



## *Limiting Risk in America's Wars: Airpower, Asymmetrics, and a New Strategic Paradigm* by Phillip S. Meilinger.

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In *Limiting Risk in America's Wars*, prolific military historian Phillip Meilinger<sup>1</sup> proposes a new “strategic paradigm” for the use of American airpower, special operations forces, and indigenous ground forces linked by intelligence networks (11).<sup>2</sup> A retired Air Force pilot, Meilinger has taught military science at institutions like the Air Force Academy and the Naval War College. He is an ardent proponent of an indirect approach that involves targeting an opponent’s “weaknesses and vulnerabilities” (1), chiefly by opening a second front. This, he believes, would have the added advantage of being less risky. The master plan would thus be for the United States to undertake a “grand strategic flanking maneuver involving a major military force that strikes the enemy unexpectedly somewhere other than the main theater of action” (31) in an expeditionary or amphibious assault.

Meilinger begins with a series of historical case studies exemplifying both successful and failed uses of second fronts prior to the development of airpower. Each study includes a brief historical overview followed by relevant (bullet-pointed) factors such as leadership and intelligence. The author goes on to investigate analytical connections between these case studies.

Later chapters concern current uses of force and highlight Meilinger’s frustration with the application of US military power in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Such conflicts, he argues, are here to stay, since the United States’ superior military capabilities force its enemies to resort to unconventional methods and manpower (28). Meilinger minces no words in stressing that the United States has struggled in these conflicts because Army and Marine Corps leaders have doggedly pursued the enemy’s fielded forces in manpower-intensive occupations (201). In his view, the problem in Afghanistan and Iraq is not *too few*, but *too many* American troops (157–58). A related problem is airpower supporting ground forces rather than the reverse.

The zeal of Meilinger’s opinions can be off-putting: he harkens back to a golden age of airpower, epitomized for him by notable victories during Operations Desert Storm and Allied Force (xiii, 9), when there emerged

a new form of war, one that was dominated by airpower employing precision strikes that was supported by the use—or the threat of use—of conventional ground forces. It was a false dawn. Although this emerging model was used initially in Afghanistan in 2001 and to a limited extent in Iraq in 2003, American ground commanders quickly reverted to their doctrines of the past. (147)

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1. He has written ten books on airpower.

2. See, further, Stephen D. Biddle, “Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq,” in *Quarterly Journal: International Security* 30 (2005/06) 161–76.

Meilinger's argument follows in the tradition of airpower enthusiasts who have challenged Clausewitz's purported obsession with fielded forces (170, 181), because it supposedly affords a "unique ... ability to detect, deter, deliver, defend, deny, and destroy" (xvi). But developments, for example, in the range and precision of Army artillery "deep fires"<sup>3</sup> belie this claim in certain contexts. The author insists, too, that the key to using airpower consists of determining an air strategy of "targeting" (7, 105). Other airpower theorists, however, insist that "targeting is not synonymous with air strategy"<sup>4</sup>—achieving victory through airpower is not a game of darts. Meeting desired political objectives necessitates deftly translating kinetic effect into strategic effect.

The author's claim that the United States has "lost its way regarding military policy and strategy" (preface) does not jibe with his repeated emphasis on proper tactical application of airpower, special forces, and indigenous infantry. Although Meilinger, like the good staff college instructor he once was, stresses that ends must shape ways and means, he fails to set forth an actual strategic paradigm centered on ends (184, 107). Rather, he just reiterates that what the United States has done for the last two decades can be effective without most conventional forces. In some ways, this amounts to an updated version of British air control doctrine. Britain sought to conduct its inter-war imperial policing by using airplanes in place of costly soldiers on the ground. Likewise, the author disputes the widely held idea that "occupation equals control" (188), that is boots on the ground to meet desired political ends.

Meilinger recommends that the US military should emulate the British way of war, with its preference for indirect strategies (179, 100). But he fails to bolster the "way of war" concept by ignoring important ongoing historiographical debates.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, he never says what a second front of airpower, special ops forces, and indigenous troops might have looked like. The book's conclusion raises more questions than it answers, leaving the reader wondering if Meilinger envisions opening a second front somewhere in the Middle East in the midst of a "major civil war being fought for the heart of Islam" (197–98) between radicals and moderates.

*Limiting Risk in America's Wars* is a provocative study of a thorny problem, full of food for fruitful discussion and thought. Its biting critiques of the US Army and Marine Corps, however, will not win airpower many new friends. Phillip Meilinger might have done better to concentrate on either the "indirect" strategic concept of the last two decades or his vision of a new strategic paradigm.

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3. Todd South, "Return of fires: How the Army is Getting Back to Its Big Guns as It Prepares for the Near-peer Fight," *Army Times* (27 Aug 2018) – available online.

4. See Colin Gray, *Airpower for Strategic Effect* (Maxwell AF Base: Air Univ. Pr, 2012) 237, 294.

5. See, e.g., Antulio Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War: US Military Practice from the Revolution to Afghanistan* (Washington: Georgetown U Pr, 2014).