

2034: A Novel of the Next World War

What a US nuclear war with China would look like

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Former NATO commander James Stavridis and novelist Elliot Ackerman have published a book depicting how the deepening conflict between the United States and China could escalate into a nuclear world war costing tens of millions of lives.

The book, entitled *2034: A Novel of the Next World War*, should serve as a warning to millions of people of what is threatened by the massive new nuclear arms race initiated by the United States and its allies targeting China.

2034 is co-written by a man who would be a leading architect of such a war. Stavridis was one of the Pentagon's most prominent political commanders, having been vetted as a potential running mate by the Clinton campaign and a possible secretary of state by President-elect Donald Trump in the fall of 2016.

A retired four-star Navy admiral, he served as NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe from 2009 to 2013, after serving as the head of U.S. Southern Command and U.S. European Command.

Stavridis has decades of experience related to US weapons of mass destruction, "beginning with my first job as a division officer on a destroyer, where I crafted a long-range plan for the maintenance and inspection of our onboard nuclear weapons," he writes in his memoirs.

Like many generals, Stavridis believes it is better for the United States to achieve its geopolitical aims without resorting to mass murder. But if war cannot be avoided and the bloodletting is to commence, "we must be prepared to fight and win," as he writes in a recent op-ed in the *Washington Post*.

2034 is the fusion of two genres: the Pentagon tabletop exercise and the airport thriller. Its cookie-cutter characters and worn-out plot tropes do not merit paraphrase or examination.

The tabletop military exercise proceeds as follows. During a freedom of navigation exercise in the South China Sea taking place in the year 2034, a group of US frigates board a Chinese civilian vessel in distress. The Americans learn the vessel houses sensitive technology and seize it. While the operation is underway, the US vessels are attacked by a Chinese fleet, which totally paralyzes them using advanced cyberweapons.

When the US dispatches two aircraft carrier battle groups to the Pacific in a show of force, a total of 40 American ships are sunk with negligible Chinese losses. The numbers are not quantified, but some tens of thousands of American sailors, airmen, and marines must have lost their lives.

In response, Washington launches a nuclear weapon at a Chinese coastal city, against which Beijing retaliates by launching a nuclear attack on San Diego, California and Galveston, Texas. The US retaliates by obliterating Shanghai, one of the world's largest and most important cities.

Stavridis writes that after an American nuclear attack on Shanghai, "These many months later the city remained a charred, radioactive wasteland. The death toll had exceeded thirty million. After each of the nuclear attacks international markets plummeted. Crops failed. Infectious diseases spread. Radiation poisoning promised to contaminate generations. The devastation exceeded... capacity for comprehension."

The American survivors of a Chinese nuclear attack on San Diego are left to live in "wretched camps," where "cyclical outbreaks of typhus, measles, and even smallpox often sprouted from the unbilged latrines and rows of plastic tenting."

This appears to be a vision of hell. But it must be stated bluntly that even this depiction falls far, far short of the

actual effects of a nuclear world war.

By training and temperament, Stavridis is largely incapable of viewing the world through the eyes of anyone besides a military officer or “national security” bureaucrat. “Ordinary” people are not described. The various protagonists take the lives of millions, and it is very hard on them, and the reader is supposed to sympathize.

In Stavridis’ account, the decisions governing the conflict are made by largely rational and analytical military technocrats. Elected leaders notionally exist, and they sometimes take actions that impinge upon the narrative, but it is the military officials that largely guide the action. Just as politicians have little impact on the plot, social dynamics and popular opinion are largely ignored.

The United States carries out a nuclear attack on a Chinese port city, and it appears to have no domestic social effect, except to lead the public to bray for blood.

Millions are killed, tens of millions are displaced domestically in the United States. In one single incident—the nuclear bombing of Shanghai—the United States carries out an act of mass murder surpassing in scale the *vernichtungskrieg* (war of extermination) waged by Nazi Germany in the Eastern front over four years.

Amid all of this, there is no domestic social response. The end of World War I toppled the Russian, Austrian, Ottoman, and German empires in a massive revolutionary upheaval. The end of the Second World War completely redrew the map of Europe. But in Stavridis’ account, the population somehow remains complacent throughout a third world war while millions are slaughtered.

This has nothing to do with the real world, dominated by class polarization and conflict. War will be accompanied by massive state repression. The pretext for a domestic crackdown and the need to divert intense internal social conflicts outward are, in fact, among the major unstated reasons why ruling classes are embarking upon military confrontations that can end in the acts of mass murder depicted in *2034*.

Finally, the military dynamics are themselves totally unrealistic. The central assumption of the book is that there exists such a thing as a “tactical” nuclear war. Military actions are calmly and rationally discussed and deliberated.

Even so, it is only through an absurd and unbelievable plot twist that a strategic nuclear exchange is avoided. In a ridiculous *deus ex machina*, India attacks both Chinese and US vessels, bringing about an end to the war.

There is no such thing as a “tactical” nuclear world war. There has never been a full-scale war between two countries armed with nuclear weapons. More importantly, there has never been a full-scale war between “great powers” armed with 21st century technology.

The range, cheapness, and speed of offensive weapons, including drones and high-speed missiles, will mean that a third world war will be conducted everywhere at once, at dizzying speed and complexity. The logic of these phenomena—the complexity of global relations and domestic opposition, the expansion of the battlefield to the entire globe, the delegation of warfare to artificial intelligence—makes nuclear war impossible to control and limit to the “tit-for-tat” military exchanges depicted in the book.

A normal person, that is, one for whom moral derangement is not a professional requirement, would read Stavridis’ book with horror and do everything to avoid the massive level of death it depicts. But the fact is that, for its intended audience within the Beltway and the Pentagon, the tactical nuclear exchanges depicted in the book, constitute, in the words of *Dr. Strangelove’s* Gen. Buck Turgidson, “getting our hair mussed”—an entirely acceptable consequence of the use of nuclear weapons.

Stanley Kubrick’s masterful *Dr. Strangelove*, Sidney Lumet’s *Fail Safe*, and, more obliquely, John Frankenheimer’s *Seven Days in May* (all released in 1964) were scathing critiques of the military and of nuclear war. No such critical works are being written and produced today, and ground has been ceded to Stavridis’ sanitized depiction of nuclear war from the standpoint of a practitioner.

2034 is a wake-up call. The US military is actively planning and discussing a nuclear war, based on the false claim that such wars can be managed and contained. No, they cannot. Nuclear war threatens the annihilation of humanity. These well-advanced war plans must be opposed and stopped before it is too late.



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