College who is also Editor of our Dusty Shelves section at the War Room and is thus our expert on important works in military history and studies memorable and forgotten. Professor Adam Seipp is Assistant Provost for Graduate and Professional Studies as well as Professor of History and Associate Department Head at Texas A&M University. His research focuses on war and social change in modern Germany, transatlantic relations and the history of the Holocaust. His most recent books are *Strangers in the Wild Place: Refugees, Americans, and a German Town, 1945 to 1952* and *Modern Germany in Transatlantic Perspective*, coedited with Michael Ming. Welcome to A Better Peace, Dr. Seipp, and welcome back Dr. Tom Bruscano.

Tom Brusino: Good to be here.

Adam Seipp: Thanks very much, Ron. It's great to join you and Tom for this.

RG: You bet. So Adam, I want to start with you. Who was Sir John Hackett and why did he write this book?

AS: Sir John Hackett is, if you were making a movie and you wanted to cast an eccentric British soldier scholar, they would send you Sir John Hackett. He is one of those characters that you start writing about in the course of historical research and just fall down a rabbit hole of fascination with. John Hackett was born in 1910 in Perth, Australia. He's the son of a newspaper publisher. When he was a teenager he immigrated to Britain for school, attempting to be an academic but it just never really came together for him, so he ended up joining the army and he had this just absolutely unfictionalizable army career. At the outbreak of World War Two, he was stationed in a British Mandatory Palestine. He fought in the Transjordan. He fought in the Western Desert. He was then promoted and ended up commanding the 4th Parachute Brigade in the drop at Arnhem during Operation Market Garden, during which he was badly wounded and was hidden by the Dutch resistance, which eventually smuggled him back out from behind German lines. In the meantime, he picked up a couple of academic degrees. He was a frustrated medievalist and spent time at the University of Grotts in Austria. He was married to an Austrian woman which was seen as something of a career killer during the Second World War, but he somehow managed to kind of avoid that. And then during the 50s and 60s he emerged as one of the great soldier scholars of the British Army. He spent time in Northern Ireland, eventually being the Commanding General of British forces there and served what would be his last command and his most important command as the Commander of the British Army of the Rhine in 1967, which also meant that he was the Senior Commander on the northern flank of NATO forces, which is really important for what happened later on because it gave him all of these contacts at NATO. When he retired, he then got to fulfill the dream of being an academic and became essentially the President of King's College London, which is where his papers are today. He was every bit as eccentric as a University administrator as he had been as a soldier. He joined student protests in the 1970s, famously wearing a bowler hat and carrying an umbrella, and he also became a well-respected defense intellectual, someone who wrote for the popular press in Britain about defense issues. He had been very close to Basil Liddell Hart, spoke at Liddell Hart's funeral and was a loud and proud proponent of conventional rearmament. He was a fierce critic of Britain's drawdown of conventional forces during the Cold War and repeatedly warned the public that Britain's conventional weakness could be exploited by the Soviet Union in Central Europe.

RG: And so that helps to explain the motivation behind this particular book, which definitely, while projecting the war eight years into the future is basically saying, boy, aren't we glad that

NATO built up its forces? Because if this war happened in 1977, we would have been in big trouble.

AS: Yes, I mean the story of how he came to write the novel is itself kind of remarkable. In 1977 he published a memoir called *I was a Stranger*, which was about his experience being hidden by the Dutch underground, and Hackett, among other things, was a deeply believing Christian, and in his account of his time in hiding, he wrote about kind of confronting his faith and the book was published to very, very little acclaim. It was kind of a strange book, neither fish nor fowl, but it attracted the attention of a London publisher, Sidgwick and Jackson, that had the idea that it might be commercially successful and useful to find a soldier who was willing to write a piece of speculative military fiction which they thought that the public was potentially interested in, and so they approached Hackett, who agreed if he was allowed to bring together a kind of team of experts to craft out a plot. That's something that I certainly want to talk about here is the process by which this this team assembled itself. But basically, they met at a bunch of London clubs where they drank heavily and talked about what the Third World War would look like. When you look at Hackett's papers in the Liddell Hart archives at Kings College London, which, if any of your listeners are interested in doing historical research, there are few better places in the world to do research in military history then the Liddell Hart archives at Kings College London. It is a tremendous repository. But it looks like it was a heck of a lot of fun putting this team together. It was retired military people, retired diplomats, a couple of journalists that sketched out this story about what the Third World War would look like.

RG: And I'm trying to remember because unfortunately, I don't have my paperback, my very beat up paperback copy at hand, but are any of the other authors directly cited anywhere in the book? I know that on the cover it just says General Sir John Hackett and colleagues. Does he say who these other people are in the book?

AS: The original plan was that the other authors were going to get some kind of credit, but that got more challenging. Several of them weren't fully retired yet, and so they couldn't have their names formally linked to it. A couple of others didn't end up delivering the quality of material that Hackett wanted. He complains frequently in his letters about having to rewrite things. His naval specialist wrote a version of the proposed war in the Atlantic that was so Britain-centric that it stretched the grounds of credibility and so Hackett had to sort of fire him. It was really quite a process, and there's also an element to this, which I think is really important and that is that there were a number of people who Hackett contacted who ended up not wanting to have their names formally associated with the book for different reasons. And that's something I think that might kind of be of interest to some of the listeners here. Hackett, as I said, was deeply connected with NATO and so he knew a number of the most important American generals at the time. And so bear in mind, this is the late 1970s. This is America's post-Vietnam Army. One of Hackett's closest American collaborators was William Depew, the legendary American general

and the man who was, at that point, just about to retire from his role commanding training and doctrine command, and the correspondence between Hackett and Depew is absolutely fascinating and this is a point that I want to want to stick with for a minute again, because of the nature of your audience. When you read Hackett's book, it's the Americans that really saved the day. It's like the U.S. Army on the southern flank of the NATO forces in Central Europe, which ultimately blunts and starts to roll back the Soviet offensive. It is a very muscular high-tech U.S. Army and you can see in the correspondence that in fact, Hackett's version of the U.S. Army is William Depew's version of the U.S. Army. And when you read Depew's letters to Hackett, and I'm going to quote just briefly here, Depew is writing a sort of fantasy version of what he thinks the America's post-Vietnam Army is. Depew writes to Hackett, "the U.S. Army was in far better shape than anyone, especially the Soviets realized, fully recovered from the Vietnam experience of the decade past. The process of rejuvenation, modernization and battle indoctrination had been pressed hard." Effectively, this is Hackett's version of the U.S. Army is taken from the mind of one of the visionary leaders of the U.S. Army. At the time though, Depew specifically asked Hackett not to give him credit, and the reason is that, as Depew said in his later correspondence, Hackett's vision of the Third World War has NATO failing to hold the German border and Depew had been a career long advocate of the principle of forward defense, that Germany's borders would be held and Depew said to Hackett, I won't have my name attached to a vision in which NATO is unable to defend the German borders. It's really kind of a remarkable piece of correspondence, but it points to this transatlantic connection in this transatlantic conversation that I think is critical if you're going to understand the way that this book came together, and if you're going to understand, frankly, America's post-Vietnam Army because there's a conversation going on between this retired British general and a retiring American general that helped to shape how Hackett saw the coming of the Third World War.

RG: Interesting. Well thank you. I want to bring you into this conversation, Tom Brusino. Based on what Adam was just saying, but also in general, what kind of value do we get out of out of rereading works like this that are clearly written for particular time and place? What can they teach us? And how do we think about how such works maintain their value even if their immediate meaning changes?

TB: Well, it's an interesting case because there's some great value to it. I was thinking about this when it comes to fiction in general, the way that people can kind of learn things. Historians, academics, we're kind of notoriously bad at teaching what we want to teach, right? We go into classes and we try to get stuff across the students and it's sort of a lost cause. And in some cases, it's just because of total lack of interest but in other cases, it's because ideas have been sort of seeped in on people through fiction, through movies, through other formats or TV and all of that. So this is kind of an interesting case of this. Depew's version is just one version of where the army is. He had a little bit more of a negative view and the focus on active defense and how effective it would be. He had a view that that would be effective, but that was kind of rejected by

a lot of other folks in the U.S. Army. So it's kind of like, used with care, maybe *Red Storm Rising* ends up kind of capturing a little bit of the reforms more developed version of what it would look like or what they thought it would look like. It's great because, it's sort of funny, it's great in a way because how many people would know what the Fulda Gap was if it wasn't for these kinds of books? And we use this term almost like it's a shorthand for folks, and it's because of this. As much as the actual training and people can understand what that means. So it's kind of a mixed bag with these. They can be kind of good and they can also then lead to sort of entrenched ideas that you can't unseat from people, and so they're kind of stuck in sort of thinking a certain way about stuff. And also, in this case too, I was reading something else recently that was kind of making a similar case to some of the stuff you see in here, and I've only read parts of this book, I haven't read this all way through yet. I've been enjoying Adam's writings about it as much as the book itself, but the idea of what kind of came out of the '73, the Arab Israeli War in 1973 and what came out of that and what they thought they knew about Warsaw Pact versus NATO technology and weapons and then how rapidly that changed. And you get this, 1991. Well beyond the calculations, the best hoped for calculations when you started putting that same kind of technology against each other where it was in the Gulf War. And this book sort of sits right on the sort of pivot there. So it's kind of interesting how accurate it is. There's no Abrams in this one. They're not there yet.

RG: There's no Abrams, there's no Bradley. There's a lot of stuff that's not there yet.

TB: So some of that is kind of missing, so you kind of see that a little bit of that, what's left over. And Depew is responding to that. The '73 war and if you look at the Army doctrine that he was most responsible for, the 1976 Operations Manual 100-5, it has graphics in it of ranges of weapons and effectiveness, comparisons of weapons, something you never saw in those kind of manuals ever before that or ever again after. Because of this little lab experiment that happened in the Middle East in 1973, I don't mean to diminish the war, but from the perspective of these military leaders in the Cold War, it's like this lab where they kind of look at these weapons and see what happens. So yeah, it's interesting. It's great to have some of these because it kind of puts you into these little spots and then you get to see kind of what's state of the art for a moment. You can learn something about it, but then you need to be careful because stuff changes and it is speculative.

RG: Right, and it changes very fast and so to go back to you, Adam. I had the quote, Callahan gave Carter a copy and then Carter kept it on his desk. We don't know for how long. We don't know how long it stayed there under the Bible, but what was the international reception of *The Third World War*?

AS: Yeah, that's a great question. It's a little bit difficult to sum up quickly just how big and influential this book was. The numbers are fairly straightforward. It sold 3 million copies. It

spent 40 weeks on the New York Times Bestseller List. 26 Editions, 10 languages. Nobody expected this book to be the kind of commercial success that it was, but the numbers alone don't convey just how big a book this was. One of the really striking things in doing the research for this piece was seeing the range of places where this book was reviewed and talked about. It was an absolute publishing sensation. A bookstore manager I quote in the article says that the only comparison you could make was to the Godfather, which I think is a very odd comparison, but there you go.

RG: Okay.

AS: It was a book, and part of the argument that I make in the article is that it was a book that was so successful and so influential because it was such a kind of global book. It was a book that let people in all different parts of the world think about war. And so it was reviewed and told and serialized in publications all over the world and one of my favorite examples was an article from the newspaper in Durban, South Africa, which was all about the part of *The Third World War* novel that was set in Africa. It was like the rest of the world hadn't happened. It was about the invasion of South Africa by Cuban troops in Hackett's book. And my other favorite thing about that review is that it had an author photo of Hackett, but somebody obviously got the photos confused, and it was in fact a photo of the then late German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer instead of Hackett. I don't laugh out loud often while doing research, but that made me laugh out loud. And in fact, the reason that I got into this book and then I wrote this article was that the larger book project that I'm working on is a social history of the U.S. Army in Germany during the Cold War and I was doing research for that and I kept running into these discussions of Hackett's book in the late 1970s in Germany. This book was an absolutely momentous bestseller in Germany, which was a complete shock. The Munich publisher, Bertelsmann, was going to publish a translation, but they didn't really want to because they didn't think it would sell and then Der Spiegel, the weekly newsmagazine, serialized the story and it took off, and Bertelsmann rushed it into translation. It's another one of these kind of international collaborations with this book. The German General Graf von Kielmansegg took over the translation of the book because he thought the German translator did a lousy job and Kielmansegg and Hackett were friends, and so Kielmansegg was keeping Hackett informed of all of this. Anyway, Kielmansegg wrote this extraordinary introduction to the German edition, where he cautioned German readers that while NATO troops in the book had fallen back from the German borders, that in the event of an actual war, he was confident that NATO could hold the inner German border. So in the case of the translation into German, it very much played into German security anxieties in the late 1970s, which then dovetailed really nicely with what—and of course Hackett had no control over this—what subsequently happened, which is the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the ratcheting up of Cold War tensions, and the NATO dual track decision which brought nuclear weapons very much into the forefront of discussions about European security in a way that they hadn't been before.

RG: Very true. And of course, one of the ironies—once again spoiler alert for those of you who haven't had a chance to read this book the 43 years since it was published—that nuclear weapons play a minor role in the Third World War. Well they play a significant role in bringing it to an end, but there is not the kind of massive battlefield exchange of nuclear weapons that people were afraid of, nor does the one exchange of nuclear weapons lead to a strategic launch, which I wonder if that doesn't also reflect sort of, let's say, the Army focus of the people who wrote it. They do talk about the Air Force, they talk about the airlift of equipment across the Atlantic, but there's not a lot of air-land battle, or what air-land battle takes place in this book is very much conventional.

TB: So, Ron, I think that this is an important point about this book and its popularity if I was guessing here. With the advent of nuclear weapons, you have what I would argue is probably the only time you have something that potentially is an actual paradigm shift in military affairs, in war. All of the old language goes out, war itself is the enemy. If anything, if a war breaks out, it's a world ender. All the other stuff we used to use to describe it goes away, and one of these things that you kind of see this pushback against is from time to time and the Cold War is that oh yeah, well maybe it'll just be unconventional wars, proxy wars or proxy conventional wars around conventional wars under the umbrella, under this threat of nuclear weapons. But really, a lot of the intellectual energy and a lot of the popular culture both in the '70s and later and especially in the '80s, went to this kind of apocalyptic world ending scenarios: war, nukes, it's Mad Max time, let's roll. It's Fury Road if you want to get really crazy. So I think the idea that you could have a war and it could actually still look like kind of a normal war. We kind of make fun of it like, oh yeah, they want to have this view but inside the militaries, because the Army wants to have a role in this and it's not just an Air Force show and a missile show. But they were right. We did fight a bunch of conventional wars.

RG: And we have not, at least as of the time we're recording right now, we have not had the apocalypse yet.

TB: Yeah, let's be careful, it's 2020. Let's knock on wood about this. We still have a month and a half ago here so this could go poorly, so let's not tempt fate on this too much. But so far, we're doing okay with it. So yeah, I mean it is important. I think that sort of glimmer of hope, we talk about that in war, maybe we could just fight a regular war is kind of a glimmer of hope, and I think that that sort of resonated with people when everything else you're getting is day after kind of stuff, and you know Terminator and 4 Games and all the kind of game theory stuff that was very dominating in security studies. So you got these kind of guys who are sort of below that level just sort of toiling away. But, what if a fight breaks out and we don't use nukes? Or we don't primarily use nukes. It doesn't go to enough nukes to destroy the world six times over so I think that's part of why this book resonates and why it's sort of worth reading again.

RG: Right, go ahead Adam.

AS: If I may, the issue of the nuclear exchange and broadly for your listeners when the Soviet invasion starts to go awry, the Soviet leadership sends a small nuclear missile to destroy Birmingham and NATO, in response, destroys Minsk. It's clear from the correspondence that that in fact, Hackett and his team really wrestled with which cities to destroy. I think they took some glee out of destroying Birmingham, but they weren't sure about Minsk. And in fact, there's a wonderful piece of correspondence where the Russian exile community in London complained vociferously about the destruction of Minsk. And so there was some discussion that if the book was ever translated into Eastern European languages, they'd need to change the city.

RG: Do we know if they did Adam?

AS: They did not. There was discussion, but they did not. But on more sort of larger scale, the fact that there's a limited nuclear exchange was really important, because Hackett thought, privately, that the book was way too optimistic, but an awful lot of readers thought that losing two cities and millions of people was kind of pessimistic. And this became an issue when Reagan in 1984, kind of out of nowhere, said that this was one of the most important books he'd ever read. He put together a list of the three most important books he'd ever read, and this was one of them. And there was some kind of concern among parts of the American press that the President was endorsing a book where there was a nuclear exchange. Well, two years later, Tom Clancy published *Red Storm Rising*, in which the story is broadly the same, except there's no atomic exchange and that became Reagan's kind of go-to reference replacing *The Third World War* and the difference is, *Red Storm Rising* does not end with two smoldering ruins where Minsk and Birmingham used to be.

RG: Right and of course, that is the fascinating thing about fiction that claims to be both speculative and instructive in a way is when push comes to shove, the authors will make literary choices, and going back to what Tom suggested, certain books are more fun to read when they don't result in the destruction of all of humanity. And that sort of appeals in a particular way which leads me to sort of our final thoughts here. We only have about 5 minutes left, but I wanted to ask, based on the various genres we're talking about here, the techno-thriller or the Third World War kind of book, do either of you have any books that you would especially like to recommend in this genre for our listeners? I'll start with you, Adam.

AS: Sure, thanks. So writing this article and doing this project gave me an opportunity to go back and reread a bunch of military speculative fiction that I read as a kid, which was in the 1980s, which was a lot of fun. Many of these books, including, I should add *The Third World War*, are not great pieces of literature. With that proviso in mind, a couple of books that really

sort of jump out at me, one of them, a book that I hadn't looked at in years before I started this, was H.G. Wells 1907 novel *The War in the Air*, which is absolutely fascinating, not as a depiction of military aviation, because that really wasn't a thing yet, but as a vision of what war might look like in the future. This is not a book that I think we need to read as a predictor of what the future looked like, but as a vision of what a very, very smart sort of intellectual thinking about social change thought about war at the turn of the 20th century. So that's one I would recommend. And then a different book with a similar title, perhaps coming a bit more from out in left field. Karel Čapek's 1936 novel *War with the Newts*, which is a little bit difficult to summarize quickly. It is a book about European politics in the 1930s, told from the perspective of a small country, Czechoslovakia, in the heart of Europe if the greatest threat to world security was a race of super-intelligent salamanders. I know I'm not doing a great job of selling the book, but you have to read it. It's an absolutely tremendous and deeply funny book about the 1930s and about what international and national security looked like in Central Europe in the 1930s. Karel Čapek's *War with the Newts*, I can't recommend it strongly enough.

RG: Alright, well I like the sound of that. Tom, do you have anything to compete with super intelligent salamanders?

TB: Yeah, I think people have seen a lot of those in terms of a lot of the back and forth, kind of Watchmen and potentially apocalyptic or apocalyptic ones that have been out there. In terms of like maybe a dusty shelves or recommendation, if somebody wanted to take a swing at something like *A Canticle for Leibowitz* would be an interesting one. I think maybe there's not enough space in ours to do it justice in terms of the themes that it's dealing with, but maybe in terms of capturing this. There's sort of different reactions. Something interesting, David Brooks called this Elephantiasis of Reason that happens in the Cold War where you try to make international affairs and strategic studies a math problem. That happens really strong after World War II. We solve this with technology. We can solve everything with technology kind of thing that happens—hyper rationalism. And in the aftermath of that, beneath that, there's this kind of religious aspect going on in culture too. And I think *The Canticle for Leibowitz*, using the same sort of post-apocalyptic in a very odd interesting way that I could never entirely wrap my arms around and figure out exactly what's going on in this book, but it might be interesting if somebody has strong views on that, that'd be an interesting one. And it's a good book to read anyway.

RG: Absolutely.

TB: That's one. It's never been out of print and it's fairly well-known, but not as well-known as it used to be, and it might be one that, like, hey, there's some deeper issues in some of the stuff that we talk about that's worth looking at again and to sort of put up against something like the kind of Peter Singer stuff that we have now, the future speculative nonfiction that we have now or fiction like *Ghost Fleet* and the new one, I can't remember the name of the new one that they just

came out with but it's doing sort of similar stuff. These other ones kind of get at some deeper themes and civilization and what does civilization mean and what does it mean when it goes away? So that's an interesting one. It might be one to look at.

RG: Excellent. Go ahead, Adam.

AS: If I could add, I think Tom's point is really well taken, and one of the things that struck me about Hackett is the degree to which reviewers and readers have used Hackett as a way of understanding subsequent pieces of military speculative fiction. There's a wonderful review of Singer and Cole's book *Ghost Fleet* by Admiral James Stavridis in which Stavridis says, essentially, this is the heir to Hackett's Third World War and if you need confirmation of that, a brief internet search will yield you lots of poorly written internet reviews that make that comparison. So it's a book that's had some real staying power, and that I think in very direct ways has shaped subsequent efforts at military speculative fiction in ways that sometimes even I think the authors don't fully grasp.

RG: Well that's great. Well thank you, both of you. I have to say at the risk of self-promotion, a year and a half ago I wrote an essay on *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, which anybody who wants to look it up on the internet. Unfortunately, it's not for the War Room so I can't mention the outlet directly, but it's a great book and I'm interested in how we think about how Hackett is continued. I will throw in one book, an older book that I think is very worthwhile is Don DeLillo's novel, *End Zone*, which manages to describe the problem of nuclear strategy with relationship to the struggles of a small college football team in Texas, written about in 1972. It has one chapter a specifically on the problem of a nuclear exchange that, if you're interested in these questions at all, you have to read. With all that in mind, unfortunately, we are just about out of time for today, so I want to thank Professor Adam Seipp for joining us to talk about his work. Thank you so much, Adam.

AS: Thanks a lot for having me.

RG: You bet. Thank you, Tom Brusino, for sharing your wisdom with us here on the War Room, and we hope we get some more contributors to the Dusty Shelves to keep Dr. Brusino busy. That's a very important thing for us to do here. And we thank all of you for listening in on today's podcast. Please send us your comments on this program and all of the programs and send us your suggestions for future discussions. We always are excited about any comments that you might have. Please take a minute to rate and review this podcast on the podcatcher of your choice. After you subscribe to A Better Peace, because of course you want to subscribe to A Better Peace, if you rate and review it helps others to find us which grows this community for these discussions, and we are always interested in having that community grow so that we can keep talking to all of you, but until next time from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.