The toy theory of western history
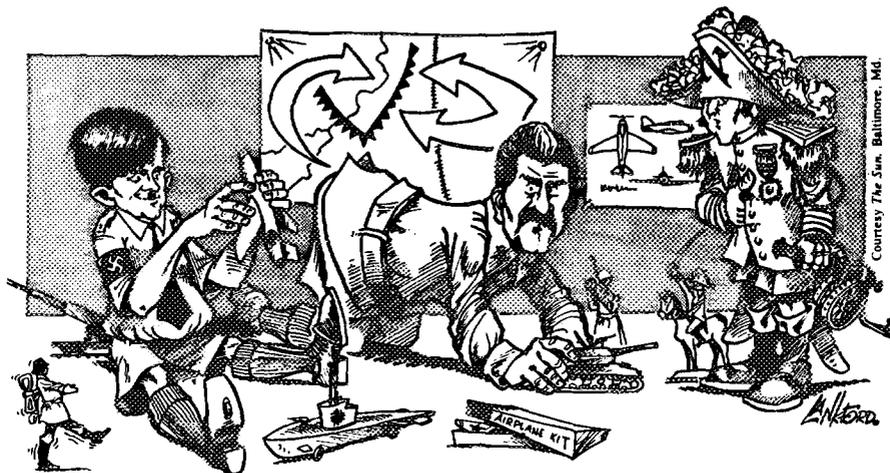
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The excess of militarism which has plagued Western society for the last century and a half is largely the result of a motivation which our society consistently underestimates. That motivation is very simply the desire to play with toys. The phrase "play with toys" is used here in the very broad sense of manipulating devices which are both novel and high-performance, devices which push the "state of the art."

The consequences of this seemingly harmless propensity have been extraordinarily significant and rather unfortunate. We have rationalized and built large military organizations primarily for the purpose of providing those technophiles among us with the opportunity to play with the neatest and newest toys. The military is in reality simply a gigantic communal toy-owning organization. That is its fascination and its true *raison d'être*.

The insidious nature of our predilection for toys lies not only in the consequences of the rationalizations that we have used, but in the blindness of the non-technophile to the importance that toys possess for a very major portion of our society.

The motivations of most people in the military are for the most part unrecognized, even by themselves. They are, like most of us, very unaware of their unconscious motivations. Those who are aware suppress it. Playing with toys is not perceived as a mature man-like thing to do in our society and, even if it were, the admission of it would jeopardize the military's existence by violating its rationale for existence. How many people are, on the face of it, willing to spend a vast amount of our national resources on a toy cooperative?

If the military functioned only as a toy-owning organization, its function would be innocuous enough. However, the problem is that once a military organization has been created, its momentum builds and there is a tendency to use the organization for its avowed purpose. This problem arises primarily because of society's refusal to admit the importance of toys as a form of manipulation.

The military and the technophiles must find a way of rationalizing their toy coop, and the rationalization takes the all-too-familiar form of "national defense," "national preparedness," "missile gap" and so on. This rationalization has been determined in large part by the nature of technology itself. The most enjoyable toys are the most powerful, those that push the state of the art the hardest. For the last 150 years the nature of technology itself has been such that those applications which pushed the state of the art have been defensible only for the military.

A P-40 is, for example, a far more exciting toy than a DC-3; a destroyer pushing its 2,000 tons with 60,000 horsepower offers a pleasure far more visceral than a freighter using a quarter of that power to push ten times that weight. The destroyer's power-to-weight ratio is greater by more than an order of magnitude.

If one wanted to design the "hottest"—toy jargon for the fastest, most powerful, highest performance—plane one could conceive, who could possibly justify it except the military? If one wanted to build, or fly, or merely be associated with a "hot" machine, there has been essentially no alternative to the military. Admittedly, when a technology is new, there may be alternatives to military design and procurement; the national air races of the 1930s were an example of advanced high performance design in a civilian

context. However, as technology grows more sophisticated, and as expenses escalate, the military tends to become the only supplier of the pleasures associated with extreme technological performance.

Democratic the military may not be, but it is in a sense a populist institution which can make available the toys of our culture to millions of people for whom they would have been otherwise unobtainable. Great personal wealth is the only alternative and not many of us are blessed with it.

Hippie Protest

The unconscious realization of this state of affairs was a major motivation behind the hippie movement, or "counterculture," of the 1960s. The hippies were saying, in effect: "Society, your goddam toys are dangerous; we want to substitute something else—love, drugs, beads." Hippies were also prisoners of our culture, and they were, unfortunately, in the main unaware of what they were really trying to say. They diluted and disguised their message with political propaganda, rationalizing their actions just as effectively as the technophiles rationalized theirs.

The irony is that while the technophiles' rationalizations continued to serve military purposes, the rationalizations of the hippies were counterproductive, alienating many of their potential supporters. For example, these unverbalized aims of the counterculture were what the policemen and the national guardsmen at the Chicago convention were responding to: the response of the child whose toy was threatened.

Despite the basic logic and relevance of the hippie protest, it was in a very real sense beside the point and after the fact. That is, new technology has been increasingly applicable directly to non-military applications. In this trend lies our hope of breaking the spiral of escalation. Toys are inevitable, and our task is to provide access to these fruits of technology *outside* the military, and to increase the opportunities for the public to participate in their pleasures.

Decreased Military Control

This trend away from military dominance of the forefront of technology is composed of three basic elements:

• One element has been the introduction of nuclear weapons. The nature of military hardware has been changed; it has been dehumanized. Destructive power has been incredibly concentrated, and the opportunity to play with the toys correspondingly lessened.

One individual ICBM in a silo in Montana contains far more destructive power than a squadron of 21, B-17s carrying ten men each, but delivers not nearly so much visceral excitement. Only a few men are directly involved, and their opportunity to "practice" with their toys is severely limited—indeed, it becomes a matter of congressional debate. This perhaps is part of the motivation for manned bombers and submarine-launched ballistic missiles—if the missiles are no longer adequate toys because practice is limited, the old standbys can be called upon and justified as new

"delivery systems." In this context, the development of small "clean" nuclear warheads, and talk of limited nuclear war is a disturbing regression.

• Involvement with the military's most impressive hardware has also been limited to a select few. Increasingly, the military provides sport for spectators rather than direct participation. And the stronger this trend becomes, the greater the importance of NASA's better-quality, toy-dominated spectaculars. These spectator sports—NASA and manned-space exploration (now sadly moribund)—are the second element.

The visceral thrill, the gut-filling rumble, that a Saturn V provides is important and will be so as long as man occupies a physical self. The point is that a civilian organization, NASA, has toys the military cannot match—fascinating powerful toys that are also of relative safety to society.

• The third and most important element has been the introduction of the computer. The computer is a toy of such a vast spectrum of potential use that the military can dominate only a very small part of it. Any university computation center, or any major industrial organization, has computers of a power that are quite comparable to what the military possesses.

Computer as a Toy

A further consequence of the unique nature of the computer, and one that is equally as important, is that not only is the hardware *availa-*ble outside the military but the most interesting and satisfying opportunities to *use* that hardware are also in the non-military sector.

That is, even if the DC-3 had possessed the performance potential of a P-40, a commercial pilot, with passengers or cargo aboard, simply would never have an opportunity to "wring his plane out" in the fashion of a military pilot. But with computer technology, this position is reversed. The opportunity to put a computer through its paces is far greater in the groves of academe than in any military organization.

The computer is, in fact, a machine with an entirely new set of constraints. The most exotic use of a computer puts no more strain on any given logic circuit than does the most trivial use. The constraints are now a function of how the organization defines its role, and in this context a military rationalization becomes a constraining influence.

With pre-computer toys—aircraft, guns, motorcycles, whatever—the fascination was, in effect, with how much the toy could extend one's self—how much it could put onto you. On the other hand, with a computer the fascination is with what one puts into the toy.

At first glance, this sounds ominous, regressive: once we received from the machine; now we give to it. But now we have a toy that extends not our limbs, but our minds. When we create knowledge to impart it elsewhere, to man or machine, we have not lost but gained. A computer is a toy unique in its capacity for non-destructive manipulation—no

other device can be "floorboarded" so safely.

A trend toward decreasing military control of our toys is obviously one to be encouraged. Along these lines some suggestions and ideas are herewith offered:

• We should promote the rapid acquisition of computer expertise by societies other than our own, particularly Soviet and Chinese societies, and embargoes and restricted lists should be modified. Perhaps we should give computers to the Soviet Union and to China—even parachute them in.

• We should continue with manned space exploration. There is no real need for space exploration to be a race. Indeed, it can be a very appropriate vehicle for international cooperation. However, it must be supported at a level that will allow it to maintain a technology that is substantially in advance of the military. We must also admit that an element of the spectacular is a necessary and a quite legitimate aspect of exploration. "Space spectacular" should no longer be a phrase of condescension.

• Not all of us are intrigued by computers, however, and the need to provide non-military access to "traditional" toys is of equally great importance. Given the nature of modern military weapons, the speed with which we can provide this access becomes crucial. Dare we simply wait for the slow evolution of the trends described above?

• An even more direct solution was hinted at earlier: a direct substitute for the military—a straightforward government-supported organization or agency whose explicit purpose is to provide access to toys.

Such an agency need not start with its own toys, it need only provide access—the establishment's equivalent to the *Whole Earth Catalog*.

• It has been a stock remark for years among technophiles that the government could reduce its defense budget simply by charging for access to its toys: renting brief rides in an F-4 with supersonic speeds guaranteed; holding public firepower demonstrations; selling space aboard a destroyer for a weekend of antisubmarine warfare operations.

• There is, of course, no requirement that this "toy access department" (TAD, a division of HEW) specialize in military toys. Many technophiles covet, for example, the chance to operate powerful Peterbilt's (if all the legendary prowess of Rolls Royce, Bugatti and Ferrari were combined in one automobile, that car would be to cars what Peterbilt is to trucks) or GGI's (the classic electric locomotive). What is crucial is that the hurdles obstructing non-military access to toys be drastically lowered.

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The military problem has arisen not only from the nature of technology itself but also from the refusal of decision-makers and opinion leaders to legitimize toy manipulation as a socially acceptable goal, and from their maladaptive acceptance of the abstraction of "defense" as the major rationale for providing access to toys. The furtherance of toy manipulation for its own sake must be legitimized as a national goal. □