

IDEAS & ISSUES (FUTURE CONFLICT)

Useful Fiction

Giving innovation the attention it requires

by August Cole

In Quantico's classrooms, Marines learn every day what it takes to become leaders in the Corps. It's a curriculum that spans urban tactics to the laws of armed conflict. One thing is missing from the coursework: science fiction writing.

Or at least it was until earlier this year.

In February, the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab's Futures Directorate organized a one-day workshop designed to develop science fiction vignettes for the *Marine Corps Security Environment Forecast*, the signature document laying out views of the world of 2030–2045. Drawing on the competitive spirit inherent to any Marine, the organizers sent out *MARADMIN 023/16, Marine Corps Warfighting Lab Science Fiction Futures Workshop Selection Results* (Washington, DC: 16 January 2016) that drew in more than 70 highly accomplished applicants from around the globe for approximately 18 spots. Facilitating the workshop was the Atlantic Council's The Art of the Future Project and Max Brooks (Atlantic Council senior fellow and author of *World War Z*), Charles E. Gannon (author of *Raising Caine*), and myself, director of The Art of the Future Project and coauthor of *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War*.

The workshop's proceedings underscored the assumption that the rapid march of technology, big demographic shifts, and newly capable adversaries on literally every continent will challenge the United States Armed Forces as never before. Though valiant efforts are made to figure out this near- and further-out future, the tyranny of the inbox and the priorities of the day often leave military leaders hamstrung. Moreover, as the Defense Department's outreach to Silicon Valley underscores, today there are

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immensely important ideas and innovation that don't get enough attention.

This is where science fiction writing can play. Using creative approaches like short stories, visual art, and other narrative techniques, Marines at all levels are allowed to battle test ideas and concepts before the stakes are life and death.

If you want to have an engaging conversation about how gene engineering or artificial intelligence will impact the future of the Marine Corps, create some memorable characters and send them on an unforgettable journey. This will shake up a status quo approach faster than any white paper. It will also test—usually safely—assumptions that superiors or peers may hold dear, but will do so in a way that opens up a conversation rather than gets dialogue shut down for threatening the status quo. After all, it's hard to get mad at the future.



August Cole, co-author of *Ghost Fleet*; Dr. Chuck Gannon, author of *Trial by Fire*; and Max Brooks, author of *World War Z*, share their thoughts during MCWL Futures Directorate and the Atlantic Council workshop. (Photo by Kyle Olson.)