



**Keith L. Shimko. *The Iraq Wars and America's Military Revolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.**

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In the 1990s much ink was spilled on debating the concept known as the Revolution in Military Affairs, or RMA. A hot topic in strategic studies debates after the 1991 Gulf War, RMA was largely viewed as a concept that could explain how new technology, with changes in doctrine, could alter the character of war. While commonly associated with the Gulf War, it is important to note that there have been multiple

RMA throughout the course of human history: oft cited examples include the steam engine (19<sup>th</sup> century), and the tank (20<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>1</sup>

What made the post-Gulf War period so fascinating though was that observers were supposedly witnessing a RMA unfolding before them, one which was distinguished by precision guided weapons, airpower, and (near) real-time digital surveillance and communications. This contemporary RMA proved attractive to both military and political decision-makers, positing that contemporary warfare now allowed for massive uses of firepower, fewer troops, and less (friendly) casualties. Swiftness and precision would be the order of the day.

Keith L. Shimko tries to unpack the RMA experience of the last two decades by arguing that the initial evaluations in the 1990s relied too much on the performance of the US military in one brief conflict, the Gulf War (23). Hence, he argues that the passage of nearly 20 years of conflict and peace have provided enough room to take a reflective, detached observation of whether America's conflicts with and in Iraq amounted to a true RMA (21). In undertaking his analysis, Shimko posits that two levels of analysis are needed to measure the influence of the RMA debate on US defence policy: a policy perspective and a theoretical. From these, two questions emerge: what are the military lessons of the Iraq wars for the future of American defence policy and should the Iraq wars be seen as a fundamental turning point in the history of warfare? (25).

But, in order to answer these questions, Shimko argues that we need to view the Iraq wars as three separate conflicts (24). The first, the 1991 Gulf War, pitted a large US-led coalition against the conventional forces of the Iraqi state. After a six-week air campaign and a 100-hour ground war, a United Nations sanctioned coalition of over 500,000 troops emerged victorious with comparatively few fatalities (less than 250). The second conflict was the opening gambit in the invasion of Iraq that occurred between March and May of 2003. Again, this was a fight against the state forces of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Although fought by a smaller coalition, the US-led forces were successful in toppling the regime. The third and final conflict was the counter-insurgency waged from the summer of 2003 to 2011, the formal end and withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq. In that latter conflict, RMA technologies and doctrine were severely tested and, in some cases, found wanting.

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<sup>1</sup> See Max Boot, *War Made New: Technology, Warfare, and the Course of History, 1500 to Today* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

Shimko contends that the strategic vacuum in the 1990s brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed Pentagon planners to indulge in creative uses of force without taking into account how those ideas would stack up against unconventional enemies. He writes that in both 1991 and 2003, “the United States was fortunate to fight the types of wars and opponent it had been preparing for since the mid-1970s – a high-intensity interstate war against a conventionally organized and equipped, albeit weaker and less competent, military” (171-172). Notably, he highlights that lessons from operations in Somalia and the Balkans, which illustrated the challenges of relying on a RMA-heavy force structure and doctrine, were either downplayed or discarded (122, 130).

Interestingly enough, Shimko states that the failure of the US to prepare adequately for stability operations in Iraq, post mid-2003, is less a reflection of the failings of RMA technologies (which had proved so successful in 1991 and 2003) and more the result of senior officials like Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks failing to appreciate “the limits as well as the promise of the RMA technology” (208). Technology, such as surveillance UAVs, precision-guided munitions, and real-time communications systems, were effective in countering the insurgency when adapted to that role (215). Instead, at least until the ‘surge’ in 2007, US occupation forces took too much of a conventional approach, relying on “lethality and firepower” in built-up urban areas, rather than securing the population (209). Consequently, Shimko concludes that the effectiveness of RMA technology and doctrine is mission specific, and requires constant adaptation on the part of US forces (217).

If there is a drawback to Shimko’s book, it is in the conflation of positing an evaluation of the latest RMA with the America experience of fighting in Iraq. While it is certainly true that the brunt of the intellectual heft behind the RMA concept is American, and the technology and doctrinal ideas are very much the products of Washington’s superpower status, the idea of a revolution in military affairs, I would argue, implies something of a more global nature.

It is worth noting that the origins for the RMA began in the Soviet Union in the 1970s, where it was known as Military Technical Revolution, or MTR. As Elinor Sloan writes in her 2002 multi-national review of RMA, America’s allies, such as the United Kingdom, France, Israel, Canada and Australia, each adapted RMA thinking and technology to their own constraints, producing numerous divergences from the American RMA experience.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Elinor Sloan, *The Revolution in Military Affairs: Implications for Canada and NATO* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002).

That being said, this book is worthy of review for any scholar interested in the intersection between technology, strategy, and operational realities. By conceptualizing his analysis around three Iraq conflicts and connecting the RMA debate with the time period between 1991 and 2003, Shimko has provided a unique comprehensive review of America's RMA experiences, updating a subject that no longer receives the attention it once did.

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