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Weapons of Choice: The Development of Precision Guided Munitions

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The regional combatant commanders today are considered by many within the U.S. government to be policy entrepreneurs. Each commands a large staff, oversees a huge budget, and travels frequently within his region to promote U.S. interests. In fact, our national security strategy now directs regional combatant commanders to engage with regional allies and promote theater security cooperation. A regional viewpoint and focus, instead of the country-specific view represented by U.S. ambassadors, makes combatant commanders ideally suited to promote and implement security agreements with heads of state. Their enormous resources and regional access dwarf the capabilities of the State Department, whose process of policy formulation still resides in Washington, D.C. In contrast, regional commanders are out on the ramparts daily, just like the proconsuls or British viceroys in the days of empire.

In this aspect, readers will find much of value in the book. As Reveron points out, there is a paucity of scholarly research on the subject of foreign policy making by regional combatant commanders and their subsequent encroachment into traditional fields of international relations. Anthony Zinni, a retired Marine Corps general and former commander of U.S. Central Command, describes the book in these terms: “Derek Reveron has put together an excellent work describing the controversial role of our nation’s combatant commanders. It is an insightful, accurate, and provocative presentation of the issues and history done by first-rate contributors who clearly know the subject.” The book is well suited for midcareer officers and students of international relations who are about to enter the field of national security policy making. While the cost of the hardcover edition will certainly deter all but the most avid readers of foreign policy, the paperback is now available for $26.95.

DONALD K. HANSEN
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At least since medieval expert Lynn White’s controversial argument that the stirrup was responsible for the demise of feudalism, historians have highlighted the seminal role of technology in social change. Paul Gillespie’s compelling, compact history of precision guided munitions (PGMs) is unlikely to raise such an acrimonious debate, but he has provided a valuable contribution to the study of technology and society and, more specifically, to the rapidly growing body of literature concerning the “revolution in military affairs.”

The great advantage of Gillespie’s book is its focus on a single, obviously significant military technology and on that technology’s effect on national security policy. The book traces the history of PGMs from World War I; the grainy picture of a destroyed bridge on the dust cover turns out to be, somewhat surprisingly, not the “Vietnam poster child” for PGMs (the notorious Tranh Hoa Bridge) but a bridge destroyed by an early guided bomb in Burma during World War II. Some readers may find a few of Gillespie’s claims a bit too “Air Force laudatory,” but one should expect...
at least a bit of airpower advocacy from a professor of history who teaches at the Air Force Academy. Gillespie’s account is on the whole balanced and well documented, and his frank discussion of some of the less-than-favorable impacts of PGMs on national security policy makes it clear he is not a complete airpower zealot.

Nearly as valuable as the technology-policy linkage is the detailed and intimate look at the technology innovation process itself. Perhaps the best chapter is the author’s account of the mid-1960s development of the Paveway laser-guided bomb. Gillespie makes it clear that this was not the work of an “individual inventive genius” but rather the product of a host of factors ranging from changes in national policy (i.e., “flexible response”), newly available supporting technologies (the laser and integrated circuit), an innovative engineering team from a minor defense contractor (Texas Instruments), and a persistent and bureaucratically adept Air Force colonel.

The biggest disappointment with this work is that despite its October 2006 release date, the most recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are treated almost as afterthoughts. There are PGM successes that could be amplified from these conflicts (e.g., the evolution of “urban close air support” and even the demise of the terrorist al-Zarqawi), and a fuller treatment would reinforce Gillespie’s central contribution.

Weapons of Choice makes a good case that PGMs have indeed altered the American approach to war as “policy-makers have seized upon precision guided munitions as the key to more humane war.” Gillespie makes clear this is not a wholly positive development, because “an anemic, casualty-averse policy is unlikely to deter or defeat the determined, resourceful foe,” and perhaps more importantly, because “winning and maintaining the peace” has proven much more difficult than destroying targets. While he could have made his argument even stronger, Paul Gillespie makes clear (with apologies to Abraham Maslow) that the mere presence of an elegant hammer could cause policy makers to overlook all but the nails. Iraq and Afghanistan may further reinforce Paul Gillespie’s assertion that “technology best serves those who thoughtfully implement it.”

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Nowadays we take for granted that space assets are necessary for military operations, but the nonmilitary use of space has also passed into the realm of the necessary. While the use of space assets, and thus access to space, is of vital importance to the nation, there is no watershed work that unites the political, economic, industrial, and military aspects into a single vision. Space policy, in other words, is still waiting for its Mahan.

If he is not quite Mahan, veteran space writer William E. Burrows lays a very good foundation for what could evolve into a national (or even international) policy—planetary protection. The author unites two major themes under this concept: protecting the earth from asteroid or comet strikes and monitoring the...