

# Rise of the Machines

By Conn Hallinan | April 7, 2004

The press had lots of fun with the recent robot debacle in the Mojave Desert. Competing for \$1 million in prize money, 15 vehicles headed off on a 142-mile course through some of the most forbidding terrain in the country. None managed to navigate even eight miles. The robots hit fences, caught fire, rolled over, or sat and did nothing.

However, the purpose of the event was not NASCAR for nerds, but a coldly calculated plan to construct a generation of killer machines.

Sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the Mar. 13 “race” was part of the Department of Defense’s (DOD) plan to make one third of the military’s combat vehicles driverless by 2015. The push to replace soldiers with machines is impelled by an over-extended military searching for ways to limit U.S. casualties, a powerful circle of arms manufactures, and an empire-minded group of politicians addicted to campaign contributions by defense corporations.

This “rise of the machines” is at the heart of the Bush administration’s recent military budget. Sandwiched into outlays for aircraft, artillery, and conventional weapons, are monies for unmanned combat aircraft, robot tanks, submarines, and a supersonic bomber capable of delivering six tons of bombs and missiles to anyplace on the globe in two hours.

## Techno-War

DARPA, the agency behind these Buck Rogers weapons systems, has a mixed track record, somewhere between silly and sobering. The mechanical elephant it developed for the Vietnam War was not a keeper, and one doubts that the robot canine for the Army, aptly dubbed “Big Dog,” will ever get off the drawing boards. But DARPA also gave us stealth technology, the M-16 rifle, cruise missiles, and the unmanned Predator armed with the deadly Hellfire Missile.

It is currently deploying a carbon dioxide laser to spot snipers in Iraq, as well as a “sonic” weapon that can supposedly disable demonstrators at 300 yards with a 145-decibel blast of sound.

Boeing is busy testing its UCAV X-45A unmanned combat aircraft for DARPA, while Northrop Grumman is working on a competitor, the X-47A Pegasus. DARPA has already field-tested the A-160 Hummingbird, an unmanned chopper for the Marines that can carry 300 pounds of missiles up to 2,500 miles.

According to U.S. Rep. Curt Weldon (R-PA), chair of the House Subcommittee on Procurements, one-third of U.S. tactical-strike aircraft will be unmanned within the next 10 years.

Lockheed Martin and Boeing, along with Carnegie Mellon University, are developing ground combat vehicles: the Gladiator, the Retarius, and the Spinner.

The military’s interest is in part a function of the Vietnam Syndrome: lots of aluminum caskets and weeping survivors play poorly on the six o’clock news. While so far the Bush administration has managed to keep these images at arm’s length by simply banning the media from filming C-130s disgorging the wounded and the slain, as casualty lists grows longer, that will get harder to do.

The lure of being able to fight a war without getting your own people killed is a seductive one. “It is possible that in our lifetime we will be able to run a conflict without ever leaving the United States,” Lt. Col. David Branham told the *New York Times* last year.



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A high-tech machine war would allow the U.S. to quickly strike over enormous distances, an important capability in the Bush administration's pre-emptive war strategy.

Project Falcon, under development by Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, is a case in point. While the press has billed the recent successful test of the X-43 Hypersonic Cruise Vehicle with its scramjet as a boon to commercial aircraft—40 minutes from Washington to Paris—DARPA has something a good deal more sinister in mind.

“The X-43 has everything to do with defense and very little to do with aerospace,” Paul Beaver, defense analyst for Ashbourne Beaver Associates told the *Financial Times*. “But if it can be dressed up as a commercial aerospace program it allows NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) more access to funding.”

Such a bomber—manned or unmanned—could strike a target anywhere on the globe within two hours. The revolutionary scramjet can accelerate an aircraft to 10 times the speed of sound, making it virtually invulnerable.

An inordinately large section of Bush's military budget will end up in the coffers of the “Big Five”—Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Boeing, Raytheon, and General Dynamics. But unraveling that budget is no easy task.

The budget request for fiscal 2005 is \$401.7 billion, a 9.7% jump, but there are a host of programs hidden in other budgets. For instance, the \$401.7 figure doesn't include \$18.5 billion for nuclear weapons, because that expense is tucked away in the Department of Energy budget. Homeland Security, and related programs in Transportation, Justice, State, and the Treasury, add another \$42.5 billion. What should also be included are the Department of Veterans Affairs (\$50.9 billion) as well as the interest on defense-related debt (\$138.7 billion).

The administration has already informed Congress that it intends to ask for a \$50 billion supplement for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (it got \$62.6 billion last spring and \$87 billion in November).

Hit the add button, and the military budget looks more like \$702.3 billion. That's real money.

### Troops Left Out

But not for the troops. The average front-line trooper makes \$16,000, the same as a Wal-Mart clerk, and according to a study by *Nickel and Dimed* author Barbara Ehrenreich, more than 25,000 military families are eligible for Food Stamps. The new budget will raise wages 3.5%, but most of that hike will go to the high-tech Air Force (9.6%), not the larger Army (1.8%).

The arms corporations are another matter. Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman will corner one out of every four of those dollars.

There are other spigots besides the military budget that pour money into the coffers of the Big Five. The big winners in NASA's budget boost will be Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and TRW—all major space contractors.

This generosity is repaid come Election Day. In the 2002 election cycle, defense firms, led by Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, poured over \$16 million into Political Action Committees (PAC) at a ratio of 65% for Republicans and 35% for Democrats. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, those figures appear to be holding in the run up to the 2004 elections as well.

The collusion between politicians, the military, and the defense firms is particularly egregious in the administration's race to deploy an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system. The ABM soaked up 15% of the \$43.1 billion slated for weapons development in 2003—60% of which went to Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Raytheon—and it is getting a major boost in the new budget.

The hemorrhaging of money by the ABM has churned up opposition from current and former military leaders. Led by retired Admiral William Crowe, former chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 48 admirals and generals recently urged that the administration halt deploying the ABM and instead divert the \$53 billion slated to be spent on the system over the next

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five years to protecting the nation's ports from terrorism.

While the military budget and ancillary programs continue to balloon, domestic spending will rise a tepid .5%; the White House is highlighting its plan to raise education spending by 3%, but that will only mean a jump of \$1.6 billion, less than the cost of a single Northrop Grumman B-2 bomber.

Machines that think and kill are expensive, and very few companies have the wherewithal to make them on the scale needed for the U.S. to continue its imperial reach. The synergy between the massive companies that benefit from empire, and their ability to fill the election coffers of those who dream of a world more akin to the 19th than the 21st century, is a powerful one.

#### Bloodless War?

Add to that a military beset by re-enlistment difficulties, and the circle comes complete: war that is costly but, for our side, largely bloodless—a virtual war.

Bloodless war is, of course, an illusion. More than 600 U.S. soldiers have died in Iraq, and thousands of others have been wounded and maimed. No one knows how many thousands of Iraqis have died, because, as Lt. Cmdr. Jane Campbell told the *New York Times*, “We don’t keep a list. It’s just not policy.”

In his book *Virtual War*, historian Michael Ignatieff asks the question: “If western nations can employ violence with impunity, will they not be tempted to use it more often?”

The “impunity,” of course, is fantasy. Our military may indeed be able to kill at enormous distances with its Frankenstein killing machines. But all that means is that civilians, not the military, become targets. Ask the relatives of those who died in the Twin Towers, the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the nightclub on Bali, and the commuter train in Spain if high-tech war has no casualties.

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