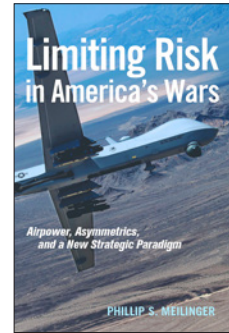


## Book Review

# Limiting Risk in America's Wars



By Phillip S. Meilinger

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Reviewed by Dr Peter Lee

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**Biography:** Dr Peter Lee is the Director Security and Risk, and a Reader in Politics and Ethics, at the University of Portsmouth. He has been researching and writing about remotely piloted air operations since 2012. In 2016 Peter was granted unprecedented research access to the two RAF Reaper squadrons for his latest book, *Reaper Force: Inside Britain's Drone Wars* (2018).

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## Introduction

In his latest book, the prolific air power author, academic and former USAF officer Phillip S. Meilinger makes an impassioned and historically-based argument for America to adopt the best available technology to reduce its military and political risk. He also extends the need to limit risk to civilians and infrastructure while fighting adversaries. More specifically, in the drive for asymmetric advantage he advocates for a reorientation of US military policy away from massed land forces towards 'airpower, SOF, indigenous ground troops, and robust ISR' (p. xvii). The latter looks very like the US order of battle in Syria against ISIS.

The author introduces a helpful, if brief, summary of the key tenets of air power theory since the First World War. This sets the foundation for the aim of the book: to grant air power 'a greater or possibly even dominant role' in US strategy (p. 9). There follows a discussion of the British military historian and strategist Basil Liddell Hart, and the reduction of risk through his 'Indirect Approach' (p. 18) and the resultant 'limited liability' (p. 22).

Having set the context for his main thesis, Meilinger then sets off on a series of historical case studies over several chapters which look at 'second front' operations (p. 31), or indirect approaches, where belligerents seek to defeat or weaken an enemy while avoiding head-on

confrontation. In the process he builds his case using incisive analysis of military and political events, consistently drawing upon statistical data that spans costs, troop numbers, supplies, sorties flown, ships at sea, enemies killed, civilian casualties, defence budgets, and much more. The result is a well-argued case for reducing risk in America's wars in the twenty-first century in an almost breathless intellectual journey across modern wars, large and small.

The final two chapters provide a fascinating and provocative culmination to the author's arguments. His tone tends to be more critical of conventional army and Marine approaches to war, attributing greater nuance to sailors and airmen and the way they apply technology. Precision weapons are presented as a particularly beneficial development and their accuracy, 'measured in single-digit feet' (p. 172), is presented somewhat idealistically: 'The consequence has been a dramatic decrease in the number of civilian casualties in wars fought by the United States and its allies (p. 173)'. His statistics point to the benefits of this technological advancement.

From an ethical perspective, I am intrigued by the dynamic that then emerges in Meilinger's argument. On the one hand he advocates for the 'jointness' that emerged from the Cold War: 'To minimise mistakes and confusion, military operations became more centralized and more joint' (p. 171). In contrast, in the discussion about the proficiency of air-delivered munitions which follows reads much more as air power advocacy.

Referencing precision weapons and civilian casualties he is keen to cite the relatively small number of civilian deaths that are attributable to single-service air strikes: 11.3% of 85,000 Iraqi civilian deaths between 2003 and 2008; and only 2.6% of 60,922 Iraqi civilian deaths between 2005 and 2009 (p. 173). The other 97.4% were a result of ground warfare.

If, as Meilinger advocates, the use of indigenous forces on the ground is to be part of America's risk reduction strategy, then the US would not, in fact, be moving away from large-scale joint warfare but merely outsourcing the land element. More pertinently, it would not be reducing *overall* risk in modern war but merely reducing its own risk by outsourcing the blood cost of the ground element. It might even be increasing the overall risk to civilians in modern warfare by supporting indigenous allies whose ground forces are not as discriminating or proportionate as the US Army or US Marine Corps. Surely consistency and morality demands that the US 'owns' the ground casualties caused by the 'friendlyes' it supports if those allies are also supporting US strategic interests. If the reader does not recognise this dynamic then they might be left with a distorted view of what air power can achieve in modern warfare.

In addition, as an air power advocate, I surprised myself with the degree to which I felt defensive towards the US Marine Corps General who is roundly criticised for his view that, '... we can't lose our honor by failing to put our own skin on the line' (p. 174). Because for the author, 'Airpower offers a far more intelligent and humane alternative' in limiting 'risk to friendly forces' (p. 174). They seem to be talking at cross-purposes. Despite any shift towards risk-free

or reduced-risk warfare – especially to one’s own combatants – through the application of technology via air power in particular, if a piece of ground needs to be taken and held it will be a marine or a soldier that does it. The need for honour and physical courage on the battlefield has not disappeared, even if the requirement has changed somewhat in the increasingly political-risk-averse wars that the US has fought over the past three decades.

In what is an excellent, thought-provoking book, there are two areas where I would take issue with the author. The first of these reveals my own bias as much as any deficiency in the text, because drone warfare is only briefly mentioned and is assumed to reduce risk to the crews involved. However, the reduced risk that the author refers to is *physical* risk. The book could benefit from a discussion here about psychological risk to Predator and Reaper crews who see the results of their strikes in increasingly high-definition detail. A brief footnote is scant consolation (p. 179, note 51). I would argue that risk is relocated or redistributed through remotely piloted aircraft (or drone) use, not reduced or removed.

My second query is about the inherent assumption that political goals should be, or even can be, pursued ‘at low cost and low risk’ (p. 205). Before the 2008 banking crisis, financiers around the world were certain that they had hedged and calculated away their risk to a minimum. Instead it was simply ignored or missed and waiting to blindsides the global banking structure, starting with seemingly impregnable US banks. For all the logic of Meilinger’s arguments, the approach he advocates contains a number of unstated risks that cannot be measured in either blood or treasure. What is the risk to the collective American psyche if opponents and neutral observers eventually see US political and military risk aversion as cowardice? And what if the unthinkable happens and a population that is schooled in the language of low risk war is called upon to wage a brutal war of truly great national and individual sacrifice? Will the confusion be any less than that of the financial crisis?

Perhaps the greatest legacy of Phillip Meilinger’s book will be to prompt exactly this kind of soul searching and critique of past, present and future government policy on the methods and means of war. After reading the book I felt there was something familiar but not immediately identifiable about its message and tone, especially the idealistic and sometimes idealised view of what air power can achieve. Initially I thought of John Warden’s ‘Five Ring Model’ of air power strategy (1995, p. 44).<sup>1</sup> But the connection that I eventually settled upon – and readers will form their own opinions – was to Hugh Trenchard’s impassioned arguments for the supremacy of air power over naval and land power after World War I. In reality, Trenchard’s air power theory was as much a political argument for the very existence of the Royal Air Force and the prioritisation of its budget, as it was about how aircraft can be used to deliver effect in war. It could even have been called *Limiting Risk in Britain’s Colonial Wars*.

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<sup>1</sup> Warden, J.A., 1995. The Enemy as a System, *Airpower Journal* 9(1), 40-55, Available at: [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-09\\_Issue-1-5e/1995\\_Vol9\\_No1.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-09_Issue-1-5e/1995_Vol9_No1.pdf) [Accessed 20 May 2019].

I highly recommend *Limiting Risk in America's Wars* to both the amateur enthusiast and the professional soldier, marine, sailor and air power practitioner. It is informed, provocative, and offers 'risk' as a very useful lens through which to revisit old debates around war and military intervention. I just can't help being concerned that the idea of 'low risk' war might lead to hubris or complacency. War will always be a costly business and someone, somewhere has to pay.

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