Cook on Warren, 'Landpower in the Long War: Projecting Force after 9/11'

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Exploring Why Joe Does Not Win

An edited collection, Landpower in the Long War: Projecting Force after 9/11 explores what Daniel P. Bolger, a retired lieutenant general, frames in the foreword as a daunting problem: "We need to figure out what we just did to ourselves, why we did it, and what to do about it“ (p. xi). To provide answers, Jason W. Warren presents eighteen essays from both military and civilian authors examining various issues of landpower or its intersection with other forms of military power. While some fall short in considering Bolger’s challenge, Warren’s collection gives a reader much to consider in pondering questions regarding the efficacy of landpower in the modern era. As recent events in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate, it is quite easy to employ landpower but extraordinarily difficult to do so successfully. While Warren’s work predates the end of America’s campaign in Afghanistan, the controversial withdrawal from Kabul makes Landpower in the Long War a timely and important book for military historians, planners, and strategists. More importantly, it is a “must read” for those civilians in the American defense enterprise whose duties revolve around issues of landpower, its capabilities, and its ultimate employment.

In Landpower in the Long War’s first essay, Luckas Milevski makes a point of expanding on the US Army’s doctrinal definition of “landpower.” He observes that “the conceptualization of landpower must move beyond the limited operational definition offered by Army doctrine better to encompass social changes, trauma, the rule of law, acquisition of equipment, civil-military relationships, headquarters manning, and bureaucratic decision-making” (p. 2). This larger construction of landpower opens the door to a recurring (and important) issue examined by multiple authors: the relationship between the uniformed army and the bureaucrats and policymakers directing its employment. This relationship cuts to the core of the issue, effective strategic employment. A recurring theme within Landpower in the Long War is a particularly unpleasant one: landpower’s failure to realize strategic objectives. Pulling no punches, Warren provides a brutal analysis of the contemporary US Army as a “more ethical version of the Wehrmacht—a supremely competent tactical and operational force that lost two world wars due to its failure to think strategically” (p. 36). For the United States to effectively employ landpower in the future, it must both accept the expanded definition Milevski provides and understand the relationship between tactical or operational success and strategic success or failure. As modern history shows (and Warren and several of the contributors cogently argue), the first two (tactical and operational success) do not automatically
result in the third (desirable strategic outcomes)—and quite often generate the fourth (failure at the strategic level). Put succinctly, tactical successes—no matter how brilliant—fail to provide desired strategic outcomes when not directly linked to specific and realistic strategic objectives.

Several reasons exist for landpower’s strategic failures. The two essays by Peter Mansoor and Frank Sobchak touch on one of them: the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs, or RMA. The RMA theoretically changed land warfare’s character by combining timely intelligence, precision munitions, and rapid information sharing between units. Properly executed, this allowed a ground force to create overwhelming tactical effects. Whether it is rotations at the National Training Center or division or corps command post exercises, the army’s approach to training emphasizes tactical excellence and sustains a service culture emphasizing tactical acumen. Such training events occur in an environment where actors largely ignore strategic objectives with this reinforcing the bias toward tactical excellence. Given the fact that most army units conduct tactical tasks, it is hardly surprising that the army values tactical skill more than strategic thinking. Hence, it should amaze no one that the army struggles to link tactical actions with strategic objectives.

J. P. Clark, whose work Warren cites, offers a second reason for strategic failure: increased bureaucratization of the army resulting in a decreased ability for military leaders to exercise authority.[1] The combination of larger and more permanent civilian staffs within the defense establishment has stifled the army’s ability to realize strategic objectives. The combination of an entrenched bureaucracy unfocused on the all-important issue of strategic success coupled with the rise of a dependent class of military contractors more interested in sustaining demand means strategic victory suffers. Warren observes that “briefings at the highest levels focus on preparing to meet the needs of headquarters above them or Congress, instead of a single-minded effort toward war-winning” (pp. 2-3).

Donald S. Travis reinforces Clark’s points in his essay, “Civil-Military Relations, Post-9/11.” He opines that landpower “confronts significant civil-military challenges resulting from frequent turnover of political and military leadership, an inattentive populace, and a corpulent and well-entrenched defense bureaucracy.” This “results in geopolitical uncertainty and obscured war objectives” (p. 61). He also states that the “US governing system is disposed towards stasis,” which “allows entrenched and questionable military policies to survive in the face of determined opposition” (p. 63).

Joel Hillison provides a fourth reason for landpower’s strategic failures: “deviant globalization” (p. 46). Citing Moisés Naim’s The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn’t What It Used to Be (2013), Hillison argues that the current version of landpower is decreasingly effective in the contemporary operational environment. This makes the difficult task of clearly defining strategic outcomes even more challenging. Implicit in Hillison’s statement is an unpleasant reality: the empowering of non-state actors and the associated risks flowing from that. Hillison calls for changes in equipping, training, and employing landpower to both counter such actors and deliver decisive strategic outcomes.

J. Casey Doss’s epilogue cogently ties together Landpower in the Long War’s various essays. He begins with an important comment from Bolger’s foreword: “some problems cannot be solved by landpower” (p. 322). He continues with a point too often overlooked by policymakers: the tensions inherent in US principles and actions affect landpower differently from air or sea power. In
considering the issue, Doss writes that “efforts to understand why we have struggled in employing landpower have too often focused on landpower itself rather than circumstances surrounding decision to employ” (p. 327). Those circumstances include a large set of actors, both inside and outside the army. Warren’s selected essays lead one to conclude that too many of those inside the army have lacked the capacity to see landpower’s successful employment while many of those outside the army maintain objectives inimical to landpower’s ultimate success.

The focus on problems makes most of Landpower in the Long War depressing. There are, however, some bright spots. Jacqueline E. Whitt’s “Willing and Qualified: Social and Cultural Considerations and the Generation of Landpower in the Global War on Terrorism” addresses change within the army and marine corps since 9/11. Questions of women’s or gay rights found some resolution in response to the requirements of the Global War on Terror, with Whitt noting a more diversified force following 9/11. Those events “created political, social, and cultural space for significant changes in the composition and management of military force” (p. 289). Whitt notes that while the immediate post-9/11 enlisted spike reflected enlistees from the top 20 percent of household incomes, the long-term effect is a force more representative of the US as a whole.

Charles Luke, Chris Bowers, and Alex Willard’s “Landpower and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief” represents a second bright spot. While noting landpower’s battlefield record, the authors highlight its unique and successful role in noncombat operations. They offer these operations as representing the only types that saw landpower realizing strategic objectives. The authors make a point of emphasizing the importance of such operations in sustaining alliances, reminding adversaries of American capabilities, and improving America’s global and regional standing.

As the United States undergoes the inevitable strategic reset flowing from its leaving Afghanistan and reassesses relationships with allies, competitors, and adversaries, Landpower in the Long War is a book that will become increasingly relevant. Warren’s collection offers well-considered insights into the nature of landpower, the strategic questions regarding its use, and the issues warranting consideration in any employment decision. Given that, Landpower in the Long War is highly recommended for those charged with considering landpower’s development and employment.

Note


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