

Interpreting and misinterpreting air power's strategic potential – overcoming the Sisyphean Labor

By Wg Cdr Chris Luck

Air power has never been so valuable or criticized as it is today. Its 'surgical precision' is the stuff of politicians' dreams, while air force leaders trumpet the ability to leverage accuracy with rapidly delivered and devastating firepower with global reach. Yet, as in Lebanon in 2006 and today in the Middle East, air power critics accuse air power of failing to win wars independently and, de facto, of failing. The idea persists among airmen that the application of the air trinity of accuracy, destructive power and reach can win wars with the Army and Navy largely as auxiliaries. But to be labeled as 'failing' in today's budget fights is a sure way to do just that.

A closer examination of why air power stands so accused despite its tactical brilliance draws an uncomfortable truth; airmen are the authors of their own misery. By misinterpreting the promise of air power, or maintaining an unempirical faith in it, airmen have made a rod for their own backs. Unlike land and naval warfare, air power's genesis and evolution is not lost in the mists of time. The Great War was a primeval soup for air power evolution. The scale and existential nature of the conflict meant that air power rapidly evolved from flimsy aircraft to giants such as the Germans' Gotha bombers and fast lethal fighters such as the

Sopwith Camel. Roles proliferated from that of reconnaissance and communication in 1914 to include most of today's acknowledged air power roles by 1918. Yet the uncomfortable reality remains that the war did more for aviation than aviation did for the war.

Despite the heroism of aviators who died in droves in a 3-D version of the Somme, air power could not win the war. A perception arose, however, from the German bombing of Britain that to strike at the heart of the enemy rather than his military forces was the key to victory. The proposition that 'strategic bombardment' would deliver victory was never proved and yet it became the bedrock of the Royal Air Force's interwar thinking. Independent action became irrevocably synonymous with things strategic. This is meaningless. This begs further explication. There is no such thing as strategic platforms, weapons, ranges, targets or anything else for that matter. Instead, all action is inherently tactical and aimed towards achieving a strategic effect that adds to the strategic performance required. Tactical action either adds to achieving the political end state required or it does not. With this understanding, the best 'strategic' application of tactical air power action may be on the battlefield or on independent action, or indeed on both. The task of air power strategists is

to understand were and how air power may best be applied for strategic effect and therefore performance.

This dynamic played out during the Great War. Air power thinkers clashed on how air power was best applied for strategic effect. Generals Sir Douglas Haig and Hugh Trenchard believed in battlefield action as the best strategic application of air power, while Prime Minister Lloyd George and General Frederick Sykes believed in independent action. The argument came to a head in 1917 after three years of almost unimaginable sacrifice without victory. Lloyd George appointed the South African general and statesman Jan Christiaan Smuts to advise on the way forward. The result was the Smuts Report which famously outlined an independent striking force to directly attack the enemy's infrastructure and morale.

It was this vision for victory that airmen have clung to as justification for an independent air force. It was a narrow reading and interpretation of Smuts' report. Smuts emphasized that the primary objective of reorganisation was to produce a single body of air-minded experts to ensure a coordinated approach to air organization, resource management, policy and doctrine rather than the adversarial competition between the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service that blighted any coherent development and exercise of air power. This was Smuts's crowning glory and great insight, not independent war-winning bombardment. From this would flow the efficient defense of the homeland, followed by auxiliary aviation support of the Army and the Navy. Last, independent action was to

be an important consequence of spare capability. Airmen's misinterpretation of air power in the Great War has resulted in a constant, stultifying, distracting and ultimately pointless argument as to whether air power can win wars independently. As one historian succinctly pointed out, "the standard of victory through air power alone is fallacious by inspection and has all too frequently created false expectations in the minds of Airmen, politicians, and those who otherwise might pass for knowledgeable military analysts."¹

The reality and the evidence so far is that air power might, if the context and strategic performance require, favor the sole application of the air weapon. In the Great War the most strategic of air power roles was reconnaissance; in the Middle East today it is lift – fixed-wing and rotary; who knows what tomorrow brings. The challenge for today's air strategists is to move beyond the Sisyphean and arid argument of whether air power can win wars independently. Airmen should instead think and articulate clearly how air power organization, training, equipment and doctrine can be best focused and balanced to meet future contexts and not let doctrine become strategy. Only then will air power maximize its potential and therefore utility; only this will justify its budget share and independence.

Note:

1. Harold R. Winton in email exchange to author Monday 04/06/2007 22:22.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL