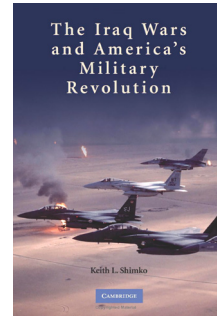


Book Reviews

The Iraq Wars and America's Military Revolution



By Keith L Shimko

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Reviewed by Group Captain Shaun Harvey

Biography: Group Captain Shaun Harvey is the RAF Exchange Officer at the USAF Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base. Commissioned into the Engineer (Communications-Electronics) Branch, he has enjoyed a number of command and staff appointments in the UK and Germany, and has served in an exchange post in Headquarters USAF, The Pentagon. He has a First and two Masters degrees and is a CAS' Fellow.

Introduction

Keith Shimko is associate professor of political science at Purdue University in the United States. His primary areas of interest are international relations and security and his other works include *Images and Arms Control* about how the Reagan administration viewed the Soviet Union.

Debates about the so-called American "*Revolution in Military Affairs*" or RMA have raged ever since the World's television screens bore witness to the targeting cross-hairs of laser-designating aircraft and CNN news coverage of Tomahawk Cruise Missiles in the 1991 Gulf War. Now, and after the recent decade of focus on Counter-Insurgency (COIN) operations in the Middle East, there is a growing transatlantic focus on the challenges of a rising China and a return to the familiar ideas of geo-politics and the military advantages being offered by American technology. What has become known as the "Third Offset Strategy" seeks to sustain the US military's technological edge, albeit with significant capital investment. Thus, the issues Shimko discusses have particular relevance to American grand strategy and the current US policy of 'Rebalancing to Asia.'

Shimko delivers a well-researched, balanced and very readable book. It will be of significant interest to anyone wanting to understand the role of technology in contemporary combat,

the recent history of Western conflict in the Middle East, or those studying the changes in the American way of war since the Vietnam War. Air power enthusiasts will find plenty of familiar but well-crafted examples of how technology has driven advantage in air and joint operations over the past two decades. Additionally, strategists will profit from its even-handed, if inconclusive, approach to the arguments over technology's role in national strategy.

This book begins by introducing the subject of the "Revolution in Military Affairs" or RMA; the post-modern extension of the arguments made by Geoffrey Parker on military innovation and the rise of the West.¹ Providing a succinct, yet familiar narrative, Shimko highlights the claims that RMA advocates make on the outstanding operational success the US demonstrated on Op DESERT STORM. He details the impact of modern technology such as stealth, precision guidance and networked information systems and proposes that these represent a radical change in warfighting. The next chapter discusses the importance of the Vietnam War on American defence planning and military thought. The legacies of Vietnam go some way to explain the momentum behind RMA; however, Shimko steers clear of investigating wider US strategy, including the important part played by ideas such as the Weinberger-Powell doctrine.

Later chapters are chronological and recount the history of America's contribution to Somalia and Kosovo, highlighting the continued essential contribution of airpower and C4ISR, its strengths and relative weaknesses. There is then coverage of the Iraq War from 2003, split into two parts. The first considers how America's technological advantage allowed the US-led coalition to remove the Iraqi regime so rapidly and with so few allied casualties. The second part describes the efforts to stem the insurgency and growing forces of civil war in Iraq as a wholly new context - a new war - in which the technological advantages of US forces were of limited value in achieving the mission.

Throughout, the book poses the same question: do the changes described in technology and warfighting represent a revolution in military affairs? The essential operational contribution made by technology is clear: the book concludes that the practices of warfighting, and major combat operations especially, have been significantly changed by the introduction of technologies such as stealth, precision guidance, C4ISR and the accompanying transformation in training, doctrine and supporting lines of development. Shimko contends that over the past twenty years, the character of warfighting has altered sufficiently to merit the label 'revolution.' However, beyond the operational level, the point is moot. Even where battlefield advantage is unequivocally demonstrated, no relationship is offered to the wars' political outcomes.

Shimko may also be wise not to have drawn any great conclusions from the Western experience of COIN Operations, as it may yet be too soon to assess the contributing roles of

¹ Geoffrey Parker. *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

strategy and technology. Such an argument would also require the rigour of investigation into the strategic choices that the US and its allies made. He focuses instead on technological advantage and how that was achieved at the operational level, leaving the reader to speculate whether it is a fallacy to assume that one can solve the complex problems of future armed conflict through the exploitation of advanced technology alone.

Strategically incomplete it may be, but in *The Iraq Wars and America's Military Revolution*, Shimko produces an excellent discussion on how technology has transformed the operational level of war. This and the even treatment that he affords technology advocates and sceptics alike are the reasons this text was selected for the USAF Air War College Foundations of Strategy Course. This is an important and well-argued work on the technological advances that shaped the way we approach today's major combat operations. For that alone, it deserves its space on any airman's bookshelf.

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