Special Commentary

The Lure of Strike

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Abstract: An increasingly important part of the new American Way of War has been a reliance on standoff technology to project power. The "lure" is minimal friendly casualties and short, inexpensive wars with only limited landpower commitments. Unfortunately, inflated expectations for such an outcome have often led to strategic overreach and a dangerously unbalanced force structure, ultimately costing the nation more blood and treasure. As the United States tries to refocus its strategy and reduce defense expenditures, it must be careful to retain a balanced force with a full range of capabilities.

There are two approaches to waging war, asymmetric and stupid. Every competent belligerent looks for an edge over its adversaries. No country is more asymmetric in warfighting than the United States. An increasingly important part of the new American Way of War has been a reliance on stand-off technology to project power, with a promise of reduced friendly casualties and short, tidy wars with limited landpower commitments. Unfortunately, this predilection has often led to strategic overreach and a dangerously unbalanced force structure, eventually costing the nation much in blood and treasure.

Buoyed by the popular seapower theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan, and a new maritime strategy to exploit an expanding industrial base, the US Navy in 1898 showed itself to be a world-class force. In February of that year, Assistant Secretary of the Navy and ardent expansionist Theodore Roosevelt took advantage of an afternoon while his boss was away to order his Asiatic Squadron to wartime readiness. When war was declared against Spain in April, Admiral George Dewey sailed for Manila, where on 1 May 1898 his modern flotilla systematically destroyed Spanish naval power in the Pacific, suffering only one dead and nine wounded in the process. Though official planning had envisioned the Philippines as only a secondary theater, Dewey cabled for land forces to exploit his success. "For tenure of the land you must have the man with the rifle," he stated, as Spanish forces still controlled the capital and the rest of the islands.[1] The McKinley administration scrambled to mobilize soldiers to send to the Pacific. Already stretched by requirements for campaigns in the Caribbean, the Army was forced to cull together another 20,000 volunteers and regulars under the command of Major General Wesley Merritt. They arrived in the Philippines during the summer, soon launching combat operations to secure Manila. By the time the Philippine-American War ended in 1902, as many as 125,000

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1 George Dewey, *Autobiography of George Dewey: Admiral of the Navy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 240.

American troops had participated, far more than in the projected main theater in the Caribbean; over 4,000 had died.[2]

Mahan and his seapower theories, along with burgeoning economic interests, inspired American leaders to modernize and expand the Navy, creating a technological impetus for an ambitious strategy during the Spanish-American War that did not pay adequate attention to landpower requirements. The invention of the airplane would bring more of the same. The earliest coherent body of airpower theory was created by the Italian Giulio Douhet. He advocated that nations invest their defense resources primarily in an independent air service that would first achieve "command of the air" over an opponent's territory and then win wars quickly by bombing cities until panicked civilians forced their government to capitulate.[3] American airmen in the 1930s, however, developed a different approach based on the promise of precision attacks. Studying New York City as a model, they concluded that destroying only seventeen targets within its transportation, water, and electrical systems would render the city uninhabitable without mass casualties. They expanded their war-winning theory to exploiting key vulnerabilities in the economies of industrialized nations and developed the precision-bombing concept that has shaped the evolution and application of American airpower ever since.[4]

Although not a part of official Army doctrine, the concept became a part of American plans for World War II when officers in the Air War Plans Division developed requirements for aerial munitions and resources to defeat Germany without an invasion and got them attached to the "Victory Plan" of 1941.[5] The 1942 plans called for 273 air groups to conduct an ambitious bombing program against enemy homelands. Those demands, combined with the needs of American industry and the Navy, severely limited the number of ground divisions available for combat. Instead of the 334 Army divisions projected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff early in the war, they had to resort to the "Ninety Division Gamble." By Victory over Japan (V-J) Day, all 89 active divisions were deployed and all but two had seen combat. When the Germans launched their surprise attacks in the Battle of the Bulge and Operation Nordwind, the American Army in Europe was already desperate for ground replacements, and was retraining thousands of airmen to be infantrymen. Even five more total divisions would have made a significant difference for the ground effort, providing a strategic reserve, more replacements, and flexibility for commanders. If Axis forces had been able to mount another ground offensive in early 1945, there would have been no additional American troops available to respond.[6] Although the

2 Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America from 1607 to 2012*, revised ed. (New York: Free Press, 1994), 280-313; Howard K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 61-63; for more on Roosevelt's ties to Mahan, see Richard W. Turk, *The Ambiguous Relationship: Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan* (New York: Greenwood, 1987).

3 For a summary of Douhet's ideas, see Phillip S. Meilinger, "Giulio Douhet and the Origins of Airpower Theory," in *The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1997).

4 Conrad C. Crane, *Bombs, Cities, and Civilians: American Airpower Strategy in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 18-22.

5 Ibid., 24-27.

6 Maurice Matloff, "The 90-Division Gamble," in *Command Decisions*, ed. Kent Roberts Greenfield (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1987); Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 17-20, 963-968.

air forces made significant contributions to the war effort they were not as decisive as projected, and much effort was redundant or wasted. Even when the Army Air Forces reached their peak deployment level in April 1945, only 90 percent of available combat air groups had been deployed overseas, (and only 224 of the 273 planned), and not all to combat theaters. When the war ended, 12,000 unused first-line aircraft were sitting on airfields at home, one third of the total available for service.[7]

After the conclusion of the war, the US Strategic Bombing Survey, an apparently objective evaluation of airpower that in reality was stacked to support Air Force desires for independence, provided plenty of evidence so airpower supporters could trumpet its successes while blaming shortsighted targeting and bombing restrictions for its lack of decisiveness. They argued counterfactually that earlier focus on objectives like oil or electric power would have brought victory through airpower in Europe, and extended city bombing or transportation attacks would have forced Japan to capitulate without dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[8]

The other consistent theme for postwar claims was that new technology promised even better results from air attacks in the future, in this case through the use of atomic bombs; this lure proved especially attractive for decisionmakers trying to maintain American military power and save money. Despite postwar defense cutbacks, considerable expenditures were committed to strengthening Strategic Air Command for nuclear attacks on the Soviet Union. As a result, when North Korea attacked south in 1950, the United States had an Army unprepared for "that kind of war," and an Air Force so focused on strategic bombing that it had to retrain and reconfigure to perform theater air missions or close air support. Concentrating on technological "silver bullets" can distort any service. With key strategic targets off limits for political reasons, alternative approaches like aerial interdiction failed to achieve desired results. One of the key findings at the MacArthur hearings was that "too much was expected of the air."[9]

As airmen searched for valid targets that could influence enemy decisionmaking, they escalated operations against cities and "dual-use" military-civilian targets, a trend in most American air wars, including the Kosovo campaign. Asian expert Selig Harrison claims that a primary justification for the current North Korean nuclear and missile programs is the desire to deter another bombing campaign like the one that wrecked all their cities and towns from 1950-1953.[10]

Though there was no organized evaluation of American bombing in Korea, the United States Air Force (USAF) claimed without any real evidence that its "Air Pressure" campaign against hydroelectric plants, cities, and irrigation dams had been decisive in persuading the Communists to agree to the 1953 armistice. President Eisenhower

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7 Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II: Vol. VI – Men and Planes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948-58), 424.

8 Gian P. Gentile, *How Effective is Strategic Bombing? Lessons Learned from World War II to Kosovo* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 33-166.

9 Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 14-39, 74-75, 80-92, 127.

10 Selig Harrison, "The Missiles of North Korea: How Real a Threat?" *World Policy Journal* 17 (Fall 2000): 13-24.

believed his threats to use atomic bombs had really done that, and the USAF took advantage of his leanings toward reliance on such weapons and desire to cut the defense budget to become the big winner in the "New Look" defense programs of the 1950s.[11] The nation's resulting decline in conventional capability encouraged adversaries to develop nontechnological approaches that were successful in Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam. Again Strategic Air Command benefited, and again the USAF entered a limited war in Vietnam with doctrine, equipment, and training inadequate for its combat requirements. The Army also suffered from its own abortive experimentation with the lure of the "Pentomic Division," in addition to structural deficiencies resulting from budget reductions.[12]

This time it was the Johnson administration believing in a technological chimera and placing high hopes on airpower. The subsequent failures of aerial interdiction and Operation Rolling Thunder repeated lessons from Korea. In 1954, in response to French requests for support, Army Chief of Staff General Matthew Ridgway warned that initial reliance on airpower to solve problems in Indochina would lead to extensive ground force commitments, and his prescience was very evident a decade later. The apparent success of Operations Linebacker I and Linebacker II near the end of the Vietnam War in 1972 allowed proponents of airpower to claim decisiveness in forcing enemy acceptance of peace terms. Mark Clodfelter, however, demonstrated that the bombing campaigns were probably most effective at reassuring South Vietnamese leaders and obtaining their approval of the Paris Peace Accords. The North Vietnamese did not lose anything after delaying their own signing of the agreement. President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger expected American airpower would be the guarantor of South Vietnamese independence, but by 1975 political constraints prevented its use to save the beleaguered country. Even if it had been available, the backlash from more bombing would have probably been counterproductive by coalescing domestic and international opposition against it.[13]

USAF leaders complained that they could have won the Vietnam War by themselves in two weeks if allowed to bomb the way they wanted.[14] Despite such arguments, the Carter-Reagan build-up produced a balanced force structure with multiple capabilities that performed brilliantly in Operations Just Cause and Desert Storm. AirLand Battle doctrine orchestrated a powerful synergy of joint forces. Fixed in place by the Allied ground threat in the Gulf War, the Iraqi army was pummeled by weeks of air strikes that severely weakened it. Still, the key Republican Guard was relatively untouched and needed to be decimated by the overwhelming 100-hour ground assault that drove out the invading forces. Before the dust settled on a liberated Kuwait, airpower proponents like Merrill McPeak and Richard Hallion were heralding the beginning of a new era where airpower using stealth and precision

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11 Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea*, 110-131, 155-173.

12 Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Crosswinds: The Air Force's Setup in Vietnam* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993); Millett and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 531-563.

13 Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea*, 178-180; "What Ridgway Told Ike," *US News and World Report*, June 25, 1954, 30-33; Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 177-210; Stanley I. Kutler, *Review of Larry Berman's No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam*, in *Washington Post Book World*, July 29, 2001, p. T5.

14 Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, 206-207.

munitions could defeat field armies, hold ground, and win wars on its own.[15] When the Gulf War Air Power Survey found that many airpower claims were exaggerated, the USAF limited the report's publication.[16]

Operations in the Balkans in the 1990s again elicited a combination of triumphalist claims for modern technology and complaints about targeting restrictions. Misperceptions about the accomplishments of airpower in Operation Deliberate Force contributed to exaggerated expectations for Operation Allied Force. The key element that brought the Serbs to agree to the Dayton Accords was not the brief bombing campaign, but the rampage of the Croatian and Bosnian armies into Serb-held territory. Airpower without landpower had failed miserably to save Srebrenica, for instance, and USAF leaders were very cautious not to promise decisive results before Operation Deliberate Force started, but soon afterwards the most zealous airmen were using their interpretation of the bombing to make their usual claims of independent decisiveness.[17]

These exaggerations reinforced perceptions in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that airpower alone could achieve alliance goals in Kosovo. That unfortunate decision cost the lives of many Kosovars. President Clinton announced to the nation that the bombing operation had three primary objectives: to stop the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, to prevent an even bloodier Serbian offensive against civilians there, and to "seriously damage" the Serbian military capacity to do such harm.[18] Bombing did not achieve any of those goals, and in fact helped exacerbate the second.

There is a wide consensus that the air campaign did very little damage to Serb forces in Kosovo, and what success it did achieve in finally forcing a settlement came from the massive destruction it wreaked in the Yugoslav civilian infrastructure made possible by the bombing of the "dual-use" targets mentioned earlier.[19] The president of the World Bank expressed concern about the ability of his organization to fund repairs of the billions of dollars in damage from the bombing, and the destruction of transportation and industrial facilities had economic repercussions throughout the region.[20] Additionally, the Belgrade Center for Human Rights predicted, "the biggest collateral damage will be the shattered possibilities for democracy in Serbia," because of the

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15 See for example Richard Hallion, *Storm Over Iraq: Air Power and the Gulf War* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 241-244, 251-254. McPeak was quoted in the March 16, 1991 *Washington Post* as proclaiming, "This is the first time in history that a field army has been defeated by airpower." Ray Sibbald, "The Air War," in *The Gulf War Assessed*, ed. John Pimlott and Stephen Badsey (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1992), 122-123.

16 Gentile, 188-190.

17 Paul Forage, "Bombs for Peace: A Comparative Study of the Use of Airpower in the Balkans," *Armed Forces and Society* 28 (Winter 2002): 211-232; see also the voluminous study *Balkan Battlegrounds: A Military History of the Yugoslav Conflict, 1990-1995* published by the Office of Russian and European Analysis of the Central Intelligence Agency in May 2002.

18 William J. Clinton speech, *The New York Times*, page A15, March 25, 1999.

19 See for instance Steven Lee Myers, "Damage to Serb Military Less Than Expected," *The New York Times*, June 28, 1999, 1; Richard J. Newman, "The bombs that failed in Kosovo," *U.S. News and World Report* 127 (Sept. 20, 1999): 28-30. For a brilliant exposition on the course and implications of the Kosovo air campaign, see Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000)

20 Tribune News Services, "World Bank: Rebuilding Balkans Comes at a Cost," *Chicago Tribune*, July 14, 1999, 5.

backlash against Western values resulting from the perceived brutality of the air campaign. [21]

Airmen again were cautious at the beginning of Operation Allied Force about predicting a quick victory, instead complaining that political restrictions were holding them back, as the air war expanded to 34,000 sorties over 78 days. However, afterwards they widely circulated the remarks by historian John Keegan that the results "proved that a war can be won by airpower alone."[22] The Air Force Association quickly published a well-illustrated pamphlet entitled "The Kosovo Campaign: Aerospace Power Made It Work," which conveniently neglected to mention that the air campaign failed to meet the initial goals set for it or to achieve a settlement as comprehensive as the one President Milosevic rejected at Rambouillet. It also did not emphasize problems with weather, intelligence, bomb damage assessment, and technical failures that continued to affect air operations, and downplayed any contributions from diplomacy or the threat of ground action in ending the conflict.[23] Overzealous proponents of airpower also ignore the international clamor always caused by their bombing. A study by the Project on Defense Alternatives concluded that excessive reliance on strategic air attacks leads to "more mistakes of strategic import, increased turmoil within coalitions, bigger postwar aftershocks, and international disapprobation."[24] Much of this negative reaction comes from perceptions of excessive collateral damage. Enemies in recent conflicts have become very adept at displaying images of shattered mosques and dead children, and blaming them on American military actions. While landpower can be just as guilty as airpower in causing such damage, who controls the ground controls the message, and ground forces are much more able to quickly stabilize such situations and ensure they are properly reported.

In addition, it must be noted that although airpower was the main American military contribution to coerce successful negotiations ending the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, extensive landpower commitments were still necessary to make the agreements work. The 1st Armored Division was part of a force of 60,000 NATO troops deployed to stabilize Bosnia. President Clinton's announcement that US involvement in the operation would last less than a year was wishful thinking at best, political chicanery at worst. Although the Stabilization Force was finally terminated in 2004, the European Union maintains peacekeepers there today.[25] The Kosovo Force (KFOR) in 1999 consisted of 30,000 NATO troops to keep the peace after Milosevic relented, not including the Russian forces who also raced into the province. The main American base there remains Camp Bondsteel. KFOR and the United

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21 Bert Roughton, Jr., "Yugoslavs Still Bitter Toward U.S.," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 25, 2001, 25.

22 John Keegan, "Please Mr. Blair, never take such a risk again," *London Daily Telegraph*, June 6, 1999.

23 Rebecca Grant, *The Kosovo Campaign: Aerospace Power Made It Work* (Arlington, VA: Air Force Association, 1999). For some differing opinions on the results and impacts of the bombing campaign by two RAND researchers, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, *NATO's Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001) and Stephen T. Hosmer, *The Conflict Over Kosovo: Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did* (Sant Monica: RAND, 2001).

24 Carl Conetta, "Disengaged Warfare: Should we make a virtue of the Kosovo way of war?" (Project on Defense Alternatives, May 21, 2001), http://www.comw.org/pda/0105bm21.html.

25 Mark A. Viney, *United States Cavalry Peacekeepers in Bosnia: An Inside Account of Operation Joint Endeavor, 1996* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 20-27. The European Union mission in Bosnia is called Operation Althea. Information about it can be found at http://www.euforbih.org .

Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, established for an initial period of 12 months in June 1999, still exist.[26] In the long run the stability preserved by these extended ground commitments must be judged worth the cost, but they were not projected when American airpower was initially committed to the operations.

Inflated expectations from technology leading to strategic overreach and unexpected ground commitments, so evident in our past history, played out in both Afghanistan and Iraq over the last decade. The speed of the Taliban's collapse in the former, facilitated by American Special Forces calling in airstrikes from horseback, surprised everyone, and encouraged Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his supporters who envisioned a defense establishment relying heavily on precision strikes while saving money by significantly cutting ground forces. They were much attracted by the arguments about technological overmatch expounded by Harlan Ullman, James Wade, and others in their book *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. Despite warnings from analysts about drawing too many conclusions from the unique Afghan scenario or expecting too much from technology, Rumsfeld sent Douglas Macgregor to United States Central Command (CENTCOM) headquarters in early 2002 to argue that a 15,000-man armor-heavy ground force would be enough to conquer Baghdad, with an additional 15,000 infantry added later to stabilize the country after the regime fell.[27]

Under Rumsfeld's unrelenting pressure, the number of ground forces planned for the invasion of Iraq declined substantially. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, nonexistent or inadequate plans for what happened after the end of major combat, "Phase IV operations," and insufficient ground force commitments, resulted in messy aftermaths and a decade of complex counterinsurgency that no one wanted or expected, to a large extent the result of inflated expectations for the capabilities of military technology of political and military leaders.[28]

Recent security actions by President Obama and his administration demonstrate a strong inclination to avoid this historic pattern, primarily by choosing not to commit landpower, even though the lure of standoff strike remains an attractive military option. Emphasis on Air-Sea Battle with the "rebalance" to the Pacific implies that significant land activities will not be essential to achieve military objectives in that important region. The recent campaign to bring down the Gaddhafi regime in Libya shows a willingness to apply airpower to support indigenous forces, as in Afghanistan, while accepting continued turmoil in the country, the destabilization of neighboring states like Mali, and the proliferation of

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26 Ignatieff, 93-94, 207. See websites http://www.unmikonline.org and http://www.aco.nato.int/kfor.aspx

27 Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002); Dale R. Herspring, *Rumsfeld's Wars: The Arrogance of Power* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 18-115; Harlan Ullman et al., *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1996); Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 33-36.

28 There are many good accounts of the inadequacy of post-major combat planning and execution in Afghanistan and Iraq. Besides books cited in the previous endnote, see Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penquin, 2006); Gordon W. Rudd, *Reconstructing Iraq: Regime Change, Jay Garner, and the ORHA Story* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011); and Rajiv Chandrasekeran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2012).

weapons in the region, as acceptable risks or outcomes too difficult or expensive to prevent with our own ground commitment. The refusal to intervene at all in the morass of Syria is another way to avoid overreach, though the ongoing chaos is ugly and deadly. There is, however, another possible way to view these options. It is obvious that the United States cannot count on indigenous forces or allies to advance our interests. Though ground commitments are often very messy, an early deployment of sizeable professional American land forces can control a situation before it spirals out of control, preserve our interests, and allow others to take over long-term constabulary roles. The key question for American decisionmakers is "How much chaos are you willing to accept in the world, and where?" If stability in a region in turmoil is deemed in our national interest, that will not be achieved by long-range strikes.

As part of the usual national backlash against major wars, there will be an inevitable cut in the number of active American ground forces. The Army grew by 90,000 soldiers in the last decade to meet demands in Afghanistan and Iraq, and it is probably correct that there should be reductions as the wars wind down. The slowness of that growth, however, reveals an important truth about contemporary myths regarding how quickly the United States can expand its military forces. In the past, the armed forces were able to endure significant peacetime cuts and still meet increased requirements for a crisis because of an effective Selective Service system and a robust industrial base. Neither of those exists today. Force structure decisions made in the current fiscally constrained environment for the Total Force will be impossible to augment in a timely manner if the strategic assumptions on which they are based are flawed. Decisionmakers must be careful to maintain enough military power to handle all contingencies, even those involving major ground forces. A balanced joint force allows a choice of asymmetries to exploit. Eventually, chaos somewhere will be unacceptable to national interests, and again will require significant landpower involvement. Or the lure of easy results through standoff technology might again lead to an unintended complex conflict in an unexpected place. When that time comes, hopefully American political leaders seeking "more bang for the buck" will not have been seduced by exorbitant expectations of technology, or the nation and its allies will pay the price in blood and treasure, and perhaps even strategic failure. Those are the costs of an unbalanced force structure and a lack of the full range of military capabilities.