



Landpower in the Long War: Projecting Force after 9/11 ed. Jason W. Warren.

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Many of the fascinating, profoundly pessimistic essays on the American projection of power during the “Global War on Terror” gathered here are the work of field-grade officers who have led and staffed units deployed to execute national policy. While some highlight significant achievements, most discuss the difficulties faced by a democracy conducting prolonged but limited military operations. These began with the challenges of maintaining public support for such intractable commitments. Lack of such support underlay the failures to execute grand strategies at the national level. Editor Jason Warren believes the United States persists in its “Long War” on terror because there is little institutional incentive to end it, given the perverse budgetary and career incentives involved. Officers, he claims, are rewarded more for tactical prowess than for professionalism or strategic acumen.

In a keynote essay on American grand strategy, Lukas Milevski argues that the state has vacillated in its use of heroism (willingness to suffer casualties) as opposed to post-heroic, technocratic solutions. Like several other contributors to the book, he highlights Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s desire to use technology to conduct land campaigns without taking casualties or exhausting resources needed for sustained combat. The consequent dearth of “boots on the ground” fed an insurgency in Iraq that could only be met by returning to the heroic approach. Precisely because “Landpower is the strongest instrument, military or nonmilitary, in grand strategy ..., its potential use may be limited to the relatively greatest threats” (28–29).

Supporting this contention, Peter Mansoor argues that US forces in the early 2000s were simply improved versions of those deployed in the Gulf War (1990–91); they neglected the transition to post-conflict operations and lacked expertise in counterinsurgency (COIN).

Joel Hillison explains how the sort of information networks that US forces believed would facilitate rapid operations also allowed ISIS and other non-state actors to spread their ideology and recruit supporters. Combating such actors, whether ideologues or criminals, required linking conventional landpower with electronic means and police structures.

Donald Travis concentrates on the civil-military relations at the heart of many issues addressed in the book. He argues that, even during the Vietnam war, US leaders understood COIN but balked at making the requisite sacrifices of blood, time, and treasure. After various non-combat uses of American power in the 1990s, Pres. George W. Bush’s administration, promising to reduce military operations, over-relied on reserve components and failed to elicit the public passion needed for sustained operations. Consequently, Pres. Barack Obama tried to restrain military force without changing US objectives in Afghanistan. Pres. Donald Trump, reacting to public dissatisfaction, wanted to withdraw completely regardless of intended objectives.

Frank Sobchak details policy failures in Iraq. The Afghan example seemed to confirm civilian leaders’ belief that advances in intelligence and technology had eliminated the “normal calculus involved in land conflicts” (87), but Rumsfeld truncated even the troop deployments he had originally authorized. He also placed a recently promoted lieutenant general, Ricardo Sanchez, in

charge of an unstaffed new headquarters—Combined Joint Task Force 7—that lacked the forces needed to pacify post-conflict Iraq. Besides the much-lamented decisions to de-Ba’atify the government and dissolve the Iraqi armed forces, the American determination to avoid long-term responsibilities led to a premature transfer of sovereignty back to the Iraqis (June 2004). By then, a nationwide uprising was underway and Iraqi security forces in charge had not had time to develop. Although the “surge” of 2007–8 reduced attacks and casualties, the United States did not capitalize on this tactical success. Instead, it allowed Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki to nullify the 2010 election results. According to Sobchak, Maliki then resisted a status of forces agreement protecting US troops because he wished to accelerate their withdrawal. Once American forces departed, Maliki rewarded loyalty over competence in security commanders while his attacks on Sunni commanders re-ignited public resistance and paved the way for the spread of ISIS. The United States not only had to return to Iraq but was compelled to work with Iran, which gained much more influence than did Washington in the prolonged struggle against the radicals.

Gregory Roberts presents a similar tale of policy-resources mismatch in Afghanistan. Quite apart from the distraction posed by the Iraqi insurgency, American strategy was doomed by Washington’s decision “to pursue a virtually limitless strategic goal [eliminating Afghanistan as a terrorist base] through the limited use of landpower” (117). Paul Westermeyer and Mark Balboni elucidate the difficulties of using even the available ground forces. Because US Marine Corps tactical units deployed for six to seven months—vs. twelve to seventeen months for Army units—they achieved only an initial suppression of insurgent activity, and the Taliban learned simply to wait for the marines to depart before resuming their attacks.

William Waddell observes that airpower proponents, who usually stress technical advantages over heroic qualities, underwent an identity crisis owing to the inconclusive, long-term nature of COIN. He maintains that airpower theory may need to be reconceived in less technical terms that hark back to Billy Mitchell’s ideal of the hero-pilot.

Edward Gutiérrez argues that even the intelligence community (IC) had cultural issues with the Long War. He cites specifically the continuing problem of policymakers forcing the IC to bow to public opinion, yet, for some reason, accepts that analysts, not politicians, were at fault in claiming Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Ibrahim al-Marashi offers an acute interpretation of ISIS’s use of landpower. Former Iraqi officers, seeing a future with ISIS, directed successful advances by decentralized, motorized units. By contrast, both Kurdish and Shi’ite Iraqis blamed Prime Minister Maliki for the defeats of 2014. The Iraqi government and its US allies had to rely on Shi’a militias until its ground and air forces could be re-trained to help in the recapture of Ramadi and Fallujah in 2015–16.

David Fastabend contrasts the relatively simple interim creation of Stryker motorized brigades with the expensive failure of the more ambitious Future Combat Systems idea. Indeed, a leitmotif of the volume is how dearly the Long War, like the Vietnam conflict before it, cost the US military in terms of future systems development. Equally expensive was the provision of theater-level headquarters for the land forces component of a joint force. John Bonin chronicles how the Army’s need to save scarce manpower for its tactical units meant that it often devoted too few resources to creating the theater headquarters needed to coordinate complex COIN and other operations.

Jon Middaugh notes that the United States had used most of its available National Guard divisions to perform headquarters functions in the former Yugoslavia after the Dayton Accords. Provisionally, this rotation of Guard staffs prepared the reserve components for more stressful deployments in Iraq.

The volume closes with a close look at the cultural and psychological effects of the Long War. Jacqueline Whitt writes that the need for troops induced the military—with the partial exception of the USMC—to permit female and gay personnel to serve in combat roles. Paradoxically, as she notes, this meant that landpower forces were actually less representative of the population: more Southern Caucasians and working-class Americans suffered casualties while Asian-Americans and the upper classes were under-represented. The voracious demand for volunteer troops led the military to relax its prohibition of recruits with criminal and substance abuse problems. In the book's last contribution, Lawrence Tritle considers the human toll of Improvised Explosive Devices and the effects of traumatic brain injury.

Most of the issues surveyed in the book arose at the level of national policy, but its contributors recognize that professional soldiers as well bore some responsibility for errors. While it will be decades before we can assess such matters with anything like objectivity, the essays gathered in *Landpower in the Long War* amount to a superb first step. Even where readers may disagree with authors, they will profit from their lucid critical overview of two decades of conflict.

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