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DECISIVENESS AND AIR FORCE INDEPENDENCE

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Preface

This project had its beginning in an ACSC War Theory seminar discussing the development of air power theory and the creation of an independent United States Air Force. It was truly surprising to realize how many students harbored doubts about whether the Air Force has earned the right to exist as an independent branch of our military based on its performance in our nation's wars. Most of the doubts centered on the fact that the Air Force has failed to prove itself as the decisive force in war as the early theorists envisioned. That seminar discussion proved to be the genesis of this project to examine the importance of decisiveness to Air Force independence. Is decisiveness important to the Air Force or is it an outmoded concept championed by early air power advocates merely to advance their chosen profession? Should we as Air Force officers be apologetic for the performance of air power in our conflicts? I attempt to address these issues in this project. I will leave it to you to determine if my attempt has any value.

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Major Joseph Reynolds, my faculty research advisor, for his guidance in this project. The staff of the Air University library proved to be indispensable in pointing me in the right direction on numerous occasions. Finally, Colonel Dennis Drew of the School of Advanced Airpower Studies gave me some invaluable insight early in this project.

Abstract

The intellectual claim for an independent Air Force is that air power promised to be the decisive factor in modern warfare. This claim rests on the theories of early air power advocates such as Giulio Douhet and General Billy Mitchell. Influenced by World War I, air power theorists proclaimed that the skillfully wielded aerial weapon offered the way to strike directly at the heart of the enemy and bring victory without major contributions from surface forces. Embraced by generations of airmen, these theories have set the standard by which air power has been measured. But has the Air Force earned the right to exist as an independent service based on its decisiveness in modern war?

This research paper examines this question by conducting a review of literature pertaining to the decisiveness of air power. Background on the theories of Douhet and Mitchell is included to understand how their theories affected subsequent airmen. The performance of the Air Force in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf wars is then examined for decisiveness. An examination of these wars indicates that the Air Force has failed to prove decisive in a way that matches the promises of Douhet and Mitchell, though the contributions to the war efforts by air power are unquestionably valuable.

The unavoidable conclusion to be drawn from this research is that the Air Force has not earned its right to exist as an independent service by decisiveness alone, though other considerations for an independent Air Force may be more compelling in today's world.

Chapter 1

Introduction

To be defeated in the air, on the other hand, is finally to be defeated and to be at the mercy of the enemy, with no chance at all of defending oneself, compelled to accept whatever terms he sees fit to dictate.

—Guilio Douhet
The Command of the Air

Whether or not the Cold War is over, the United States will still need air power. It is not as clear that we need a separate Air Force independent of the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps.

—Jeffrey Record
Should We Abolish the Air Force?

The decision to create an independent U. S. Air Force in 1947 was primarily based on two claims. The first was an intellectual claim that air power, particularly through strategic bombing, offered a quick, relatively cheap way to quickly win wars without the use of surface forces. This claim was rooted firmly in the theories advocated by air power pioneers, particularly that advanced by Guilio Douhet. The belief was that air power could destroy the functioning of the modern industrial state by careful selection of vital targets in the industrial infrastructure and that there was no completely effective defense against strategic bombing. Perhaps not surprisingly, the role of tactical air power, which exists to serve the needs of surface forces, received little consideration. Tactical air power, with its emphasis on supporting ground forces, offered no convincing argument for

the existence of an independent U. S. Air Force. The second claim for Air Force independence in the early post World War II era rested on the Air Force's monopoly on nuclear weapons and the means of employing them. Jeffery Record, in his thought provoking article "Should We Abolish the Air Force," dubs this second assertion the bureaucratic claim for independence.¹

The bureaucratic claim, according to Record, was clearly of secondary value to the intellectual claim for independence.² It is also clear that since 1947, the Air Force has lost its monopoly on the means of delivering either tactical or strategic nuclear weapons, thus negating the bureaucratic claim for independence. The intellectual claim for independence, rooted in the belief that strategic bombing by manned aircraft offered the decisive way to wage future wars, has also come to be questioned since the birth of the Air Force in 1947. This paper will examine whether or not the US Air Force has proved to be the decisive factor in war promised by the early air power advocates, and, subsequently whether it has earned its right to exist as an independent service based on the intellectual claim for independence. Decisive, for the purposes of this paper, means what the early advocates for air power claimed—that air power could single handedly win the wars of the future, relegating surface forces to secondary status.

To examine this question this paper is divided into four major parts. This chapter presents the major theme and the method of examining the role air power's decisiveness has played in America's wars.

Chapter Two will examine the theories of early air power advocates, specifically Douhet and Mitchell, regarding the interrelation of decisiveness and independence. The intellectual claim for Air Force independence seems to be solidly rooted in the theory of

Douhet and his claims for the decisiveness of air power. Douhet's beliefs have left a legacy that air power has found exciting to contemplate, yet often difficult to attain. The mark of the early theorists is clearly visible on the US Air Force that followed them.

Chapter Three presents case studies on air power's decisiveness from four wars. The first study considers World War II, which saw air power mature into a formidable weapon after its primitive beginnings in World War I. The introduction of the atomic bomb seemed to finally provide the means for air power to prove the decisive weapon that Giulio Douhet envisioned. The next study, Korea, proved to frustrate the proponents of air power in their quest for decisiveness in war. The third study examines the role of air power in Vietnam, focusing on the Rolling Thunder and Linebacker campaigns, and exposing how strategy and political objectives can serve to limit the effectiveness of air power. The final study explores the role of air power in the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Air power proved to be extremely effective, yet perhaps failed to prove ultimately decisive in a way that would prove the ascendancy of air power over surface forces.

Chapter Four presents the major conclusions of this research regarding the role of decisiveness in the independence of the Air Force. First, that conventional air power has failed to prove to be the decisive weapon in modern warfare that Douhet and others envisioned. Second, that the Air Force belief in strategic bombing, an important component of the Air Force's intellectual claim to independence, has produced strategies and expectations that have contributed to the failure of the Air Force to prove decisive in war. Finally, though the Air Force has failed to prove so decisive in war that surface forces are relegated to secondary status, this is not a reason to call for the abolishment of the Air Force.

Notes

¹Jeffery Record, “Should We Abolish the Air Force?” *Policy Review*, no. 52 (Spring 1990): 50.

²*Ibid.*, 50.

Chapter 2

The Ascendance of Air Power

National defense can be assured only by an Independent Air Force of adequate power.

—Guilio Douhet
The Command of the Air

If not the first to recognize the value of the new aerial weapon used in World War I, the Italian Guilio Douhet was undoubtedly the first to develop and present a logical, coherent theory on the use and possibilities of the new weapon. Though he made many invalid assumptions, he possessed some significant insights. His influence has been apparent on air forces in general and especially on the United States Air Force. Douhet's emphasis upon an independent mission for a national air force and upon the overriding importance and sufficiency of that mission appealed to early air proponents and has influenced latter expectations regarding the use and effectiveness of air power. Indeed, Bernard Brodie, recognized as an expert in American strategic issues, insisted that Douhet exerted more influence on the United States Air Force than did Brigadier General William Mitchell. Brodie also believed that the development of the nuclear bomb made Douhet's philosophy more valid in the atomic age than during his lifetime or during World War II.¹

Influenced by the bloody stalemate of World War I, Douhet believed that the defensive had gained the upper hand on the offensive and that further developments in

weapons were only guaranteed to continue to favor the defensive. But, as Douhet realized, wars are only won by offensive action. Unless offensive forces could be made disproportionately larger than the defensive forces they were to face, a new development in weaponry was needed. To Douhet, the airplane represented the ideal offensive weapon, magnifying the advantages of the offense, nullifying the advantages of the defense, and depriving the defense of time needed to prepare further defense.² In short, Douhet saw air power as the decisive factor in future war.

That Douhet envisioned air power as decisive is unquestionable. His theory revolved around obtaining command of the air, which he defined as being in a position to prevent the enemy from flying while retaining the ability to fly oneself.³ Douhet likened command of the air to command of the sea. To gain command of the sea and to defend one's coastline, a fleet attacked and engaged the enemy fleet to prevent it from navigating the seas. Likewise, to defend against enemy air attack, the air force would seek to gain command of the air by preventing enemy planes from flying. This required offensive action - the type of action most suited to air power. And once command of the air was achieved, then total victory was sure to follow. Douhet envisioned newer, more effective aircraft, capable of carrying newer, more effective types of munitions. He imagined aerial offensives directed against an enemy's industrial and commercial centers, transportation arteries, and civilian population centers. Armies and navies would find themselves cut off from their bases and unable to function effectively under the threat of air power. And aerial offensives would be directed against the targets of least moral resistance, the civilian population. Douhet envisioned the collapse of the effectiveness of industry as workers saw the effects of bombing.⁴

Douhet's own words are perhaps most eloquent in stating his view of the decisiveness of air power:

To have command of the air means to be in a position to wield offensive power so great it defies human imagination. It means to be able to cut an enemy's army and navy off from their bases of operation and nullify their chances of winning the war. It means complete protection of one's own country, the efficient operation of one's army and navy, and peace of mind to live and work in safety. In short, it means to be in a position to win. To be defeated in the air, on the other hand, is finally to be defeated and to be at the mercy of the enemy, with no chance at all of defending oneself, compelled to accept whatever terms he sees fit to dictate.⁵

Douhet was firmly convinced that in order to be the decisive weapon that he envisioned it being, air power must be independent of the control of the army and navy. From World War I on, air power had been treated as an auxiliary of land and naval forces, under the direct control of land and sea commanders. Douhet saw this as inefficient use of forces. He felt that the aerial force capable of conquering command of the air must by necessity be self sufficient and independent of land and sea operations. This aerial force he dubbed the Independent Air Force. In Douhet's mind, the Independent Air Force was the only assurance of an adequate national defense. Against a true Independent Air Force, operating as Douhet theorized was logical, he felt that army and navy auxiliary aviation would find itself helpless.⁶

Thus Douhet promised an Independent Air Force capable of achieving decisive results without direct naval and land action. World War II would find many of Douhet's theories lacking. Chief among Douhet's mistakes was his overestimation of the destructiveness of bombs. He consistently overestimated the capability of aerial bombs to achieve results, as evidenced by the huge tonnage of bombs actually needed in World War II to achieve the results Douhet expected. The Nazi blitzkrieg that opened World War II showed that

Douhet's belief in the static nature of war was incorrect. Douhet also helped perpetuate the belief in morale bombing, which proved to be largely a wasted effort in World War II. Defenses against aerial attack proved much more effective than Douhet expected. But if Douhet made some mistakes his overall concept emerged relatively unscathed. Douhet's vision of carrying war to the heart of the enemy homeland had been embraced by the United States before and during the war and would prove to be the cornerstone of Air Force doctrine in post war years. And with the development of the atomic bomb, the weapon to actually fulfill Douhet's vision was finally available.⁷

Brigadier General William A. Mitchell is widely regarded one of the early, great leaders of the United States Air Force. Bernard Brodie insists that Douhet exerted much more influence on the United States Air Force than did Mitchell. Brodie argues that Mitchell's thoughts are mostly tactical and that where Mitchell does delve into strategic thought he follows almost purely Douhetan lines.⁸ This seems to be true, but as Brodie concedes, Mitchell still saw the future more clearly than did most of his contemporaries. Mitchell saw air power as the ability to do something through the air, and since air covers the planet, that meant going any where in the world. Mitchell saw the vulnerability of surface forces and of cities and the industries they supported. Like Douhet, Mitchell saw the cascading effect of the destruction of industries and bases of operations on both armies and navies. Further Mitchell realized that new rules and strategy for the conduct of war would be necessary to accommodate the aerial dimension.⁹ He realized that to develop air power to its fullest, forward thinking was required and that independence was necessary since the older services were psychologically unfit to properly develop air power.¹⁰ Though not as articulate on the subject and more prone to think tactically than

strategically, Mitchell clearly saw the same future for air power that Douhet expounded. Both men felt that an independent air force could and would prove to be the decisive factor in future wars; that air power was the weapon ascendant.

The stamp of these early advocates of air power, particularly that of Douhet, is clearly visible on the United States Air Force from World War II through Desert Storm. The single minded belief in decisiveness through strategic bombing at the expense of tactical aviation is a recurring theme.

Notes

¹Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), 71-77.

²Giulio Douhet, *The Command of The Air*, trans. Dino Ferrari (New York: Coward-McCann, 1942), 11-15.

³*Ibid.*, 24.

⁴*Ibid.*, 19-23.

⁵*Ibid.*, 23.

⁶*Ibid.*, 31-33.

⁷Brodie, 101-106.

⁸*Ibid.*, 77.

⁹William Mitchell, *Winged Defense: The Development and Possibilities of Modern Air Power - Economic and Military* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), 3-6.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 20-21.

Chapter 3

Case Studies in the Decisiveness of Air Power

Is it possible to refuse to admit the truth of the affirmation which forms the basis of this book - namely, that the command of the air is a necessary and sufficient condition of victory?

—Giulio Douhet
The Command of The Air

Conceived in the bloody slaughter of World War I and nurtured by staunch advocates in the years that followed, air power truly came of age in World War II. The wartime performance of air power and the development of atomic weapons heralded the independence of the USAF and promised unlimited possibilities for air power. But the wars fought by the United States since the development of its independent air force have served to display the limitations of air power as well as its possibilities. An examination of these wars will show that air power, though pivotal to American success in war, never proved decisive in the manner envisioned by its proponents past and present.

World War II

World War II provided the first true test of air power and the opportunity to test the theories of advocates such as Douhet. Though the war pointed out flaws in the theories of the early air power advocates, it reinforced the belief of many in the Army Air Forces that air power, and particularly strategic bombing, was vital to victory. General Spatz, the first

Air Force Chief of Staff, speaking on the strategic bombing campaign remarked that “We might have won the war without it, but I very much doubt it.”¹ It is interesting to note that many Army generals were less sure of the decisive role of strategic air power. They believed that tactical air power missions such as close air support and battlefield air interdiction played a more significant role in victory than did the strategic campaign. These doubts had little effect on the air chiefs. They viewed strategic bombing as a complete success and as justification for Air Force autonomy at the war’s end.²

The views of the air chiefs, with respect to the war against Germany, were supported by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS). Commissioned by the Secretary of War in 1944 to study the effectiveness of the bombing effort and its contribution to the Allied victory, the survey determined that Allied air power was decisive in the war in Western Europe. The survey found that air power won complete control of the air, contributed to the defeat of the submarine threat, and made possible the invasion of Europe by land forces.³ The USSBS also made an interesting observation about the employment of air power, noting there were some in both the RAF and United States Army Air Forces who believed that air power could be decisive without the contributions of surface forces. According to the survey this was never the intent. The dominant element in the Allied strategy was to invade the Continent in the spring of 1944, thus establishing air superiority by this time as the overriding priority.⁴

Bernard Brodie draws three major conclusions from studying the findings of the USSBS. The first is that our strategic bombing did bring the German war economy to the verge of collapse. The second is that for a variety of reasons this result occurred too late in the war to affect the ground and naval campaigns that were already proceeding to a

decisive conclusion. His third and last conclusion is that with a better understanding of the capabilities of strategic bombing and with better target selection, the positive effects of bombing could have come much earlier in the war using only the air power resources available.⁵ The resilience of the German war economy coupled with the failure of the Allies to consistently target and destroy any single indispensable war commodity until late in the war when liquid fuel, chemicals, and transportation were knocked out prevented strategic bombing from achieving the decisive results that could have ended the need for an invasion of the continent.⁶ Also of interest was the failure of strategic bombing to destroy the German Air Force. In 1943, the German aircraft industry was made the primary target of the Combined Bomber Offensive. Despite heavy attacks, German fighter strength actually increased during the campaign, only declining late in 1944 after ceasing to be a primary target.⁷

While conceding that the bombing campaign did affect the German war effort, historians Stephen McFarland and Wesley Newton, writing in *To Command The Sky*, do not agree with the findings of the USSBS regarding the decisiveness of strategic bombing. They consider the survey to be self-serving and designed from the outset to justify strategic bombing and thus Air Force independence. Their contention is that through its symbiotic relationship with the battle for air superiority, strategic bombing made its greatest contribution to the war effort against Germany through aerial attrition. The bombers required air superiority to continue bombing and the fighters needed the bombers to draw the Germans into the air where they could win the battle of attrition they were waging against the Luftwaffe. It was through winning air superiority that air power made its greatest contribution, but air superiority was only an intermediate step to victory. Air

superiority made possible those operations that could end the war, such as the Normandy invasion or even the strategic bombing campaign.⁸ By the time of the Normandy invasion, strategic bombing had accomplished nothing vital of its own accord but, in conjunction with the battle for air superiority, had succeeded in defeating the Luftwaffe through attrition.⁹

The USSBS concluded that the defeat of Germany solely by air power was not the goal of the strategic bombing campaign. There were airmen who disagreed with this assessment, however. Major General Haywood S. Hansell, Jr., one of the architects of the American air war, makes it clear that he felt air power could have defeated Germany if the air campaign plans such as AWPB-1, AWPB-42, and the Combined Bomber Offensive were carried out as devised:

Had the strategic air effort not been so often diverted to tactical targets the mortal wounding of Germany would probably have happened by June of 1944, rather than March of 1945. That would have been in keeping with the concept of the original strategic air plan. Unfortunately, the strategic air plans were not closely followed and their effect was consequently diluted. In my considered opinion, this dilution had a tragic effect in prolonging the war with attendant loss of life.¹⁰

Hansell felt the decisions to invade North Africa and to campaign in the Mediterranean were the single greatest obstacles to achieving decisive results. He recognized the contributions of the strategic air campaign in paving the way for the Normandy invasion and that after the invasion, strategic bombing was a full partner with the ground component in defeating Germany.¹¹ Nevertheless, it is obvious that Hansell felt that air power alone, properly applied, could have defeated Germany without the need for surface operations.

The failure of the strategic bombing campaign to destroy the will of the German people was a major finding of the USSBS. Douhet contended that the general population of a nation represented the area of least moral resistance to the rigors of war. According to his theory, attacking the populace would swiftly end a war by convincing the people of the hopelessness of continuing in the face of aerial attack. The USSBS found that the German people showed surprising resistance to the effects of air attack. Though they may have lost their belief in victory, as long as they possessed the physical means of production they continued to work. The survey concludes that “The power of a police state over its people cannot be underestimated.”¹²

One of the purposes of the USSBS was to apply lessons learned from the war against Germany to the continuing war effort against Japan; however, the surrender of Japan came too quickly for major applications of the lessons from the air campaign against Germany. Regardless, as recognized by the USSBS, many of the lessons learned could not have been directly applied since the strategic bombing campaign against Japan differed in many respects from the campaign conducted against Germany.

In assessing the effects of air power against Japan, the USSBS never stated that air power was decisive, as it had in assessing the war against Germany, recognize the differences that existed between Germany and Japan. Against Japan, the strategic bombing campaign was more concentrated in time. The target areas were smaller and more vulnerable. Also, the Japanese defenses were overwhelmed and Japan’s ability and will to resist were lower than Germany’s. Improved American technology in the form of the B-29 also contributed to the destruction of the Japanese urban areas.¹³ Unlike Germany, Japan’s smaller industries were largely impervious to precision attack. Thus in

Japan, strategic attacks under General Curtis LeMay were carried out at low level with incendiary bombs. These attacks against the small Japanese industries located in residential areas were directly targeted to maximize destruction and to destroy the Japanese will to resist.¹⁴

Because the Allied goal was the unconditional surrender of Japan, a direct assault in the form of an invasion was still anticipated. It is significant that the strategic bombing campaign helped preclude the necessity of carrying out this invasion. Nonetheless it would be unreasonable and unrealistic to attribute victory to air power. Four years of land and sea operations combined with tactical air operations had succeeded in bringing Japan to the verge of defeat. In truth, Japan was already a defeated power when the strategic bombing campaign began. The Army Air Force, by applying the direct, massive pressure that it did by conducting fire bombing missions, merely succeeded in forcing the Japanese government to develop a consensus on the fact that they had been defeated and then to openly concede it.¹⁵ Thus air power was the correct tool at the time and was correctly applied. Indeed, the USSBS concluded that even without the atomic bombs or the planned invasion, Japan would likely have surrendered no later than 31 December 1945.¹⁶

In summary, the decisiveness of air power in World War II is somewhat ambiguous. Though the USSBS found air power to be decisive in Europe and implied that it was in Japan, clearly in neither case did it prove decisive on its own, but only as a complement to naval and ground forces. Air power supported the goal of unconditional surrender by facilitating the invasion of France and by avoiding the invasion of Japan. Though the air campaigns cost much in terms of lives and resources, they undoubtedly helped save lives by contributing to the defeat of the Axis powers.¹⁷ The contention of men like Hansell,

that air power properly applied could have been decisive without the help of surface forces, remains unproved and unprovable. In this sense air power failed to live up to the promise of Douhet, though most airmen emerged from the war confident of the contribution of strategic bombing to the war effort. It was the development of the atomic bomb that seemed to make Douhet's vision of air power as adapted by the Air Force a reality. Unfortunately, it was a vision that failed to grasp the realities of future wars.

Korea: The Challenge of Limited War

The end of World War II found professional airmen riding high. Despite the rather ambiguous results of the strategic bombing campaigns of the war, airmen emerged from the war convinced of the value and effectiveness of the doctrine of strategic bombing. The development of the atomic bomb and the Air Force's monopoly on delivery systems for the bomb clinched the argument for Air Force independence in 1947. Strategic Air Command captured the major share of the severely limited defense budgets that followed the war. Airmen trained to wage war against industrialized nations, a mission which suited the doctrine of strategic bombing, and seemed to forget the lessons of World War II which stressed the effectiveness of air forces working in harmony with ground and naval forces. It was a doctrine that would be challenged in Korea.¹⁸

The 25 June 1950 invasion of South Korea by the North Koreans thrust America into the first limited war in which air power would play a role. Though the war would eventually be conducted under the auspices of the United Nations, the preponderance of effort in Korea was American and this paper will largely examine the war from an American viewpoint. President Truman considered the attack a threat to the vital interests

of the United States and ordered the use of military forces to preserve the South Korean government. In the beginning, Truman's "positive political goal," or the goal attainable by the use of military power, was the preservation of a non-Communist South Korea restored to its preinvasion borders. Truman viewed the attack as a Communist probe and viewed Korea as a symbol of our resolve. But unlike World War II, where no "negative political objectives," or objectives threatened by the use of military force, existed in the quest for unconditional surrender, Truman was constrained by several negative objectives in Korea. Chief among these was the desire to prevent another world war, which led Truman to restrict the war to the Korean peninsula and to seek to prevent Soviet or Chinese intervention. Truman and his advisors viewed Korea as a feint, expecting the main Communist thrust to come in Europe. Thus support to Korea was lessened to maintain forces to meet the expected threat. Also, the desire to maintain the integrity of the United Nations military effort produced limits. The British in particular were concerned that too much force in Korea would lead to Soviet reprisals in Europe.¹⁹

In support of Truman's original objectives, air power was quite effective. American air power was critical to the survival of retreating American and South Korean forces in the summer of 1950. Though hampered by a legacy of poor coordination in the postwar years, close air support to Army forces proved reasonably effective. Interdiction was even more effective in the summer of 1950 because of existing circumstances. The North Koreans were on the offensive, consuming supplies at a great rate, and were faced with ever increasing supply lines. Terrain and weather combined to make the North's lines of communication susceptible to air attack.²⁰

After the success of the Inchon landings, Truman changed his positive political objective to the unification by military force of the Korean peninsula, though his negative political objectives remained consistent with his prior policy. The entry of the Communist Chinese into the war in November of 1950 forced Truman to once again modify his positive political objective. Truman now sought an independent, non-Communist South Korea with a defensible northern boundary at approximately the 38th parallel. When the military situation stabilized sufficiently negotiations began and the war settled into a stalemate.²¹

The new reality of the war brought a change in air operations against the Communist forces. Operation Strangle, actually a two part strategic interdiction campaign, began in May of 1951. It started with attacks on the North Korean road system and expanded to include railroads. The goal was to cut off front line Communist ground forces from their supplies. Enormous numbers of sorties were expended in the operation with heavy losses in aircraft yet, when Strangle was abandoned in the summer of 1952, it was obvious that the operation had failed to achieve decisive results. Because the Communist ground forces operated on a fraction of the supplies used by a similar American force, it proved impossible to completely choke off the flow of needed supplies. Operation Strangle might have succeeded if it had been coupled with an intense ground campaign. This would have forced the Communists to increase their use of supplies making them vulnerable to air interdiction. But the United Nations forces did not have the will to undertake this type of operation and suffer the casualties that would have resulted. Thus the Air Force's most ambitious independent contribution to the war failed to achieve decisive results.²²

With the realization that interdiction attacks could not destroy the enemy's capability to continue the fight, the emphasis shifted to an "air pressure" campaign designed to directly attack both the enemy capability and will to fight. Attacks now shifted to aircraft, airfields, and electric power facilities. The move to attack power facilities represented the desire to inflict the maximum amount of damage possible on military related targets that were also essential to the civilian populace.²³ This theme was expanded in the summer of 1953 when a new campaign against dams critical to the North Korean agricultural system was begun. Shortly thereafter the Communists signed the armistice agreement. Many airmen claimed this as proof of the decisiveness of air power if political restraints were removed, but it is not clear that the attacks against the dams were directly responsible for the Communists ceasing the war effort.²⁴

It is likely that the attacks on the dams were only one of several factors that convinced the Communists to sign the Armistice. Probably the major factor was the change in United States leadership, especially considering President Eisenhower's stated willingness to use nuclear force and to expand the war. This intent was communicated to the Communists and appears to have been taken quite seriously. The attacks on the dams threatened to destroy the North Korean rice crop and cause mass starvation of the populace. Since North Korea had already suffered heavily in the war, further weakening of the country did not appeal to either Peking or Pyongyang. As well, the death of Stalin produced a change in the political situation by effectively removing Soviet support for the war.²⁵

It is interesting that Eisenhower's threat to use nuclear weapons is given much of the credit for driving the Communists to negotiate in good faith. Korea marked the first war

in the nuclear age and the strategy for using nuclear weapons was still unclear. Bernard Brodie notes three primary reasons that nuclear weapons were not used in Korea. First, there was a strong desire to save our limited nuclear arsenal, especially since most felt that Korea was simply a feint by the Soviets. Secondly, the commanders in Korea generally felt that no worthwhile targets existed for nuclear weapons, which to a large degree reflected a lack of knowledge about the true effect of nuclear weapons. Third, our allies, especially the British, strongly opposed any escalation of the war by the use of nuclear weapons. This only served to reinforce our own anxieties about employing the nuclear option.

Thus, at a time when the United States had a virtual monopoly on the weapon that probably made Douhet's vision of air power a reality, nuclear weapons were not used. In hindsight the decision not to employ nuclear weapons was probably the right one in light of the potential consequences. The Soviets were credited with having at least a few atomic bombs at the time. This, according to Brodie, points out the lesson of Korea for any future limited war. While we may have enjoyed a semblance of a monopoly in the area of nuclear weapons in Korea, in the future we would not. The stakes of the game were changing and the price of escalation was rising.²⁶

Korea offered many valuable lessons for airmen, but it is questionable if many of these lessons were truly learned. As noted by military historian Dr. Earl Tilford, many airmen of Korea, like later airmen in Vietnam, complained that air power in Korea was misused, hampered by political restraints.²⁷ Perhaps most damning was the tendency to dismiss Korea as an aberration:

There was much to be learned from the experiences of combat, but nearly every lesson of the Korean conflict had to be qualified by the fact that the Korean war had been a peculiar war, which was unlike wars in the past and was not necessarily typical of the future.²⁸

Most took this view of Korea, dismissing it to concentrate on the real enemy, the Soviet Union. In assessing the consequences of Korea on the United States Air Force, Air Force historian Frank Futrell notes that while we entered the war with SAC bombers possessing only limited capability to drop atomic bombs, “by 1957 SAC bombers were able to employ both atomic and thermonuclear weapons” and that a new family of nuclear weapons permitted fighter bombers to employ nuclear weapons.²⁹ Korea did not fit neatly into the doctrine espoused by the Air Force, thus it was dismissed as unworthy of consideration as airmen sought to prepare for a war that fit the template they had chosen.

The importance of air power in Korea is not in question, but it is obvious that air power failed to achieve decisive results in the Korean War. It is also obvious that airmen failed to grasp that reality and to understand the limitations of air power. Max Hastings says it best:

It is not surprising that the airman’s limitless faith in what they could achieve remained undiminished after Korea, as it had after World War II. If they admitted some of the bitter truths revealed by those wars, a critical part of the U. S. A. F. rationale for its own independent operations would cease to exist. But it remains astonishing that ten years later, in Vietnam, they were allowed to mount a campaign under almost identical circumstances to those of Korea, with identical promises of potential and delusions of achievement.³⁰

The Vietnam War

With the exception of the American Civil War, it is doubtful that America has ever fought a war so frustrating and damaging to the American psyche as was the Vietnam

War. Even today, over twenty years after the end of the war, Vietnam still evokes intense emotions within both the military and civilian communities. The overriding consensus of both groups is a fervent desire to not repeat the failure of Vietnam, though failure may mean something different to each community.

For the U. S. Air Force, Vietnam represents special frustrations. Less than one month after the end of the 1972 Linebacker II bombing campaign, the North Vietnamese signed the peace treaty in Paris. For many, both politicians and Air Force officers alike, this rapid move to the treaty table emphasized the decisiveness of air power and reinforced the belief that with the proper application of air power, meaning massive bombing of the North, the war could have ended much earlier and under much different circumstances. This view meshes nicely with the Air Force doctrine of strategic bombing. Unfortunately, this view is probably too simplistic. An examination of the major air campaigns and the political and military situations that existed during the campaigns will show why bombing worked in Linebacker II and why it did not work in Rolling Thunder.³¹

From 1965 through 1968 the Air Force, along with the Navy, Marines, and South Vietnamese, undertook the longest bombing campaign ever conducted by The U. S. Air Force, flying more than a million sorties and dropping more than three quarters of a million tons of bombs on North Vietnam. This campaign was Rolling Thunder and it is generally held to be a failure.³² Rolling Thunder was not the beginning of American air involvement in Vietnam. The first Air Force units arrived in Vietnam in 1961. These Air Commandos fought a frustrating counterinsurgency war until 1964, when the transition to a more conventional type of war began, much to the relief of the institutional Air Force which was clearly uncomfortable with the counterinsurgency war. At this time, the Viet

Cong, who were doing the majority of the fighting, began moving from guerrilla war to larger scale warfare. Hanoi began increasing its support for the Viet Cong in the belief that the end might be near for the regime in Saigon.³³

Recognizing the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam in early 1965, President Johnson and his advisors felt the time had come for a display of American resolve. Air power proved to be the tool they would use. On 13 February 1965, President Johnson officially ordered the start of the sustained air campaign against North Vietnam known as Rolling Thunder.³⁴ At the time Johnson turned to air power he saw it as the answer to achieving his positive political goal of an independent, stable, non-Communist South Vietnam. At the same time, his negative political objectives of preventing a third world war and of keeping both domestic and world public attention away from Vietnam produced limits on Rolling Thunder.³⁵ Johnson's advisors, who helped shape Rolling Thunder, each saw the campaign as a compromise means to various ends: boosting South Vietnamese morale, breaking Hanoi's will to fight, securing bargaining leverage, and conveying America's political resolve to Hanoi.³⁶ Ostensibly, Rolling Thunder had three objectives. The first was strategic persuasion, coercing Hanoi into abandoning its support of the insurgency in the South. The second objective was to raise the morale of the military and political elites in South Vietnam. The third objective was the only tactical one of the campaign: interdiction strikes against bridges, railroads, and roads to slow the movement of men and supplies moving South.³⁷

Other than perhaps raising the morale of a few South Vietnamese generals, Rolling Thunder failed to achieve any of its objectives.³⁸ Military leaders such as Air Force Generals Curtis LeMay and William W. Momyer, as well as Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp

were quick to seize on the political restraints imposed as the reason for failure, arguing that an unrestrained Rolling Thunder could have achieved in 1968, or sooner, what they believed Linebacker achieved in 1972. Yet that belief shows a misunderstanding of the basic nature of the conflict prior to the 1968 Tet Offensive and of the fundamental tenets of American strategic bombing doctrine.

Before Tet, the war in South Vietnam was a guerrilla conflict. Viet Cong units composed five-sixths of the Communist army that intermingled with the local populace. With the North Vietnamese troops, the Viet Cong fought only about once every thirty days and thus needed minimal logistical support - only about 34 tons of material a day from outside the South. No amount of bombing could stop this meager trickle of supplies from getting through. Thus, Rolling Thunder could have affected the war making capability of the North only by attacking two targets: people and food. Yet American bombing doctrine stressed attacking an enemy's vital economic centers to destroy its war making capability and this emphasis continued throughout Rolling Thunder. Also, moral concerns usually limit American attacks on morale to targets having military value, thus making it unlikely that American forces would have willingly obliterated civilian targets. Lastly, the destruction of targets in the North would not have guaranteed victory in the South. The self sufficiency of the insurgents in the South meant that they could have continued the war even with the withdrawal of Northern support and there was no guarantee that Saigon could have survived against the Viet Cong.³⁹

In the final analysis, Rolling Thunder failed for two reasons. First, both military and civilian planners did not imagine that North Vietnam could endure American air attacks. Civilian leaders did not fully understand American air power and thus failed to realize their

policies might be crippling its effectiveness. Military leaders were victims of a doctrine that they never could, or would, realize had little applicability in a limited war. Secondly, military leaders failed to develop and propose a strategy appropriate to the war at hand. Bombing strategic targets in the North had little or no influence on the insurgent war going on in the South. Also, even though the generals and admirals running the campaign realized that the constraints placed on them by civilian policy makers would not be removed, they never devised a strategy that fit the war as defined for them.⁴⁰

For a number of reasons, both political and military, President Johnson curtailed Rolling Thunder in March of 1968 and finally ended it, for the most part, on 1 November 1968. Bombing of North Vietnam would not resume until April 1972, when President Nixon again ordered American planes to begin bombing in response to North Vietnam's invasion of the South.⁴¹

On 29 March 1972, Hanoi launched a conventional invasion of South Vietnam, sending fourteen divisions and twenty-six separate regiments into the South.⁴² Though South Vietnamese and US forces had blunted the attack by the end of April, President Nixon wanted it defeated by making sure that North Vietnamese forces inside South Vietnam could not be resupplied for further action.⁴³ The air campaign to accomplish this became known as Linebacker I. It was designed to cripple North Vietnam's ability to conduct offensive actions inside South Vietnam by destroying war related resources such as petroleum storage facilities and power plants. The campaign also aimed to reduce or restrict the import of supplies by harbor, rail, or road from China and to impede the flow of men and supplies South by destroying the internal transportation system.⁴⁴

Linebacker I forced the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table for serious talks. By the first week in October it was clear that the most immediate threat to South Vietnam was over. By the third week in October it appeared that a reasonable agreement might be reached. On 23 October 1972, President Nixon ordered a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam.⁴⁵

But the peace agreement that Washington and Hanoi had negotiated was not acceptable to South Vietnamese President Thieu. Thieu's substantive objections focused on the presence of North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam, the composition of the proposed national council of national reconciliation, and the nature of the DMZ. Though the North Vietnamese agreed to reopen negotiations, they balked at the demands and appeared unwilling to complete the agreement. On 13 December, the North Vietnamese ended the talks.⁴⁶

On 14 December, President Nixon ordered the mines in Haiphong Harbor to be reseeded and a new bombing campaign to begin against North Vietnam. Linebacker II began on 18 December 1972. This time B-52s were used in air attacks on Hanoi and Haiphong.⁴⁷ Despite unexpectedly heavy B-52 losses, the attacks were extended beyond the originally planned three days. Linebacker II destroyed most of the legitimate targets in North Vietnam and added a new target: the North Vietnamese air defense system. By 27 December, North Vietnam was virtually defenseless and began arrangements for new technical peace talks. On 29 December 1972, President Nixon ordered a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam, ending Linebacker II.⁴⁸

Why did Nixon's air campaigns succeed where Johnson's Rolling Thunder campaign failed? The first answer is that President Nixon's objectives in Vietnam differed from

Johnson's quite substantially. Nixon's positive political goal was an American withdrawal that did not abandon the South to an imminent Communist takeover, a much more limited objective than Johnson's. Also, negative political goals had a much more limited effect on Nixon's use of air power. Because of detente with the Soviets and Chinese, the threat of an expanded conflict was lessened. Also, the continued departure of American troops and the blatant aggression of the Communist Easter Offensive assured him of public support for Linebacker I. In December 1972, Nixon had one primary negative aim. He wanted to end the war prior to the return of the Democratic Congress. This goal limited his use of air power and Nixon used that goal to heighten Linebacker II's effect on President Thieu. In simple terms, Nixon's bombing was more effective than Johnson's because it was more threatening to North Vietnam's vital concerns. Nixon's lack of negative objectives allowed him to expand the bombing until it threatened to destroy Hanoi's ability to fight by rendering its army impotent.⁴⁹

But equally important as the lack of stringent political controls was the fact that Nixon was fighting a different war. After the defeat of the Viet Cong in the 1968 Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese Army was the only military force capable of achieving the Communist goal of unification. When Hanoi launched its Easter Offensive, its conventional assault made its army vulnerable to air power. The doctrine and morality that had proven to be Rolling Thunder's two most effective military constraints now proved suited to the conflict at hand. For the first time in Vietnam, air power attacked an objective that was essential for a Communist victory.⁵⁰

Many in the Air Force have been quick to seize on the apparent success of Linebacker II and to argue that a campaign of massive strategic bombing in Vietnam, with no political

constraints could have been decisive early in the war. Thus the belief in the fundamentals of strategic bombing doctrine survived unchanged. Most failed to realize that Linebacker II was a unique campaign for very limited ends. Strategic bombing doctrine remained geared toward a fast paced conventional war and ignored the realities of a guerrilla conflict.⁵¹ The myth of Linebacker II sustained the belief of airmen in the decisiveness of air power. In reality, Linebacker II was decisive in only a very narrow sense; it convinced the North Vietnamese to allow us to abandon the war effort on our own terms.

The Gulf War: Air Power Triumphant?

The images are familiar to most Americans. During the Gulf War television news coverage was filled with images of precision guided weapons scoring direct hits on Iraqi targets and of dazed Iraqi forces, mercilessly pounded by coalition air forces, surrendering en masse to ground forces. The apparent success of the air war against the forces of Saddam Hussein was complete and total. “Simply (if boldly) stated, air power won the Gulf war,” wrote Richard Hallion in *Storm over Iraq*.⁵² After years of frustration and less than complete success the advocates of air power seemed vindicated. But as the first flush of success faded, once again the question of the overall decisiveness of air power surfaced. An examination of the Gulf war will show that despite overwhelming success, the decisiveness of air power remains ambiguous.

The genesis of the air campaign that was used in the Gulf is an interesting story. In brief, the basic concept for the campaign was developed in response to General Norman Schwarzkopf’s desire for a strategic air campaign by Colonel John Warden. Incorporating his five ring concept, Warden developed a plan called Instant Thunder, a massive and

concentrated six day campaign that would seek to paralyze Iraqi command and control, the perceived center of gravity of the Iraqi war effort. Ignoring the fielded forces of the Iraqis in Kuwait, Instant Thunder would be the first truly strategic war, waged from the “inside out.” By concentrating on command and control and on key military capabilities that included nuclear and chemical capability, Warden felt that air power could achieve a stand alone victory. But Warden’s plan did not survive intact. Instant Thunder was met with skepticism and outright hostility by Air Force leadership, particularly General Charles Horner of CENTCOM. Despite this fact, Warden’s ideas, though modified, became the nucleus of the final campaign as used against the Iraqis.⁵³

As modified from Warden’s initial concept, the air campaign plan had three key phases: strategic attack, suppression of the air defense capability in the Kuwaiti theater of operations, and attacks on the Republican Guard and Iraqi army inside Kuwait.⁵⁴ The success of the tactical campaign appears to be unchallenged. Though the Republican Guard was not completely decimated, emerging with enough capability to fight again another day, the ability of the Iraqi army to resist was destroyed. Iraqi forces in Kuwait were decimated and their supply lines from Iraq all but severed.⁵⁵ By the time the ground forces began their offensive, supplies flowing from Iraq to their forces in Kuwait had been cut from twenty thousand tons a day to a mere two thousand tons a day - barely enough for subsistence.⁵⁶ The effect of the tactical air campaign on the Iraqi army was absolutely devastating:

By depriving it of any help from the Iraqi air force, forcing it to dig in, eliminating the prospect of a mobile defense, and knocking out much of the Iraqi armor and artillery, the air campaign had all but won the war.⁵⁷

The success of the strategic campaign is another matter. Air power failed to suppress the use of Iraq's only significant strategic weapon, the Scud missile. It is not clear that the command and control capability of the Iraqi leadership was seriously degraded during the war, or that it would have been a significant factor if it had been, since the primary mission of Iraqi forces in Kuwait appeared to be to simply hold fast and then to scourge the country prior to withdrawing. The primary failure of the strategic campaign was the continued existence of the Hussein regime with a disturbingly large amount of his military capability intact.⁵⁸

In his book *Hollow Victory*, Jeffrey Record states that the continued existence of the Hussein government in the face of the strategic bombing campaign targeted directly at it, so embarrassed the Air Force that after the war, Air Force leadership was forced to deny that either Hussein or his weapons of mass destruction were ever really targets of the campaign. According to Record, such a denial covers up the failure of the strategic bombing campaign to achieve victory with little or no help from surface forces, the intellectual argument for Air Force independence. Certain facets of the strategic campaign may support the contention that the Bush administration ultimately feared the destruction of central authority in Iraq more than the survival of the Saddam Hussein regime, but this remains conjecture.⁵⁹ What would seem indisputable is the fact that in a campaign far more intense and sustained than Warden's original Instant Thunder concept, air power failed to win the war by destroying Iraq's governing infrastructure and causing Saddam's overthrow. Despite the contribution to the military victory, air power again failed to influence the political outcome of war. And if war is, as Clausewitz asserts, simply an extension of politics then this failure is significant. For air power, despite its undeniable

contributions to military victories in 20th century warfare has consistently failed to demonstrate any capability to decisively influence governments.⁶⁰

Historian Richard Hallion, however, sees the strategic campaign as clearly decisive due to its effect in five areas: command and control, power generation, refined fuel and lubricants production, the transportation infrastructure, and the Iraqi air force. Hallion also praises the precision of attack that made this decisiveness possible without the heavy loss of civilian life experienced in previous wars.⁶¹ The effectiveness of the attack on command and control is questionable, though the contributions of the attacks on transportation and the Iraqi air force clearly contributed to the tactical victory. The effects of the attacks on the Iraqi economic infrastructure seem unusual for a war expected to have such a short duration, with a decision expected prior to the influence of these attacks becoming significant. Record suggests two reasons that these attacks were pursued. First was a desire to bring the war home to the Iraqi people and to thus breed discontent with Saddam's regime. Second was a desire to obtain postwar leverage over the Iraqi government, to make economic sanctions more effective due to economic destruction during the war. While the avoidance of civilian casualties during the war was amazing by all accounts, the economic deprivation caused by war has fallen mostly on the civilian population, possibly beyond the expectations of wartime planners.⁶² Significantly enough, the suffering of the Iraqi people has not led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, nor has it prevented Hussein from asserting his influence in the region.

In summary, the conclusion on the decisiveness of air power in the Gulf war is once again one of ambiguity. In the military campaign that liberated Kuwait, air power played the main role, but the support of ground forces was crucial to victory. Not only were

ground forces necessary to actually dislodge Iraqi troops from Kuwait, in a mopping up operation made possible by five weeks of intense application of air power, but ground forces were strategically necessary to allow the build up of decisive military forces to tackle the Iraqis. A premature resort to air power could have allowed Iraqi forces to mount a ground invasion early enough in the build up for war that would have threatened the Saudi ports and airfields needed to carry out military operations.⁶³ But if the effectiveness of the tactical campaign is obvious, the decisiveness of the strategic campaign is not. Under ideal circumstances air power failed to achieve the strategic paralysis promised by the architects of the air campaign and by air power advocates back to Douhet. For all of its success in Desert Storm, the air power campaign was not an unqualified success and once again the Air Force was denied its dream of victory through air power.⁶⁴

Notes

¹Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 11.

²*Ibid.*, 11

³United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Summary Report (European War)* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1945), 37.

⁴*Ibid.*, 9.

⁵Brodie, 109.

⁶*Ibid.*, 110-111.

⁷*Ibid.*, 117-118.

⁸Stephen L. McFarland and Wesley Phillips Newton, *To Command The Sky: The Battle For Air Superiority Over Germany, 1942-1944* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 4-7.

⁹*Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁰Haywood S. Hansell Jr., *The Air Plan That Defeated Hitler* (Atlanta: Higgins-McArthur/Longino and Porter, Inc., 1972), 252.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 273.

¹²United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Summary Report (European War)*, 39.

¹³United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Summary Report (Pacific War)* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 86.

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- ¹⁴Clodfelter, 7.
- ¹⁵Brodie, 131.
- ¹⁶United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Summary Report (Pacific War), 107.
- ¹⁷Clodfelter, 10.
- ¹⁸Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Touchstone, 1987), 254-256.
- ¹⁹Clodfelter, 13.
- ²⁰Earl H. Tilford Jr., *Setup: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why* (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air University Press, 1991), 16-17.
- ²¹Clodfelter, 13-14.
- ²²Hastings, 266-267.
- ²³Clodfelter, 16-17.
- ²⁴Hastings, 268-269.
- ²⁵Clodfelter, 23-24.
- ²⁶Brodie, 319-321.
- ²⁷Tilford, 19.
- ²⁸Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1961), 689.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, 710-711.
- ³⁰Hastings, 269.
- ³¹Clodfelter, ix.
- ³²Tilford, 89.
- ³³*Ibid.*, 90-91.
- ³⁴Clodfelter, 56-59.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*, 204.
- ³⁶*Ibid.*, 204.
- ³⁷Tilford, 105.
- ³⁸*Ibid.*, 154.
- ³⁹Clodfelter, 205-207.
- ⁴⁰Tilford, 154-155.
- ⁴¹*Ibid.*, 152-153.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, 225.
- ⁴³*Ibid.*, 233.
- ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 234
- ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 238.
- ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 250-252.
- ⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 254.
- ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 257-262.
- ⁴⁹Clodfelter, 204-205.
- ⁵⁰Tilford, 206.
- ⁵¹Clodfelter, 208-210.
- ⁵²Richard P. Hallion, *Storm Over Iraq: Air Power and the Gulf War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 1.

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⁵³Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995), 75-100.

⁵⁴Hallion, 150.

⁵⁵Jeffery Record, *Hollow Victory: A Contrary View of the Gulf War* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1993), 106-107.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁷Gordon and Trainor, 331.

⁵⁸Record, *Hollow Victory*, 107.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 107-109.

⁶⁰Gordan and Trainor, 474.

⁶¹Hallion, 190.

⁶²Record, *Hollow Victory*, 109-113.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁴Gordan and Trainor, 474.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The Air Force has never taken its status as a separate service for granted, and raising the issue of its autonomy once again could provoke greater Air Force attention to correcting deficiencies perceived by its critics as warranting a revisitation to the decision of 1947.

—Jeffery Record
Should we abolish the Air Force?

The examination of the decisiveness of air power in war to date reveals that the promise of the early air power advocates has proven false. The United States Air Force, granted status as an independent and equal service in 1947, has not earned its right to exist based on its ability to prove decisive in war. The intellectual claim for independence, the most important claim for independence, has proven largely an empty promise.

This promise was a cornerstone of the theories of Douhet and Mitchell, the prophets of air power. Almost without realizing it, the vision of air power that these pioneers proclaimed has affected each succeeding generation of airmen, creating great expectations and setting lofty goals that have left both proponents and critics of air power unsatisfied with the actual performance of air power in war. The desire for independent air forces caused airmen to identify the use of air power with the strategic bombing mission, since only strategic bombing offered a uniquely air force opportunity to prove decisive exclusive of the contributions of surface forces.

An examination of the role played by air power in America's wars exposes the limitations of air power. Though the USSBS concluded that air power was decisive in World War II, it also stated that air power was most decisive in its support of surface forces. Regardless, airmen emerged from World War II convinced that air power was the answer for future wars, especially in light of the development of atomic weapons. Korea and Vietnam exposed the limitations of air power in the limited war environment. The Air Force attempted to force both wars to fit its chosen doctrine and ignored the political realities of limited war in the nuclear age. Both Korea and Vietnam proved that technology is no substitute for sound strategy. The Gulf war seemed to redeem air power, but on closer examination the decisiveness of air power is questionable. Air power excelled in the tactical arena, making the ground war little more than a mopping up operation. Strategically, however, air power failed to prove decisive in influencing the political situation in Iraq. Saddam Hussien emerged from the war with his regime and much of his military power intact. In the Gulf war, as in all prior wars, the Air Force once again failed to achieve victory through air power alone.

Having determined that the Air Force has consistently failed to prove unambiguously decisive in war does it follow that the Air Force should be abolished, its components reabsorbed into the Army from whence it came? Though largely beyond the scope or intent of this paper, some answers seem readily apparent. The obvious answer, according to Jeffery Record, is that the political and bureaucratic realities of today promise that any attempt to disband the Air Force would be extremely painful to all involved. As Record also concludes, there is no reason to believe that the Army, which would inherit most of the Air Force missions and resources, would make any better use of them.¹

Colonel Dennis M. Drew, Associate Dean of the School of Airpower Studies at Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, points out why this is true based on the differing doctrinal worldviews of the Army and Air Force. In simple terms, armies are generally constrained by geography that limits speed and maneuverability and usually have the immediate problem of enemy forces in front of them. Thus, the worldview of a soldier is usually sharply constrained and often limited to the immediate problem. The airman's worldview is limited only by the capability of his equipment. While the enemy is often found at great distances, air power's speed can make the airman's problem as immediate as the soldier's. Thus airmen have a global, but time-sensitive worldview which means they not only think in terms of immediate effects, as do soldiers, but in terms of war as a whole. These differing worldviews cause differences of opinions between soldiers and airmen, particularly regarding enemy centers of gravity. While soldiers tend to concentrate on the enemy army, airmen take a more abstract view that often overlooks the fielded forces of the enemy.² The arguments between the Air Force and the Army over shaping the battlefield in Desert Storm that defense correspondent Michael Gordan and retired Marine General Bernard Trainor document in their book *The Generals' War*, lend credence to Drew's theory of worldview.³

The fact is that both worldviews are correct. Though air power has not proven to be the single decisive factor in war that its proponents envisioned, the contribution of air power to America's war efforts is unquestionable. The synergy of land, sea, and air forces working together is necessary to achieve victory in modern warfare.⁴ The current emphasis on jointness is critical for the future of the American military. As Colonel Drew states, jointness is more than just a buzzword:

Rather, jointness signifies the realization that in modern warfare there are no such things as discrete air, land, and sea wars. The notion of jointness represents the historical truth that neither air power nor land power nor sea power wins wars by itself.⁵

Perhaps it is time that both proponents and critics stop measuring the performance of air power against the promises of Douhet, Mitchell, and other pioneering air power advocates. Their views reflected the political and military realities of their times as they saw them, but those realities have changed. There are essential truths in their views and these truths should be embraced, while unrealistic promises and measurements are discarded. Air power has not always been well used or decisive, but its contributions have proven invaluable to our nation's war efforts. Thus, the value of the Air Force is obvious even without achieving "victory through air power."

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¹Record, "Should We Abolish the Air Force?", 54.

²Dennis M. Drew, "Joint Operations, The World Looks Different From 10,000 Feet" *Airpower Journal*, Vol. II, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 7-12.

³Gordan and Trainor, 319-321.

⁴Drew, 13.

⁵*Ibid.*, 5.

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