

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 32
Number 3 *Parameters Autumn 2002*

Article 5

8-16-2002

Commentary & Reply

Parameters Editors

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Recommended Citation

Editors, Parameters. "Commentary & Reply." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 32, 3 (2002).
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol32/iss3/5>

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Commentary & Reply

AIR-CENTRIC STRATEGY AND CASUALTY AVERSION

To the Editor:

The article “Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War” (*Parameters*, Summer 2002) by Jeffrey Record should be thought-provoking for those concerned with the future role of the Army in national defense and its force structure. Although well organized, the article demonstrates the corruption of logic employed by air-centric strategists to gain a priority role for airpower and relegate land forces to small units of marginal relevance.

First, the first section heading, “Failed States as the Primary Threat,” is an apt title for the air-centric argument that goes something like this: The employment of military means since Desert Storm (e.g. Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, etc.) has been primarily precision-strike missiles and aircraft with small, light “scouts” (as the author calls them) on the ground; therefore, we should orient our entire defense organization to handle this type of operation. The author supports this argument with a mantra that failed states are the “primary source” of instability in the world. This thought process is flawed because the frequency of use of one type of military capability should not be the sole, nor even the dominant, factor for structuring our armed forces. This logic ignores the very real, more dangerous threats in the world today that require conventional ground forces, including the heavy component of conventional forces (Korea, Iraq, China, etc.). The fact such threats have remained relatively inactive the last decade shows the value of having conventional forces in our arsenal. Does anyone think that Saddam Hussein would hesitate to invade Kuwait, or even Saudi Arabia, if we do away with our current land force capability? We must organize our military with priority given to the most dangerous threats, even if the frequency with which they occur is lower than the Kosovo-type intervention.

The author looks at the recent application of military power with blinders, looking only at US operations. Other military forces in the world, taking a wider view of recent history, seem to disagree with him. Note Israel’s recent incursions into Palestine (perhaps a failed state even under the author’s definition?) with tanks, armored personnel carriers, and mechanized infantry as the weapons of choice. How would the author propose to carry out a similar operation with an air-centric force? The current face-off between India and Pakistan adds another contrary example not mentioned by Record.

Second, the air-centric logic in the article also assumes the potential threat array will remain basically the same. This is a false assumption. How fast things can change. In 1986, no one would have predicted the military would have to prosecute Desert Storm a mere five years later. Leaders were frantic to “go light” then, just as they are now. Threats that require the use of conventional military ground power can grow and mature just as quickly as those requiring airpower alone. The timeline necessary to develop competent conventional ground power is much longer than the timeline for a conventional forces threat to emerge.

Third, the argument in the article uses distorted history to make the case for a future military consisting primarily of missiles, aircraft, and ground-based air control

parties. The author apparently concurs with the opinion he quotes that the Gulf War, fought with conventional ground forces, was a “radically incomplete victory.” According to the author, airpower “had already beaten” frontline Iraqi combat troops before the ground war commenced, ground combat units merely “chased” the few surviving Iraqi units off, and air was the “dominant arm of victory.” These statements are simply untrue, as anyone in VII Corps, XVIII Airborne Corps, or the Tiger Brigade can attest.

In actual fact, the air war against Iraq was not operationally decisive—it did not force Saddam to move out of Kuwait, and it showed no potential for doing so even if we had gone on to bomb Iraqi forces for a year. It took conventional ground forces—a half million of them—and thousands of armored fighting vehicles to accomplish our operational goal, which we did, completely. And, there seems to be little doubt the airpower-claimed “body count” from the Gulf War was highly inflated.

On the other hand, Record argues, the Kosovo operation was a complete success. Air bombardment had “decisive strategic effects” and it, alone, created a “clear strategic win.” This would be news to the thousands of Kosovar people killed and maimed when our airpower failed to stop a third-rate country from completing its ethnic cleansing. One must consider the question of how much capability we really have through airpower when, after two months of using our most capable air warfare systems, Milosevic was still thumbing his nose at us.

This last point drives home the Achilles’ heel of air-centric logic. Airpower alone, even in the most favorable environment (such as Afghanistan) only has the capability for point destruction. This results in dispersal, not annihilation at the operational level. Airpower does not have the capability to “trap” enemy ground forces. This usually precludes a complete victory (witness the escape of bin Laden and Omar and hundreds if not thousands of Taliban fighters). Compare the results in Afghanistan in this regard with our operations in Panama, where Noriega and his cronies were trapped and captured quickly by ground forces. Airpower alone does not have the capability to “block” enemy ground forces. If it could not keep Milosevic from driving tens of thousands of people in front of him for the better part of two months, would it be able to prevent North Korean forces from seizing South Korea? Last, airpower alone does not have the capability to seize or hold ground, which is usually the main issue when it comes to our vital strategic interests.

I am glad *Parameters* saw fit to publish the article, as debate on this topic is critical. For it is through serious, reasoned debate that the flaws in the author’s argument are exposed. Let us not find our sons and daughters who happen to join the Army or Marine Corps going off to war in ten years in some faraway land like Korea, Iraq, or larger countries on the Pacific Rim armed only with a rifle, a HUMMWW, and a UHF radio. We have a solemn obligation not to leave them holding the bag after our decisions on force structure.

Colonel Kris P. Thompson
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To the Editor:

I read with great interest Jeffrey Record’s thought-provoking article, “Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War.” However, I

believe the article incorrectly identifies the problem of casualty aversion as peculiar to American leaders because of their history and culture. In fact, casualty aversion is part of a broader phenomenon associated with democratic governments: namely, the need to maintain the consent and support so indispensable for winning wars.

Readers interested in this topic can explore it further in a carefully researched book by Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton University Press, 2002). Drawing on data from the Correlates of War Project at the University of Michigan and the Historical Evaluation and Research Organization under contract for the US Army Concepts Analysis Agency, the authors conclude that since 1815 democracies have won more than three-quarters of the wars they have participated in. One aspect that explains the propensity of democracies to win wars is that they are better than autocratic states at initiating only those wars they are likely to win. The more prudent choices for initiating wars in turn are linked to the fact that democratic leaders are constrained to consider public opinion because such leaders can be voted out of office for failure. Concerns for retention of power thus induce leaders in a democracy to avoid starting risky wars. A related finding is that the propensity of democracies to win declines over time as a war drags on, presumably because of mounting casualties. In contrast, autocratic states have less of a probability of winning a war early, but their probability of winning does not decrease significantly as time passes. In other words, there is a natural tendency for leaders in any democracy to be casualty-averse.

Does this analysis then suggest that democracies are inherently at a disadvantage in any protracted conflict and that enemies need only to find a way to prolong the conflict and wait out a democracy? Not always, because although democracy has some disadvantage in a protracted war related to the danger of declining public support, a second factor may offset the disadvantage: The authors also suggest that democracies are better at warfighting than are non-democracies. Democratic political culture, placing an emphasis on rights and prerogatives, seems to carry over to the battlefield and leads to a higher level of initiative and innovation that proves indispensable for adaptation in a fluid battlefield environment. Thus, while a protracted conflict may offer some advantage to an autocratic state fighting a democracy, the autocratic state remains at a competitive disadvantage from the standpoint of warfighting.

Casualty aversion may only appear to look peculiarly American or more pronounced today because the United States is the most visible leader in the international system. In addition, both the withdrawal from Somalia and the war in Kosovo took place during the Clinton Administration and may reflect a greater level of casualty aversion associated with President Clinton and his Administration. One cannot necessarily extrapolate a trend that may not hold with subsequent administrations. To be sure, groups like the bin Laden network may have developed their strategies based on an assumption of US casualty aversion, but that does not necessarily mean the United States should develop its own military strategy relying predominantly on airpower.

If the real threat facing the United States derives from the phenomenon of failed states, the solution is not to rely on airpower to coerce without casualties in order to “overthrow” the failed states. Rather, the United States has the imperative for developing a multi-pronged approach that will assist with the creation of stable, decent political rule in these failed states. Given the nature of the long-term problem, airpower has little role to play. And as far as relying on coercion to attain political objectives on the periphery, we would do well to recall a point made by Robert McNamara in his confes-

sional on Vietnam, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*: “There may be a limit beyond which many Americans and much of the world will not permit the United States to go. The picture of the world’s greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one.”

Using airpower to avoid US casualties as a means to retain democratic support could well have the ironic effect of subverting that democratic consent because of a general revulsion against the brutality and disproportion of airpower applied for limited political purposes.

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The Author Replies:

Colonel Thompson’s commentary exemplifies the Army’s understandable sensitivity to the issue of the continued utility of Cold War legacy conventional ground forces, especially heavy ground forces. I know of no one, including myself, who favors the elimination of such forces. My focus on the recent US airpower-centric wars in failed states was not an argument for doing away with armored forces and lots of boots on the ground. Rather, it reflected the combination of international political, domestic political, and technological change that has fundamentally altered where, how, and against whom we have fought and continue to fight in the post-Soviet era.

We do, however, seem to be running low on plausible scenarios involving massive and sustained US ground force combat. Colonel Thompson mentions North Korea, Iraq, China—and the example of Israeli armor on the West Bank. The United States, however, worries less about the obsolete North Korean and Iraqi armies than it does about Pyongyang’s and Baghdad’s missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Conventional deterrence has worked against both rogue states since 1991, and there is good reason to believe it will continue to do so unless, of course, the United States attacks those countries under the rubric of the Bush Doctrine. A US-Chinese war over Taiwan or the South China Sea would be largely an air and naval fight, unless the United States violated its long-standing and Vietnam War-reinforced strategic injunction of avoiding large wars on the Asian mainland. As for Israeli armor on the West Bank, I don’t propose carrying out a similar operation anywhere. Americans are not in the business of conquest and repression of other peoples.

I share Colonel Thompson’s view that the air war against Iraq was not operationally decisive; large and heavy US ground forces were indeed required to expel the Iraqi army from Kuwait. But were those forces themselves operationally decisive? Was not a key operational objective the destruction of the Republican Guard, and did not much of it escape through the Basra gate General Schwarzkopf mistakenly thought he had closed? Enough to keep Saddam Hussein in power and rob Operation Desert Storm of its strategic decisiveness?

Colonel Thompson also rightly points to the disconnect in Operation Allied Force between the military instrument selected—airpower—and the political objective it was designed to achieve—halting Milosevic’s ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. The

air campaign actually sparked an acceleration of Milosevic's war on Kosovar Albanians. The Clinton Administration's public renunciation of the ground force option was a monumental act of moral cowardice and strategic incompetence. Yet, in the end, airpower coerced Milosevic into abandoning Kosovo, where today NATO, not Serbian, boots are on the ground. Getting to that clear strategic win was not a pretty sight, but a clear strategic win it was.

As for the inherent limitations of airpower, I acknowledged them at the end of my article: The "conquest, occupation, and administration of territory . . . require 'boots on the ground' in sizable numbers. . . . Airpower's utility is also limited in peace enforcement operations, which require dedicated ground forces." I also condemned US air occupation zones in Iraq as having "done little to retard undesirable developments on the ground."

Janeen Klinger's commentary addresses my discussion of the fact and consequences of casualty phobia among American political and military elites. She uses the term "aversion," which refers to a healthy desire on the part of leaders of democratic societies to minimize casualties consistent with the achievement of wartime military missions. I use the term "phobia" to refer to a much more extreme phenomenon: a fear of casualties so overpowering as to induce the placement of the safety of the military instrument above the mission it is designed to accomplish. It was this phobia that we saw on display in Bosnia, Kosovo, and at Tora Bora, and which encouraged Osama bin Laden, among others, to believe that the United States was a gutless giant, a sawdust Caesar.

Casualty aversion *is* part of a broader phenomenon associated with democratic governments because of the need to maintain the consent and support so indispensable for winning wars. But among the fighting democracies, elite casualty *phobia* is unique to the United States and has been much remarked-upon both in America and overseas by friend and foe alike since the end of the Vietnam War, and especially since the American debacle in Somalia.

I certainly share Janeen Klinger's admiration for Dan Reiter and Allan Stam's path-breaking and myth-shattering *Democracies at War*, as well as her belief in the imperative of promoting the political and economic reconstruction of post-regime-change failed states. As for the disastrous McNamara and his pathetic book—don't get me started.

Jeffrey Record

Commentary & Reply Submissions

We invite reader commentaries of up to 1,000 words on articles appearing in *Parameters*. Not all commentaries can be published. For those that are, the author of the article will be invited to provide a reply. Commentaries may be edited to meet style and space constraints. Send to US Army War College, ATTN: *Parameters*, 122 Forbes Ave., Carlisle, PA 17013, or by e-mail to Parameters@carlisle.army.mil.