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Cover: Map of Paris published in 1847 depicting Baron Georges Eugène Haussman's plan to transform Paris into "the capital of capitals." In red are the networks of new streets and boulevards and in green are the parks. Courtesy of the New York City Public Library.

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SPEED AND POLITICS

An Essay on Dromology

Paul Virilio

Translated by Mark Polizzotti

The State of Emergency

Speed is the essence of war.

— Sun Tzu

THE REDUCTION OF distances has become a strategic reality bearing incalculable economic and political consequences, since it corresponds to the negation of space.

The maneuver that once consisted in *giving up ground to gain Time* loses its meaning: at present, gaining Time is exclusively a matter of vectors. Territory has lost its significance in favor of the projectile. *In fact, the strategic value of the non-place of speed has definitively supplanted that of place*, and the question of possession of Time has revived that of territorial appropriation.

In this geographic contraction, which resembles the terrestrial movement described by Alfred Wegener, the binomial “fire movement” takes on a new meaning: the distinction between fire’s *power to destroy* and the *power to penetrate* of movement, of the vehicle, is losing its “validity.”¹

With the supersonic vector (airplane, rocket, airwaves), penetration and destruction become one. The instantaneousness of action at a distance corresponds to the defeat of the unprepared

adversary, but also, and especially, to the defeat of the world as a field, as distance, as matter.

Immediate penetration, or penetration that is approaching immediacy, becomes identified with the instantaneous destruction of environmental conditions, since after *space-distance*, we now lack *time-distance* in the increasing acceleration of vehicular performances (precision, distance, speed).

From this point on, the binomial *fire-movement* exists only to designate a double movement of implosion and explosion; *the power of implosion* revives the old subsonic vehicles' (means of transportation, projectiles) power to penetrate, and *the power of explosion* revives the destructive power of classical molecular explosives. In this paradoxical object, *simultaneously explosive and implosive*, the new war machine combines a double disappearance: *the disappearance of matter in nuclear disintegration* and *the disappearance of places in vehicular extermination*.

Nonetheless, we should note that the disintegration of matter is constantly deferred in the deterrent equilibrium of peaceful coexistence, but not so the extermination of distances. In less than half a century, geographical spaces have kept shrinking as speed has increased. And if at the beginning of the 1940s we still had to count the speed of naval "strike power"—the major destructive power of the time—in *knots*, by the beginning of the 1960s this rapidity was measured in *machs*, in other words in thousands of kilometers per hour. And it is likely that current high energy research will soon allow us to reach the speed of light with laser weapons.

If, as Lenin claimed, "strategy means choosing which points we apply force to," we must admit that these "points," today, are no longer *geostrategic strongpoints*, since from *any given spot* we

can now reach any other, no matter where it may be, in record time and within several meters...

We have to recognize that *geographic localization* seems to have definitively lost its strategic value and, inversely, that this same value is attributed to *the delocalization of the vector*, of a vector in permanent movement—no matter if this movement is aerial, spatial, underwater or underground. All that counts is the speed of the moving body and the undetectability of its path.

From the war of movement of mechanized forces, we reach the *strategy of Brownian movements*, a kind of chronological and pendular war that revives ancient popular and geographic warfare by a geostrategic homogenization of the globe. This homogenization was already announced in the nineteenth century, notably by the Englishman Mackinder in his theory of the "World-Island," in which Europe, Asia and Africa would compose a single continent to the detriment of the Americas—a theory that seems to have come to fruition today with the disqualification of localizations. But we should note that the indifferenciation of geostrategic positions is not the only effect of vectorial performances, for after the homogenization sought and finally acquired by naval and aerial imperialism, *strategic spatial miniaturization* is now the order of the day.

In 1955 General Chassin stated, "The fact that the earth is round has not been sufficiently studied from the military point of view." No sooner said than done. But in the ballistic progress of weapons, the curvature of the earth has not stopped shrinking. It is no longer the continents that become agglomerated, but the totality of the planet that is diminished, depending on the progress of the arms "race." The continental translation that, curiously enough, we find both in the geophysician Wegener,

with the drift of land masses, and in Mackinder, with the geopolitical amalgam of lands, has given way to a world wide phenomenon of terrestrial and technological contraction that today makes us penetrate into an artificial topological universe: *the direct encounter of every surface on the globe.*

The ancient inter-city duel, war between nations, the permanent conflict between naval empires and continental powers have all suddenly disappeared, giving way to an unheard of opposition: *the juxtaposition of every locality, all matter.* The planetary mass becomes no more than a "critical mass," a precipitate resulting from the extreme reduction of contact time, a fearsome friction of places and elements that only yesterday were still distinct and separated by a buffer of distances, which have suddenly become anachronistic. In *The Origin of Continents and Oceans*, published in 1915, Alfred Wegener writes that in the beginning *the earth can only have had but one face*, which seems likely, given the capacities for interconnection. In the future the earth will have but one interface...

If speed thus appears as the essential fall out of styles of conflicts and cataclysms, the current "arms race" is in fact only *"the arming of the race" toward the end of the world as distance, in other words as a field of action.*

The term "deterrence" points to the ambiguity of this situation, in which the weapon replaces the protection of armor, in which the possibilities of offense and offensive ensure in and of themselves the defense, the entire defensive against the "explosive" dimension of strategic arms, but not at all against the "implosive" dimension of the vectors' performances, since on the contrary the maintenance of a credible "strike power" requires the constant refining of the engines' power, in other

words of their ability to reduce geographic space to nothing or almost nothing.

In fact, without the violence of speed, that of weapons would not be so fearsome. *In the current context, to disarm would thus mean first and foremost to decelerate*, to defuse the race toward the end. *Any treaty that does not limit the speed of this race* (the speed of means of communicating destruction) *will not limit strategic arms*, since from now on the essential object of strategy consists in maintaining the non-place of a general delocalization of means that alone still allows us to gain fractions of seconds, which gain is indispensable to any freedom of action. As General Fuller wrote, "When the combatants threw javelins at each other, the weapon's initial speed was such that one could see it on its trajectory and parry its effects with one's shield. But when the javelin was replaced by the bullet, the speed was so great that parry became impossible." Impossible to move one's body out of the way, but possible if one moved out of the weapon's range; possible as well through the shelter of the trench, greater than that of the shield—possible, in other words, through space and matter.

Today, the reduction of warning time that results from the supersonic speeds of assault leaves so little time for detection, identification and response that in the case of a surprise attack the supreme authority would have to risk abandoning his supremacy of decision by authorizing the lowest echelon of the defense system to immediately launch anti-missile missiles. The two political superpowers have thus far preferred to avoid this situation through negotiations, renouncing anti-missile defense at the same time.

Given the lack of space, an active defense requires at least the

material time to intervene. But *these* are the “war materials” that disappear in the acceleration of the means of communicating destruction. There remains only a passive defense that consists less in reinforcing itself against the megaton powers of nuclear weapons than in a series of constant, unpredictable, aberrant movements, movements which are thus strategically effective—for at least a little while longer, we hope. In fact, war now rests entirely on the deregulation of time and space. This is why the *technical* maneuver that consists in complexifying the vector by constantly improving its performances has now totally supplanted *tactical* maneuvers on the terrain, as we have seen. General Ailleret points this out in his history of weapons by stating that *the definition of arms programs has become one of the essential elements of strategy*. If in ancient conventional warfare we could still talk about army maneuvers in the fields, in the current state of affairs, if this maneuver still exists, it no longer needs a “field.” The invasion of the instant succeeds the invasion of the territory. The countdown becomes the scene of battle, the final frontier.

The opposing sides can easily ban bacteriological, geodesic or meteorological warfare. In reality, what is currently at stake with strategic arms limitation agreements (SALT I) is no longer the explosive but the vector, *the vector of nuclear deliverance*, or more precisely its performances. The reason for this is simple: where the molecular or nuclear explosive’s blast made a given area unfit for existence, that of the implosive (vehicles and vectors) suddenly reduces reaction time, and the time for political decision, to nothing. If over thirty years ago the nuclear explosive completed the cycle of *spatial wars*, at the end of this century the implosive (beyond politically and economically

invaded territories) inaugurates *the war of time*. In full peaceful coexistence, without any declaration of hostilities, and more surely than by any other kind of conflict, rapidity delivers us from this world. We have to face the facts: today, speed is war, the last war.

But let’s go back to 1962, to the crucial events of the Cuban missile crisis. At that time, the two superpowers had *fifteen minutes’* warning time for war. The installation of Russian rockets on Castro’s island threatened to reduce the Americans’ warning to thirty seconds, which was unacceptable for President Kennedy, whatever the risks of his categorical refusal. We all know what happened: the installation of a *direct line*—the “hot line”—and the interconnection of the two Heads of State!

Ten years later, in 1972, when the normal warning time was down to several minutes—ten for ballistic missiles, a mere two for satellite weapons—Nixon and Brezhnev signed the first strategic arms limitation agreement in Moscow. In fact, this agreement aims less at the quantitative limitation of weapons (as its adversary/partners claim) than at the preservation of a properly “human” political power, since the constant progress of rapidity threatens from one day to the next to reduce the warning time for nuclear war *to less than one fatal minute*—thus finally abolishing the Head of State’s power of reflection and decision in favor of a pure and simple *automation* of defense systems. The decision for hostilities would then belong only to several strategic computer programs. *After having been* (because of its destructive capacities) *the equivalent of total war*—the nuclear missile launching submarine alone is able to destroy 500 cities—*the war machine suddenly becomes* (thanks to the reflexes of the strategic calculator) *the very decision for war*.

What will remain, then, of the “political reasons” for deterrence? Let us recall that in 1962, among the reasons that made General de Gaulle decide to have the populations ratify the decision to elect the President of the Republic by universal suffrage, there was the credibility of deterrence, the legitimacy of the referendum being a fundamental element of this very deterrence. What will remain of all this in the automation of deterrence? in the automation of decision?

The transition *from the state of siege* of wars of space to *the state of emergency* of the war of time only took several decades, during which the political era of the statesman was replaced by the apolitical era of the State apparatus. Facing the advent of such a regime, we would do well to wonder about what is much more than a temporal phenomenon.

At the close of our century, *the time of the finite world is coming to an end*; we live in the beginnings of a paradoxical *miniaturization of action*, which others prefer to baptize *automation*. Andrew Stratton writes, “We commonly believe that automation suppresses the possibility of human error. In fact, it transfers that possibility from the action stage to the conception stage. We are now reaching the point where the possibilities of an accident during the critical minutes of a plane landing, if guided automatically, are fewer than if a pilot is controlling it. We might wonder if we will ever reach the stage of automatically controlled nuclear weapons, in which the margin of error would be less than with human decision. But the possibility of this progress threatens to reduce to little or nothing the time for human decision to intervene in the system.”

This is brilliant. Contraction in time, the disappearance of the territorial space, after that of the fortified city and armor, leads to

a situation in which the notions of “before” and “after” designate only the future and the past in a form of war that causes the “present” to disappear in the instantaneousness of decision.

The final power would thus be less one of imagination than of anticipation, so much so that to govern would be *no more than* to foresee, simulate, memorize the simulations; that the present “Research Institute” could appear to be the blueprint of this final power, the power of utopia.

The loss of material space leads to the government of nothing but time. *The Ministry of Time* sketched in each vector will finally be accomplished following the dimensions of the biggest vehicle there is, the *State-vector*. The whole geographic history of the distribution of land and countries would stop in favor of a single *regrouping of time*, power no longer being comparable to anything but a “meteorology.” In this precarious fiction speed would suddenly become a destiny, a form of progress, in other words a “civilization” in which each speed would be something of a “region” of time.

As Mackinder said, forces of pressure are always exerted in the same direction. Now, this single direction of geopolitics is that which leads to the immediate *commutation* of things and places. War is not, as Foch claimed, harboring illusions on the future of chemical explosives, “a worksite of fire.” War has always been a worksite of movement, a speed-factory. *The technological breakthrough*, the last form of the war of movement, ends up, with deterrence, at the dissolution of what *separated* but also *distinguished*, and this non-distinction corresponds for us to a political blindness.

We can verify it with General de Gaulle’s decree of January 7, 1959, suppressing the distinction between peacetime and

wartime. Furthermore, during this same period, and despite the Vietnamese exception that proves the rule, war has shrunk from several years to several days, even to several hours.

In the 1960s a mutation occurs: *the passage from wartime to the war of peacetime*, to that *total peace* that others still call “peaceful coexistence.” The blindness of the speed of means of communicating destruction is not a liberation from geopolitical servitude, but the extermination of space as the field of freedom of political action. We only need refer to the necessary controls and constraints of the railway, airway or highway infrastructures to see the fatal impulse: the more speed increases, the faster freedom decreases.

The apparatus’ self-propulsion finally entails the self-sufficiency of automation. What happens in the example of the racecar driver, who is no more than a worried lookout for the catastrophic probabilities of his movement, is reproduced on the political level as soon as conditions require an action in real time.²

Let us take, for example, a crisis situation: “From the very beginning of the Six Days’ War in 1967, President Johnson took control of the White House, one hand guiding the Sixth Fleet, the other on the hot line. The necessity of the link between the two became clearly apparent as soon as an Israeli attack against the American reconnaissance ship *Liberty* provoked the intervention of one of the fleet’s aircraft carriers. Moscow examined every blip on the radar screens as attentively as Washington did: would the Russians interpret the air planes’ change of course and their convergence as an act of aggression? This is where the hot line came in: Washington immediately explained the reasons for this operation and Moscow was reassured” (Harvey Wheeler).

In this example of strategic political action in real time, the Chief of State is in fact a “Great Helmsman.” But the prestigious

nature of the people’s historical guide gives way to the more prosaic and rather banal one of a “test pilot” trying to maneuver his machine in a very narrow margin. Ten years have passed since this “crisis state,” and the arms race has caused the margin of political security to narrow still further, bringing us closer to the critical threshold where the possibilities for properly human political action will disappear in a “State of Emergency;” where telephone communication between statesmen will stop, probably in favor of an interconnection of computer systems, modern calculators of strategy and, consequently, of politics. (Let us recall that the computers’ first task was to solve simultaneously a series of complex equations aimed at causing the trajectory of the anti-aircraft projectile and that of the airplane to meet.)

Here we have the fearsome telescoping of elements born of the “amphibious generations”; the extreme proximity of parties *in which the immediacy of information immediately creates the crisis*; the frailty of reasoning power, which is but the effect of a miniaturization of action—the latter resulting from the miniaturization of space as a field of action.

An imperceptible movement on a computer keyboard, or one made by a “skyjacker” brandishing a cookie box covered with masking tape, can lead to a catastrophic chain of events that until recently was inconceivable. We are too willing to ignore the fact that, alongside the threat of proliferation resulting from the acquisition of nuclear explosives by irresponsible parties, there is a proliferation of the threat resulting from the vectors that cause those who own or borrow them to become just as irresponsible.

In the beginning of the 1940s, Paris was a six-days’ walk from the border, a three-hours’ drive, and one hour by plane. Today the capital is only several minutes away from anywhere

else, and anywhere else is only several minutes away from its end—so much so that the tendency, which still existed several years ago, *to advance* one's destructive means closer to the enemy territory (as in the Cuban missile crisis) is reversing. The present tendency is toward geographic disengagement, a movement of *retreat* that is due only to the progress of the vectors and to the extension of their reach (cf. the American submarine *Trident*, whose new missiles can travel 8 to 10,000 kilometers, as opposed to the *Poseidon's* 4 to 5,000).

Thus, the different strategic nuclear forces (American and Soviet) will no longer need to patrol the area in the target continents; they can henceforth retreat within their territorial limits. This is confirmation that they are abandoning a form of geostrategic conflict. After the reciprocal renunciation of geodesic war, we will possibly see the abandonment of advanced bases, extending to America's extraordinary abandonment of its sovereignty over the Panama Canal... A sign of the times, of the time of the war of time.

Nonetheless, we must note that this strategic retreat no longer has anything in common with *the retreat* that allowed conventional armies to "gain time by losing ground." In the retreat due to the extended reach of the ballistic vectors, *we in fact gain time by losing the space of the (stationary or mobile) advanced bases, but this time is gained at the expense of our own forces*, of the performances of our own engines, and not at the enemy's expense, since, symmetrically, the latter accompanies this geostrategic disengagement. *Everything suddenly happens as if each protagonist's own arsenal became his (internal) enemy, by advancing too quickly*. Like the recoil of a firearm, the implosive movement of the ballistic performances diminishes the field of

strategic forces. In fact, if the adversary/partners didn't pull back their means of communicating destruction while lengthening their reach, the higher speed of these means would already have reduced the time of decision about their use to nothing. Just as in 1972, in Moscow, the partners in this game abandoned plans for an anti-missile missile defense, so five years later they wasted the advantage of swiftness for the very temporary benefit of a greater extension of their intercontinental missiles. Both seem to fear—all the while seeking—the multiplying effect of speed, of that *speed activity* so dear to all armies since the Revolution.

In the face of this curious contemporary *regression* of strategic arms limitation agreements, it is wise to return to the very principle of deterrence. The essential aim of throwing ancient weapons or of shooting off new ones has never been to kill the enemy or destroy his means, but to deter him, in other words, to *force him to interrupt his movement*. Regardless of whether this physical movement is one that allows the assailed to contain the assailant or one of invasion, "the aptitude for war is the aptitude for movement," which a Chinese strategist expressed in these words: "An army is always strong enough when it can come and go, spread out and regroup, as it wishes and when it wishes."

For the last several years, however, this freedom of movement has been hindered not by the enemy's capacity for resistance or reaction, but by the refinement of the vectors used. Deterrence seems to have passed suddenly from the fire stage, in other words the explosive stage, to that of the movement of vectors, as if a final degree of nuclear deterrence had appeared, still poorly mastered by the actors in the global strategic game. Here again, we must return to the strategic and tactical realities of weaponry in

order to grasp the present logistical reality. As Sun Tzu said, "Weapons are tools of ill omen." They are first feared and fearsome as *threats*, long before being used. Their "ominous" character can be split into three components:

The threat of their performance at the moment of their invention, of their production;

The threat of their use against the enemy;

The effect of their use, which is fatal for persons and destructive for their goods.

If these last two components are unfortunately known, and have long been experimented with, the first, on the other hand, *the (logistical) ill omen of the invention of their performance*, is less commonly recognized. Nonetheless, it is at this level that the question of deterrence is raised. *Can we deter an enemy from inventing new weapons, or from perfecting their performances?* Absolutely not.

We thus find ourselves facing this dilemma:

The threat of use (the second component) of the nuclear arm prohibits the terror of actual use (the third component). But for this threat to remain and allow the strategy of deterrence, we are forced to develop the threatening system that characterizes the first component: *the ill omen of the appearance of new performances for the means of communicating destruction*. Stated plainly, this is the perpetual sophistication of combat means and the replacement of the geostrategic breakthrough by the technological breakthrough, the great logistical maneuvers.

We must face the facts: if ancient weapons deterred us from interrupting movement, *the new weapons deter us from interrupting the arms race*. Moreover, they require in their technological (dromological) logic the exponential development, not of *the number*

of destructive machines, since their power has increased (simply compare the millions of projectiles in the two World Wars to the several thousands of rockets in contemporary arsenals), but of their global *performances*. Destructive capabilities having reached the very limits of possibility with thermonuclear arms, the enemy's "logistical strategies" are once more oriented toward power of penetration and flexibility of use.

The balance of terror is thus a mere illusion in the industrial stage of war, in which reigns a perpetual imbalance, a constantly raised bid, able to invent new means of destruction without end. We have proven ourselves, on the other hand, not only quite incapable of destroying those we've already produced (the "waste products" of the military industry being as hard to recycle as those of the nuclear industry), but especially incapable of avoiding the threat of their appearance.

War has thus moved from the action stage to the conception stage that, as we know, characterizes *automation*. Unable to control the emergence of new means of destruction, deterrence, for us, is tantamount to setting in place a series of automatisms, reactionary industrial and scientific procedures from which all political choice is absent. By becoming "strategic," in other words, by combining offense and defense, the new weapons deter us from interrupting the movement of the arms race, and the "logistical strategy" of their production becomes the inevitable production of destructive means as an obligatory factor of non-war—a vicious circle in which the inevitability of production replaces that of destruction. The war machine is now not only all of war, *but also becomes the adversary/partners' principal enemy* by depriving them of their freedom of movement.³ Dragged unwillingly into the "servitude without honor" of

deterrence, the protagonists henceforth practice the “politics of the worst,” or more precisely, the “apolitics of the worst,” which necessarily leads to the war machine one day becoming the very decision for war—thus accomplishing the perfection of its self-sufficiency, *the automation of deterrence*.

The suggestive juxtaposition of the terms *deterrence* and *automation* allows us to understand better the structural axis of contemporary military-political events, as H. Wheeler specifies: “Technologically possible, centralization has become politically necessary.” This shortcut recalls that of Saint-Just’s famous dictum: “When a people can be oppressed, it will be”—the difference being that this techno-logistical oppression no longer concerns only the “people,” but the “deciders” as well. If only yesterday the freedom of maneuver (that aptitude for movement which has been equated with the aptitude for war) occasionally required delegations of power up to the secondary echelons, the reduction of the margin of maneuver due to the progress of the means of communicating destruction causes an extreme concentration of responsibilities for the solitary decision-maker that the Chief of State has become. This contraction is, however, far from being complete; it continues according to the arms race, at the speed of the new capacities of the vectors, until one day it will dispossess this last man. In fact, the movement is the same that restrains the number of projectiles and that reduces to nothing or almost nothing the decision of an individual deprived of counsel. The maneuver is the same as the one that today leads us to abandon territories and advanced bases, and as the one that will one day lead us to renounce solitary human decision in favor of the absolute miniaturization of the political field which is *automation*.

If in Frederick the Great’s time *to win was to advance*, for the supporters of deterrence it is *to retreat*, to leave places, peoples and the individual where they are—to the point where dromological progress closely resembles the jet engine’s reaction propulsion, caused by the ejection of a certain quantity of movement (the product of a mass times a velocity) *in the direction opposite to the one we wish to take*.

In this *war of recession* between East and West—contemporary not with the illusory limitation of strategic arms, but with *the limitation of strategy itself*—the power of thermonuclear explosion serves as an artificial horizon for a race that is increasing the power of the vehicular implosion. The impossibility of interrupting the progress of the power of penetration, other than by an *act of faith* in the enemy, leads us to deny strategy as *prior knowledge*. The automatic nature not only of arms and means, but also of the command, is the same as denying our ability to reason: *Nicht raisonniren!* Frederick the Second’s order is perfected by a deterrence that leads us to reduce our freedom not only of action and decision, but also of conception. The logic of arms systems is eluding the military framework more and more, and moving toward the engineer responsible for research and development—in expectation, of course, of the system’s self sufficiency. Two years ago Alexandre Sanguinetti wrote, “It is becoming less and less conceivable to build attack planes, which with their spare parts cost several million dollars each, to transport bombs able to destroy a country railroad station. *It is simply not cost-effective.*” This logic of practical war, in which the operating costs of the (aerial) vector automatically entail the heightening of its destructive capability because of the requirements of transporting a tactical nuclear weapon, is not

limited to attack planes; it is also becoming the logic of the State apparatus. This backwardness is the logistical consequence of producing means to communicate destruction. *The danger of the nuclear weapon, and of the arms system it implies, is thus not so much that it will explode, but that it exists and is imploding in our minds.*

Let us summarize this phenomenon:

— Two bombs interrupt the war in the Pacific, and several dozen nuclear submarines are enough to ensure peaceful coexistence...

This is its *numerical* aspect.

— With the appearance of the multiple thermonuclear warhead and the rapid development of tactical nuclear arms, we see the miniaturization of explosive charges...

This is its *volumetric* aspect.

— After having cleared the planet surface of a cumbersome defensive apparatus by reducing undersea and underground strategic arms, they renounce world expanse by reducing the trouble spots and advanced bases...

This is its *geographical* aspect.

— Once responsible for the operations, the old chiefs of war, strategists and generals, find themselves demoted and restricted to simple maintenance operations, for the sole benefit of the Chief of State...

This is its *political* aspect.

But this quantitative and qualitative scarcity doesn't stop. Time itself is no longer enough:

— Constantly heightened, the vectors' already quasi-supersonic capacities are superseded by the high energies that enable us to approach the speed of light...

This is its *spatio-temporal* aspect.

After the time of the State's political relativity as nonconducting medium, we are faced with the no time of the politics of relativity. The *full discharge* feared by Clausewitz has come about with the State of Emergency. The violence of speed has become both the location and the law, the world's destiny and its destination.

— September 1977