

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 47
Number 1 *Parameters Spring 2017*

Article 13

Spring 3-1-2017

Commentaries and Replies

USAWC Press

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Recommended Citation

USAWC Press, "Commentaries and Replies," *Parameters* 47, no. 1 (2017), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2842.

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Commentaries and Replies

On “The Army’s Identity Crisis”

Conrad C. Crane

This commentary responds to Gates Brown’s article “The Army’s Identity Crisis” published in the Winter 2016–17 issue of Parameters (vol. 46, no. 4).

Although it recognizes the difficulty of predicting the location and timing of the next war, the Army has tried to prepare for certain types. Historically, the choices have been between the most dangerous, generally a full-blown conventional war against a near-peer, or the most likely, a lower scale conflict such as counterinsurgency. Some have argued all other types of war or contingencies are just subsets of the first category, a misconception that has had significant consequences from Baghdad to Bosnia, and from Haiti to Helmand. Dr. Gates Brown has introduced a new twist, arguing that in the current environment, the most dangerous scenario of full-scale combined arms warfare against a near-peer competitor is also the most likely, and the Army should train and structure itself accordingly.

He supports that claim by stating that Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, defines the Army’s main threats as a nonstate actor with weapons of mass destruction that would best be handled by special operations forces, or a nuclear capable nation-state partnered with nonstate actors. In fact, the doctrine just calls those “the most challenging potential enemy,” a variation on the most dangerous argument, and states, “The most likely security threats that Army forces will encounter are best described as hybrid threats” (4). The passage goes on to explain that such enemies might resort to high-end capabilities of conventional state conflict or protracted war with irregular proxies, and the Army must be prepared to deal with all aspects of such a threat spectrum, including protecting populations.

Without doctrinal justification, the most effective argument Brown has left to make is that instead of risking an incoherent approach while trying to develop a force capable of both counterinsurgency and maneuver warfare against a near-peer, the Army would be better off focusing its mission, acquisitions, and training on what he terms the “most direct threat to the nation,” which is a high-intensity conflict, and accepting increased risk for other levels of conflict or operations. That is a return to the traditional debate. His position ignores the implications of hybrid threats, and the fact that both Chinese and Russian doctrine writings emphasize the utility of what have been called gray-zone conflicts that avoid the level of high intensity or full blown conventional war.

His approach makes some sense for systems acquisition, as high-intensity conflict is the most technologically dependent. Training is another matter. The Army did see degradation of some conventional

combat skills over the last decade, most notably in large-scale fire and maneuver, but has been working diligently to restore them. I have heard the noted defense analyst Stephen Biddle advocate for an “Army of Mediocrity.” That is not a very attractive bumper sticker, but his point is the force can be given some preparation for a wide variety of missions and then trained-up for specific deployments. That seems a very sensible approach in an uncertain world where the Army cannot choose the missions political leaders will assign.

Arguing in Congress for just the capabilities to conduct a high-intensity conventional war risks making the Army a marginal consideration for policymakers who want, and need, a much wider array of options. Brown is correct that the size of the force will not allow large-scale specialization and that future conflicts might not allow much training time. But, there is no guarantee that such requirements will always be for high-tech conventional war. I am confident that a force no longer committed to the war in Iraq can maintain high enough readiness to respond to any contingency short of the “big one.” If the worst happens, the nation will need time to mobilize more forces anyway, and limitations in strategic lift will always cause deployment delays from CONUS bases. It is also incorrect to define any sort of conflict as more complex or difficult than another. One of my regrets about my work with Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, in 2006 was putting in the quote that counterinsurgency was the “graduate level of war.” All war is at the graduate level, it is just the final exams that are different.

In his article, Brown highlights the superb melding of missions, training, and acquisitions that produced the AirLand Battle army that performed so well in Operation Desert Storm. But, they never did fight the chosen enemy and were lucky instead to go up against a poor and battered Soviet clone. One of the reasons Future Combat Systems failed—along with other programs of the 1990s like Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below and the Army After Next—is they continued to follow the same high-tech, high-intensity developmental trajectory instead of realizing the world and its threats were changing, with dire consequences in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Author Replies

Gates Brown

Dr. Crane rightly calls attention to the problematic nature of forecasting future conflicts. No one knows the probability of a major war occurring. But that reality does not mean it is impossible to discern an emphasis for crafting our national defense or that we should assume risks where there is a possibility of rapid catastrophic defeat.

In my article, I outlined the most dangerous threat to the nation, a conflict with near-peer competitors such as Russia or China who have interests that in some ways counter those of the United States. Identifying these states as the most likely near-peer competitors, however, is not the same as calling them the most likely threats. The current threat, our adversaries’ combination of conventional and unconventional forces

into a hybrid approach to warfare, effectively mitigates the advantages of the United States in terms of policy as well as force structure.

To understand this trend, it is important to put it into a broader context. Hybrid tactics are a reaction to US dominance in conventional maneuver warfare. Due to the need to maintain a low profile, hybrid conflicts have had a protracted nature; limited involvement, in turn, gives rise to smaller political objectives. Neither of these characteristics affects the threat. Thus, the critical fact Crane overlooks is that by maintaining our capability in high-intensity maneuver warfare, US adversaries are forced to operate in the gray zone.

Likewise, if the United States focused on a lighter force to combat hybrid wars, our opponents would soon shift to tactics that mitigate that approach. Focusing US force structure on maneuver warfare, therefore, provides the capability to counter hybrid wars while preserving high-end conventional maneuver forces necessary for bolstering and supporting allied forces as well as countering hybrid aggression.

Hybrid wars, generally, require geographic proximity to the aggressor state, Russia borders Ukraine, North Vietnam bordered South Vietnam. A force fielded to fight maneuver warfare would be able to aid allied nations to contain hybrid conflicts while maintaining the deterrence to major combat operations. While it is true the forces fielded to support AirLand Battle never fought the intended enemy, their capability forced potential adversaries to wage limited wars for limited aims. The consequences of Iraq and Afghanistan were a product of flawed strategy. The Army has to assume risk and the best place to do that is with limited conflicts.

On “Drawdown: The American Way of Postwar”

John A. Bonin

This commentary responds to Brian McAllister Linn’s book review on Drawdown: The American Way of Postwar published in the Winter 2016–17 issue of Parameters (vol. 46, no. 4).

As an author of two chapters in the book, and a co-organizer of the US Army War College conference that generated this volume, I am uniquely positioned to respond to Brian Linn’s recent review of *Drawdown*. This is especially true since his critique about the lack of policy guidance and implications in the text seemingly overlooked the stated purpose of the book—to contribute to the dialogue on American military “drawdowns.” That dialogue “lacks a proper historical perspective.” An historical baseline for drawing down forces and force structures is essential to making informed decisions of the kind Linn seeks.

Over the course of my nearly 50 years of government service, I have repeatedly encountered the lack of historical perspective in critical decisions, particularly during the periods between conflicts. Our authors provide some unique insights into America’s history of drawdowns. Organized chronologically, the chapters establish both context and relevance over some 500 years that can inform specific policy prescriptions. This edited volume is no less coherent in its themes than any edited military history volume of similar scope. Establishing a tight relationship between early American history and those issues surrounding the all-volunteer force of the current day is useless and ahistorical.

Beginning in the colonial era, sure patterns developed in American history, which makes the text’s early focus relevant and necessary to the overall thrust of the volume. These patterns include the underfunding of military structure for short-term savings at the expense of longer-term efficiencies. They emerged as a result of the “Liberty Dilemma”—the uneasy relationship between the fear and the expense of standing armies and the desire for safety that still affects drawdowns today. It goes beyond the single aspect of “demobilization” that Linn highlights as applying only to a portion of drawdowns, particularly of those involving mass armies.

Finally, Linn criticizes *Drawdown* for being too focused on battle and operations; yet, considering aspects of drawdowns in a vacuum without the reality of the influence of these on future successes or failures in war is irrelevant. Understanding the trends mentioned above will better position contemporary decision-makers to grapple with current challenges.

The Author Replies

Brian McAllister Linn

The author declined the opportunity to respond.