

Letters

Where are the air power strategists? A response

In the last edition of *Air Power Review*, Gp Capt John Alexander took up the challenge in my original article and opened a dialogue. As with D Def S, I welcome the debate since it is only through the rigorous, intellectual examination of our craft that we will improve our appreciation of air power in every respect. Much of what Gp Capt Alexander says makes complete sense, but I am not convinced by his response that he fully understood my original point – for which the sin must lie with the author, not the reader. In particular, flattered though I am that he suggests that I had answered my own question, I suggest that the conundrum still has to be unpicked.

When studying air power history, one is always directed to the writings of Douhet as the starting point of air power thinking. With this I can hardly disagree, but I contend that Douhet's thinking was about methods, about equipment and about tactics, it was not a strategy. The subsequent events of the Second World War, when technology, production rates and the crucible of a war of national survival, allowed his theories to be tested to the point of destruction proved, in the main, that his core tenet was lacking: air power alone could not win a war. Now I acknowledge that there are two clear exceptions to this. First, the impact of the bombing during Operation GOMORRAH, the bombing of Hamburg that raised a firestorm in July 1943, could, if the RAF and 8th USAAF had been able to repeat the action on several more German cities, (they could not as they did not have the resources) have ended the War. Nevertheless, the impact on the Nazi regime was marked. Indeed, the spreading across Germany of the million or so refugees, with their tales of terror and impotence against the

terror from the air, shook the political leadership to its core. Second, it is indisputable that the two atomic bomb attacks on Japan did bring the Second World War to an end. However, if the only way air power can have such a strategic effect by itself, and not as part of a wider, Joint and Combined action, then the basis of our ability to lever strategic effect in isolation is surely flawed?

The same argument, I believe, holds good for Warden and Pape: they are tacticians not strategists for they are expounding how to employ the technology of the day to apply air power to the conflict of their time. While I firmly believe that the nature of war is unchanging its conduct is driven by the circumstances, not least the weapons available, and this therefore does change. Warden and Pape address air power in these terms and their writings, excellent though they are, are already showing limits in their utility. The writings of Douhet, Mitchell and Trenchard have likewise proven to lack longevity.

Am I being too harsh on those who we regard as possible air power strategists and too enamoured of the Maritime and Land strategists? I do not believe so. Taking again my point about history, if studying land warfare one might look at the writings of, say, Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus whose *Epitoma rei militaris* is one of the most complete books of its era. But it is not a strategy, it is a description of how to wage war according to the needs and capabilities of the era. Where Jomini and Clausewitz, Mahan and Corbett differ is that their writings, although including elements that are applicable only to the times in which they were writing, contain much that has proven

to be enduring. Douhet's book is, I suggest, not. Moreover, Clausewitz's thinking is widely quoted, including by air power writers (just think of the enduring Clausewitzian Trinity that remains as relevant today as when it was written). Furthermore, Mahan – and even more, Corbett – with their thinking about sea control have not only proven to be enduring in *Maritime Circles*, but their construct has proven to be equally applicable as a foundation to Space Power theory. Strategies, and the thinking of Strategists, endure; tactics to meet operational requirements employing the technology of the day, evolve.

The excellent thinking that NATO's Joint Air Power Competence Centre have undertaken, eloquently expressed by Gp Capt Alexander, very precisely captures the concept of air power and yet, and yet . . . It is still about employment, not art: it is still not that elusive key.

Let me go back to the beginning: what makes air power different from Land or Maritime? It is our different perspective of time and space, driven by the speed at which we move over the earth and the oceans, by the scale of our understanding of where we can have effect, and by the (relative) impermanence of both our presence and our effect. It is this unique exploitation of the third dimension and, arguably, our particular understanding of the fourth dimension that makes us, the air power practitioners, different. Gp Capt Alexander has added significant value to the debate of how; I still search for the understanding of what air power is.

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