

Commentaries and Replies

On “The Lure of Strike”

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This commentary is in response to the special commentary, “The Lure of Strike” by Conrad Crane published in the Summer 2013 issue of Parameters (vol. 43, no. 2).

As an admirer of Dr. Conrad Crane, it genuinely saddens me to see his new essay, “The Lure of Strike.” Here we have a distinguished historian becoming, in essence, an “interservice hit man,” and chief spokesperson for the Army’s small but burgeoning neo-Luddite wing. Regrettably, his essay sounds too much like that of a 1930’s cavalryman fulminating against the internal combustion that was altering the way the Army would fight wars.

Dr. Crane starts by expressing the belief that because of what he seems to think is a nefarious Air Force, America suffers from the delusion that technology inevitably produces what he calls “short, tidy wars with limited landpower commitments.” Where he gets this notion isn’t clear. The Air Force, which sandwiched a decade of no-fly zone enforcement marked by hundreds of Iraqi anti-aircraft engagements between years of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, certainly does not view conflict that way. Nor does the general public, whose rejection of stand-off strikes against Syria is ample evidence that it has no illusions about the potential unintended consequences of any use of force.

Regardless, defending Army force structure is plainly the *raison d’être* of Crane’s piece. Indeed, “The Lure of Strike” is reducible to a simple syllogism: if technological developments allow for “short, tidy wars with limited landpower commitments” then that will inevitably mean (in his thinking) a smaller Army. To him, a smaller Army is, ipso facto, bad. Ergo, technology is bad. Classic Neo-Ludditism.

Exactly why Dr. Crane is not advocating that the Army develop its own method for conducting “short, tidy wars with limited landpower commitments” is also unclear. After all, such conflicts would limit the risk to America’s most precious resource: her sons and daughters and, particularly, those in Army uniforms. It is especially baffling given that a weary Army is just emerging from exactly the opposite: long, untidy wars with massive manpower commitments that produced results most charitably described by Army Colonel Gian Gentile as “unsatisfying.”

Unfortunately, Dr. Crane does not attempt to bring to bear his formidable skills as a historian to address some of the very questions that have spurred the nation’s search for the technology-based alternatives that he rails against. For example, why is it that the best-trained, best-equipped, and most valorous army in the history of warfare was, nevertheless, unable to fully defeat the largely uneducated and lightly-armed tribesmen it significantly outnumbered and wildly outgunned?

Moreover, why did the Army, as it implemented its manpower-intensive strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan, ignore a fundamental lesson of COIN history, that is, that the most powerful insurgent recruitment

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tool is not, as some narratives would have it, the use of high-technology means (such as stand-off strike), but rather the physical presence of foreign troops? Should not the Army ask itself why its leaders repeatedly characterized its warfighting mission as “protecting the Afghan (or Iraqi) people” when the actual assignment was about protecting the *American* people as Congress’ Authorization to Use Military Force made crystal clear?

And even among those Soldiers who did grasp the true mission, why did so many think that the way to go about it was to try to turn infantrymen armed with high school degrees into social workers, civil engineers, nurses, schoolteachers, and boy scouts as Dr. Crane’s COIN doctrine importuned? And then give them the Sisyphean task to transform hostile, ancient cultures into pacific, Westernized societies? Even if that scheme somehow could work, did they not realize that al Qaeda would easily outflank it by decamping to Pakistan, Yemen, and North Africa—not to mention burrowing into urban areas around the globe?

Instead of grappling with those substantive questions of recent history, Dr. Crane launches a lengthy and startlingly venomous attack on America’s most high-tech force, the United States Air Force. According to Crane, not only does airpower fail at every turn, it is Airmen who are disingenuously and deceptively corrupting the national security dialogue. Of course, these hackneyed myths have been rebutted repeatedly, but picking apart the many flaws and omissions in Dr. Crane’s rendition is actually unnecessary. In fact, his essay amply illustrates the limits of the historian’s art when it comes to the technology of war. It really doesn’t matter, for example, what airpower could or could not do during World War II or, for that matter, yesterday, as the only thing that really counts is what it can do today.

And that is plenty. As the President and others have come to learn from material found in bin Laden’s lair and elsewhere, what America’s most dangerous enemies fear the most is not chai-drinking soldiers, female engagement teams, or even masses of infantrymen lumbering about in Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, but rather being relentlessly hunted by high-tech surveillance and strike platforms.

Of course, no one believes that stand-off, precision strike is always the answer, but—sometimes—it can be. As Tom Ricks’s book *Fiasco* reports, 1998’s Operation Desert Fox—a few days of air and missile strikes—effectively ended Iraq’s nuclear weapons’ program. David Kay, the former United Nations arms inspector, said that after the strikes the Iraqi weapons programs “withered away, and never got momentum again.”

America is a technological nation, and the Army ought to embrace and celebrate that fact even if it means changes. Yet as a developer of robotic ground vehicles told *The New York Times*, “there is a resistance to new technologies being introduced in and around soldiers.” Although infantrymen are hardly obsolete, their numbers and employment strategy is—and should be—reevaluated because of what technology can now offer.

The Army needs to calm itself. Everyone whose opinions anyone should care about knows America needs a robust and dominant Army. There is, in fact, a powerful case to be made for such an Army, but it

is not one premised on denigrating another service, or—especially—suggesting that technology does not and cannot change the *calculus* of warfighting. In short, our Army must resist “the lure of Neo-Ludditism.”