The Hard Truth about “Easy Fighting” Theories:
The Army is Needed Most When Specific Outcomes Matter

by
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Introduction

The new wisdom around the Washington Beltway is that when the greatest dangers lie in a naval theater, and when the nation has little inclination to venture into land theaters to sort out complex conflicts, then naval power conjoined with airpower is the defense investment of choice. But what is the basis of this belief? And should the nation act on such logic?

In the spring of 2011, then-Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates announced at the Air Force Academy that AirSea Battle “has the potential to do for America’s military deterrent power at the beginning of the 21st century what AirLand Battle did near the end of the 20th.” Thus an idea that began life as a concept for overcoming the new and envisioned anti-access tactics of a great and modern power like China gained legitimacy as the new American way of high-end war, laden with the faulty logic of its predecessor of a decade ago, Rapid Decisive Operations (RDO). RDO informed the logic and design of the 2001 and 2003 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to depose the Hussein and Taliban regimes; both invasions depended on overwhelming precision air and naval firepower and a light presence of U.S. ground forces to change intolerable situations on the ground. The approach endorsed by Secretary Gates would rely entirely on overwhelming precision air and naval firepower. This approach applies the logic of economic sanctions to bring a foreign government to terms by indirect pressure on the public it governs.

Since the First Gulf War, the belief has grown that the power to change intolerable situations on the ground can be achieved without hard and bloody fighting by Soldiers and Marines. I call them “easy fighting” theories—conceptions that promise low-risk and high-gain solutions to complex world problems through air and naval military power. The hard truth about such “easy fighting” theories is that it is extremely difficult, when a specific outcome matters, to convince any implacable enemy—particularly one willing to blow himself up to achieve his aims—to yield to U.S. or coalition terms. And the inconvenient truth is that “easy fighting” theories cannot be relied upon to deliver high-stakes results.

Making the Important Case More Boldly is Important

To make the case for the Army’s enduring utility, Army Chief of Staff General Raymond T. Odierno, in his October 2012 ARMY “Green Book” article “Today’s Army: The Strength of Our Nation,” stressed its capabilities across a broad range of likely future missions:
Regardless of the complexity of the terrain or the duration of an operation, Army units have the demonstrated ability to perform tasks across the entire spectrum of conflict. From disaster relief to counterterrorism operations, partnering with host nation forces to seizing an objective, the Army delivers capable, tailorable active and reserve units for almost any contingency. Against the complex backdrop of future operations, ground forces offer a unique set of capabilities increasingly crucial to achieving lasting strategic effects. No sensor can match a Soldier’s ability to distinguish friend from enemy or discern hostile intent. The discriminating application of force, particularly in an increasingly interconnected world, is increasingly a moral requirement that can often be achieved only by working within and among populations. At other times, conflict can be prevented through our engagement. Partnering with allies builds their capabilities and our own while increasing interoperability and trust. All the while, we demonstrate the strength of the world’s greatest land force, signaling commitment to friends and deterring potential enemies.2

These are certainly important and defensible truths. General Odierno also reminds his readers of the continuing relevance of General Omar Bradley’s World War II-gained wisdom. In 1951, the first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff expressed the following theory about military power: “American armed strength is only as strong as the combat capabilities of its weakest service. Overemphasis on one or the other will obscure our compelling need—not for airpower, not for seapower—but for American military power commensurate with our tasks in the world.”3

But is General Bradley’s 1951 logic still self-evident wisdom within the Washington Beltway? I think not. It is important to be much more forthright about this issue. The important point is that power is not a commodity like coal or oil. In all of its forms, power is situational and specific to the task at hand—as is military power. The Army tends to argue its flexibility rather than its central essentiality when achieving specific outcomes matters most. It must support General Bradley’s claim and the essential modern corollary to it—that deficiencies in land forces are not easily made up by greater superiority in air- and seapower for the tasks in the world that still matter most today.

There is no polite way around the age-old processes of “creation and destruction” that has brought humankind from the broadly held views of previous ages to the more enlightened ones of the present. The advance of science requires a process of disciplined professional confrontation, not of compromise. It is not difficult to show that the theories that minimize the role of land forces have severe limitations and derive from faulty thinking about military power and its applications in the modern world—thinking that assigns unwarranted causal power to the “shock and awe” of modern air and naval weaponry over the decisions of hostile governments and other relevant human actors. This faulty logic skews the cost-benefit calculus of choosing war by minimizing the costs of success and by exaggerating the efficacy of its methods. A full defense of both General Bradley’s thinking and its modern corollary requires dismantling the logic of modern “easy fighting” theories.

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA)-authored AirSea Battle concept is only the latest of these.4 The CSBA version of AirSea Battle, the only version in existence when Secretary Gates spoke, is—like the AirLand Battle of the 1980s—a full-blown method for waging war. Its authors advocate “distant blockading” to avoid the need for land battles with rising powers. And while the Joint Staff and the combatant commanders have thoughtfully distanced themselves from the CSBA-authored concept by renaming their derivative the “Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC),” implying a tactical function that may be necessary at the front end of any military intervention, for any purpose. The Department of Defense (DoD) still harbors an AirSea Battle Office and the Air Force and Navy chiefs still refer to their joint enterprise as AirSea Battle, thereby implicitly favoring this “easy fighting” method of “high-end” warfare. But while the authors admit that the AirSea Battle form of “shock and awe” is not rapid, they do seem to believe that, applied long enough and competently, it is decisive. What they do not see is that, once chosen, it is a road to unpredictable and unfavorable outcomes and not a reliable way to change an intolerable status quo. What really matters is that this proposed new wisdom has been uncontested in the public domain.

To avoid confusion, AirSea Battle references later in this essay will be to the version in the public domain in the broadly distributed CSBA document mentioned earlier. There is a classified AirSea Battle document
authored among the DoD AirSea Battle Office and the Air Force and Navy, to which the other services have contributed, but one can only assume that a movie based on a previous book will follow mostly the same plot. Such conceptual premises held by DoD officials will heavily influence the campaign strategy and tactics of future military interventions, as they have in the recent past.

The real difference between RDO and AirSea Battle is extending the old Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) defeat mechanism of “shock and awe” into the economic dimension by “distant blockading” of the flow of goods and resources from and to an adversary power’s economy for as long as it takes for its leadership to come to terms. The difficulty of both remains the very unpredictable, and even weak, link between cause and desired effect, a link that must pass through the very human brains of a war-stressed leadership of strangers. AirSea Battle compounds this weakness by setting in motion causal chains affecting globalized economic interdependencies in unpredictable, fratricidal and even suicidal ways. For instance, China is now America’s third largest export customer after Canada and Mexico.

Rapid Decisive Operations Minimized the Role of Grounds Forces

RDO was heavily favored by the technical services and resisted (but not strongly enough) by the Army and Marine Corps. There was a time when Army thinkers also believed in the theory that the addition of modern technology-enhanced intelligence and fire support took the place of Soldiers whose primary mission it is to engage the enemy, allowing them to reduce some fraction of their brigade combat teams (BCTs). In the reorganization of the late 1990s based on that theory, one tank was removed from each platoon, and the infantry squad shrank from eleven to nine members. The Task Force (TF) Modularity reorganization beginning in 2004 reduced the combat-force fraction of the BCT even more. BCTs retained two rather than three or four maneuver battalions, based on a continuing belief in that theory and also on the desire to increase the number of available BCTs. General Odierno’s article shows that the Army’s thinking has evolved beyond this earlier view. The Army’s two-combat-battalion BCTs will add one more.

Although never officially accepted as joint doctrine, RDO’s key conceptual premises heavily influenced DoD officials and thus campaign strategy and tactics in the Kosovo campaign and in the opening campaigns of the Afghan and Iraqi wars. All three of these were offensive operations intended to rapidly and decisively enforce our will against determined enemies. And in all of these, the civilian leadership placed heavy emphasis on limiting the ground presence, believing that precise lethal firepower from “standoff” could, and should, replace ground maneuver.

The key conceptual premise of RDO was that if long-range, precise, lethal and destructive weapons are employed on a massive scale, from the safety of the seas and the sky, against scientifically selected “high-value” ground targets, accompanied by clever “influence” operations in the “information domain,” then these actions would cause (actually shock) enemy leaders to capitulate and accept terms both rapidly and decisively. A key underlying planning assumption of this theory is that with careful attention to operational net assessments (ONAs) made ahead of time and a keen application of “effects-based planning” (EBP), even second and third order effects can be predicted. But is such linearity and predictability warranted? Has the hypothesis underlying this form of warfare ever been rigorously tested?

In fact, the experience of the NATO air war against Yugoslavia between 24 March and 12 June 1999 over the withdrawal of Serb forces from Kosovo and the insertion of a stabilizing NATO ground force seemed to encourage supporters by confirming the fundamental premises. Was the Kosovo air war really a “proof of principle”? What caused Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic to give in to NATO demands?

RDO received another boost of confirmatory evidence when the Taliban government of Afghanistan was deposed so quickly with such a small U.S. and allied ground presence. This discussion of strategy and tactics was put on hold when the intended swift-offensive RDO-style campaign to topple Saddam Hussein transitioned into a very long and arduous campaign of a very different sort. And the ground services were quickly diverted to new, and very different, conceptual difficulties—modernizing counterinsurgency doctrine to cope with the situation created largely by the faulty RDO logic of the civilian leadership and some highly placed military professionals. They believed that precise lethal firepower from standoff and surface maneuver were functionally fungible.
In an article about insights from the application of RDO-like concepts in two Title 10 war games conducted by the Army and the Air Force in 2002, this author drew these conclusions:

I suspect we greatly underestimate the difficulty of concluding such campaigns promptly. Service Title 10 war games tend to devote more attention to successful campaign beginnings than to successful conclusions. War games usually conclude when victory seems inevitable to us (not necessarily to the enemy), at about the point operational superiority has been achieved and tactical control of strategically significant forces and places appears to be but a matter of time. For instance, the many questions about the necessary means and methods required to achieve an acceptable strategic end state could not be answered because neither Global Engagement VI team had progressed far enough before the war game ended. In fairness to the U.S. Air Force, their most significant efforts begin early. It has also been important for the U.S. Army to understand the implications of some very new challenges at the front end of such campaigns. But it is just as important to know how to follow through to the resolution of such conflicts.\(^5\)

Science advances when hypotheses are rigorously tested. Much confirming evidence can be overturned by one unequivocal disconfirmation. Rather than being rapidly decisive, several implementations of this hypothesis have led to more than one long, protracted and indecisive campaign, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq. Title 10 war games, and those of some of our think tanks, often permit confirmatory evidence to sway conclusions.\(^6\) The science of developing military theories has been treated much more cavalierly than it deserves.

**AirSea Battle Asserts that Ground Forces Are Not Necessary at All**

While RDO minimized the role of ground maneuver forces, this more recent incarnation of “transformation thinking” gaining traction asserts that ground forces are not necessary at all—that striking and destroying such targets predictably and reliably while constricting economic activity and output causes the rational enemy decisionmaker to capitulate.\(^7\)

In their “AirSea Battle: Promoting Stability in an Uncertain World,” the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force (CSAF) and the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) speak of projecting military power as if it were a uniform commodity.\(^8\) But if “power,” as the dictionary tells us, is the capacity to do work, does differentiated work require differentiated forms of power? If so, we have to ask what kind of work air and naval forces can do and what kinds of work they cannot do.

The truth is that naval, air and space forces may gain information about objects and activities on the ground, and they may influence activities and strike objects, but only truly integrated operations containing a sufficiency of ground forces can control activities of adversaries and enforce desired outcomes. Naval, air and space forces may be able to do so in special circumstances when the strategic aim is to deter, warn, suppress or punish, but when implacable foes have to be defeated and the desired outcome is a specified new condition or behavior, only unified action including a significantly large land force can secure it.

In the aforementioned article, the CSAF and the CNO do not address how air and naval forces can or will control activities of adversaries and enforce desired outcomes on the ground. And interestingly, although they appear to support the ideas of the original CSBA authors by retaining the name and other trappings of AirSea Battle, they never mention “distant blockading” as a form of offensive warfare. They mostly address the challenge of projecting military power in the face of mounting counter-access challenges to American military freedom of action. And overcoming counter-access challenges is the kind of work air and naval forces can do. The question is: can they overcome these challenges during a period of crisis without starting an unwanted war? Can the “networked, integrated attack-in-depth” air and naval operations that they propose “defeat anti-access and area-denial threats and restore our freedom of action” without precipitating war? What does “attack-in-depth” imply? To which the chiefs reply,

In traditional attrition models of warfare, forces attack the outer layer of an enemy’s defenses and deliberately fight their way in. In contrast, under AirSea Battle, forces will attack adversary systems wherever needed to gain access to contested areas needed to achieve operational objectives.\(^9\)
This is nothing new. Attack-in-depth operations, derived from earlier AirLand Battle thinking, have been joint doctrine since the very first Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*. But such “attacks-in-depth” are clearly acts of war against the country in which they occur. So what is new? The CSBA paper acknowledges that such attacks, intended to destroy the counter-access system holistically, may precipitate war. The chiefs do not address this question. So what happened to warfare by “distant blockading”? Not mentioning this aspect of the original concept is not repudiating it. Assuming the title of the book implies that the movie follows the same story line, does it not? Or is this the continuation of an old pattern noted in 2002—devising concepts only about starting wars, not finishing them? Whichever it is, we must assume that the default option in the thinking of the technical service chiefs is, in case war erupts, to conduct it as a continuation of some form of “easy fighting”—be it “attacks-in-depth,” “distant blockading” or some combination. So let’s develop the argument about the limitations of warfare by air and naval forces only a few steps further.

**The Theoretical and Practical Limitations of Warfare by Air and Naval Forces Only**

Today is certainly different from 1951 in some important ways. The most important of these is that the one struggle that mattered most in 1951 was one that American strategists could see and measure in concrete terms, and it could be upon them in about 48 hours without earlier unambiguous (“actionable”) warning. Today the most essential armed conflicts will be those that we cannot predict and therefore cannot see and measure in concrete terms beforehand. And the most threatening of these may take longer to become dangerous. Finally, they will not be armed struggles to preserve a status quo on ground where we are deployed and ready immediately to defend—for that one remnant of the Cold War in Korea, where armed conflict has been successfully deterrent for six decades.

In some cases influencing the outcome by shaping conditions to facilitate desirable ones is sufficient. Some notable past examples are supporting the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, punishing the Milosevic regime for invading Kosovo, destroying and disabling suspected storage and production sites for weapons of mass destruction in Hussein-era Iraq and maintaining a no-fly zone over that country for 12 years. There were also past cases that involved neither combat nor the need to threaten it. As important as such missions might be for the best interests of the country, they are ventures in which outcomes are certainly important but “losing” is either not possible or irrelevant. Such missions should not be highest in the priority of Army design and investment requirements.

Today’s and tomorrow’s Army will be most essential for situations that evolve rapidly and unexpectedly to become intolerable before credibly deterrent military counteractions are even possible. Examples include the transnational crime syndicates supporting the Noriega regime in Panama; the ouster by coup of the first freely elected government in Haiti; the unexpected Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990; the collapse of the former Yugoslavia into disruptive “ethnic cleansing”; the 2001 Afghan Talibam government’s harboring of al Qaeda training bases and providing a launching place for global attacks; and the threat of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein in 2003. A sudden attack in Korea may require military reinforcements to restore rather than just to defend South Korean territory. In other words, the preeminent tasks in the world for American military power will remain responding to change in an unacceptable new status quo on the ground and restoring a situation that is favorable. In each of these cases it was essential to place combat formations on the ground to enforce a desirable outcome. In fact, in both of the recent long interventions into Afghanistan and Iraq, the task of removing undesirable regimes was easily done with a small land component—but this proved inadequate to enforce the desired changes in the situation.

It is one thing to have the capability to change, modify, defeat and disrupt man-made systems that actually exist in the world—including those that make up the Internet and counter-access systems. These are complicated, concrete realities comprising both observable and obscured parts, but they make up systems that behave in a linear (i.e., predictable) fashion. Mapping the structural form and pattern of such systems reveals a predictable causal logic for changing, modifying, defeating or disrupting them.

It is quite another thing to effect the decisions, beliefs, intentions and relationships of thinking humans, because we can only guess what strangers are thinking and what factors matter to them. Key human relationships
and concerns are hidden, constantly evolving and impossible to bound. Any assumption of linear predictability between cause and effect is problematic because the linkage from cause to effect must pass through the very human brains of strangers. It is not reasonable to try to elicit the desired response from such human systems by attacking the attackable, even when scientifically and precisely done.

It is more prudent to assume that it is always difficult to predict whether air and naval attacks on “high-value” targets will cause submission, or how long it will take before decisions to submit are taken, and what form the decision will take.

Even when we guess correctly—that enemy leaders value economic and civil infrastructures such as bridges, power grids, pipelines, military installations or ships at sea and that destroying them will influence the enemy leader’s decision—we will not be sure how any resourceful and determined enemy leader or group of leaders will respond to our military actions. (A democratic government is likely to fall by its own choice before a tyrant’s would.) Once we attack a determined enemy, the enemy’s definition of winning promptly becomes not losing, or delaying defeat until the coalition tires of pursuing its original strategic ends. Eventually it becomes evading closure on our terms, indefinitely if possible. Is this what happened in the first real practical test of this hypothesis, Hitler’s air war to knock the British out of World War II? It seemed to have stiffened resolve instead. Air and air defense forces together can control air space. Naval forces can control sea space. Air and naval forces may influence what happens on land surfaces, but they cannot establish persistent control there.

Any thinking foe will fully comprehend not only our strengths but also our limitations and will adjust his tactics and defenses accordingly. For instance, there is no guarantee that offensive warfare from the sea and high altitude will limit casualties on the friendly side. On the contrary, such offensives may shield casualties in combat units, but they may also expose offensively deployed supporting infrastructures, and coalition homelands, to asymmetric attack.

Some will argue that anyone who is punished enough will eventually yield. But how will he yield and how much destruction of “high value” economic and civil infrastructure is in the strategic interest? For instance, if the strategic aim is to unseat the old regime and to install a new and stable regime more to our liking, then punishing the very elements of the society—the business class and those who depend on those businesses for their jobs, who will be vital to achieving the ultimate strategic aim—would seem to be counterproductive. In the case of AirSea Battle, not only would the proposed new American way of high-end war harm (in unpredictable ways that could have global consequences) the nonpolitical Chinese, it would harm the economies—including our own—that are now so interdependent with China.

The greater the time allowed to accomplish strategic objectives once hostilities are begun, the more opportunity the enemy has to strike asymmetrically, adjust his defenses, diminish the cohesion of our coalition and extort concessions from our political authorities. We will not have the capabilities in the foreseeable future to fight offensive wars against major powers unilaterally, and the political support for coalitions tend to fray as optimistic expectations fade and the achievement of strategic aims is delayed. This risk is so great that it seems to me irresponsible, and unrealistic, to initiate such unbalanced offensive warfare without some assurance that any such approach can enforce closure on favorable terms sooner rather than later.

The Cost of Defeating an Enemy’s Power to Resist Imposed Terms Regardless of Will

Because military efforts that aim to coerce enemy leaders to accept undesirable terms are very problematic, they are historically accompanied by complementary efforts that force closure by defeating the enemy’s power to resist regardless of his will, and thus make it possible to enforce desired changes in conditions on the enemy. This prudent addition, even when held back as a credible threat and not actually exercised, limits damage prior to the submission of enemy leaders and makes irrelevant the enemy’s choices about whether, when and how to submit. When outcomes matter most, this arm of campaigning cannot be wished away.

Understanding this, there is all the more reason to be wary of strategies that provide a “slippery yellow brick road” to war. The “attacks-in-depth” alluded to by the air and naval chiefs above, while designed to gain freedom of action, may also precipitate war on undesirable terms. For instance, while the aim may be to gain freedom
of action to deter aggressive adventurism, attacks-in-depth—the only available method to gain that freedom of action—also provide that “slippery yellow brick road” without a reliable control or closure mechanism.

Therefore, what good is a strategy that gains freedom of action only to impose “distant blockade” on the Chinese economy? What will such a strategy cost in lost jobs and economic hardship to our own country and in those of all countries who benefit from China’s economic rise? Avoiding a major land war with China is obvious strategic wisdom. But no grand master of strategy would plot a course that could, through miscalculation or the bad judgment of future Chinese leaders, lead to his having to “distant blockade” the biggest economy on the globe and deal with all of the possible global fallout of such a condition. He would find a way to manage the peaceful military rise of China alongside its economic rise in a prosperous and interdependent world. And he would think realistically about war from beginning to ending, should it become necessary.

When trusted military professionals endorse “easy fighting” concepts they encourage bold talk by government officials (and office seekers) and thus lower the threshold of wars of choice. I heartily recommend a close reading of David E. Johnson’s *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza* about how Israel was heavily influenced by America’s mechanistic “easy fighting” concepts and how they fared. Americans have had their own experiences with “easy fighting” theories. (The conceptual model for the “regime change” in Afghanistan and Iraq was “Rapid Decisive Operations.”) And this careless and shallow thinking makes the world more dangerous and unpredictable rather than safer and more stable. Moreover, such military conceptions make for lazy strategists, encouraging thinking more valid during the Cold War, when strategist could lead with military rationales. It is time for the U.S. military services to change the long pattern of devising concepts that apply at the beginning of wars without thinking through how such concepts would deter war or how follow-on concepts would lead to finishing them.

Finally, tactical concepts and capabilities for overcoming the new and envisioned anti-access tactics of great and modern powers are vital additions. But they cannot just be “attacks-in-depth” as described by the air and naval service chiefs or by the CSBA authors. They have to be surgical operations that leave few scars yet incapacitate the increasingly powerful “counter-access systems” of potential adversaries without immediately drawing them into war with us. Not only can this be done, it must be done.

**Conclusion**

A defense establishment based on “easy fighting” theories risks wars on unwinnable terms because it is one thing to trigger change on the ground by setting internal forces free and it is another to control such forces once freed. The best way to avoid the need for “hard fighting” by Soldiers and Marines is first to understand what it takes to do it well in the rapidly evolving 21st century—rather than by limiting ourselves to alluring theories based on wishful thinking—and then to have the core capabilities in hand from which to evolve the capacity to handle situations as they arise.

Only a balanced American armed force with a sufficient land force component can perform such missions at acceptable costs. An unbalanced AirSea Battle force means taking on such missions half-prepared. Thus the issue here is not about the size of the military budget. It is about basing an affordable military budget on a prudent strategy and on realistic premises.

And the Army cannot make that case convincingly unless it believes that its core function, when it is committed within the joint armed forces of the United States, and when it is needed most, is to enforce necessary change in the status quo when specific outcomes matter.
Endnotes


3 Ibid.


9 Ibid.


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