

# **Operation IRAQI FREEDOM Air Campaign: A Tactical Military Success, or a Strategic Information Failure?**

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Operation Iraqi Freedom began on 19 March 2003. Unlike the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 air campaign was very different both in its execution and its implications for air power thought. This article first examines the OIF air campaign, looking at how its historical lineage and the military and political factors of the day shaped its development and execution. It then moves on to consider the effectiveness of the air campaign, in terms of both its military outcome for Coalition and Iraqi forces and importantly in today's media-savvy environment, in terms of whether or not the Coalition successfully translated military and technological superiority to information superiority amongst the public. The article concludes that the complexities of modern air campaigns are such that tactical military success can easily turn to strategic information failure if air power's capabilities are not clearly understood and matched to specific operational requirements. Furthermore, the contemporary operating environment is now too complex to characterise air campaigns as being a success or failure, raising questions as to whether previous absolute theories on the utility of air power are still relevant to complex non-linear campaigns in the twenty-first century.

## Introduction

Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF)<sup>1</sup> started on 19 March 2003 with an attempted decapitation strike against Saddam Hussein. At the time thought to be the start of a second spectacular air campaign against the Iraqi regime similar to the Desert Storm air campaign in 1991, it quickly became clear that OIF was to be very different both in its execution and in its implications for air power thought. Rather than being overshadowed by the land component, the air component effectively redefined the notions of how airpower can be used to best effect in twenty-first century warfare.

Analysis of the OIF air campaign clearly demonstrated that the effectiveness of airpower lies as much in the perception of its achievements as in the actual achievements themselves. The complexities of OIF with the multitude of measures of effectiveness that can be applied across the physical, cognitive and information domains, make assessing the outcome of the air campaign a complicated process. If that assessment is then viewed against a backdrop of an uncertain campaign end state and the political and societal demands and expectations of an information hungry, media-savvy population, it can be argued that the assessment of any air campaign based solely around the absolute notions of success or failure is overly simplistic.

With this in mind, this article examines the 2003 air campaign in terms of both its military outcome and the public's perception as an indicator of how successful the air campaign was in the information domain. It aims to show that if considered in isolation, the OIF air campaign seemingly corroborates Robert Pape's thoughts on the utility of air power as an independent strategic option;<sup>2</sup> viewed in this sense, the air campaign can only be described as a qualified success at best. However, if viewed as a key component in a fully integrated joint campaign, simultaneously operating across the levels of warfare, then it can be argued that the air campaign was militarily successful to such a degree that it effectively made previous absolute theories redundant. But when examined against the broader background of the media and information domains, the outcome of the air campaign, whilst predictable from a western perspective, was an overall failure because of its inability to affect Iraqi and Arab opinion, possibly to the extent that the public relations failure helped sow the seeds of anger and potential insurgency amongst the Iraqis and Arabs.

The article will start by seeking to better understand the 2003 air campaign, how it developed and how it was influenced both by the earlier Desert Storm campaign and the Rumsfeld Doctrine which was gathering momentum at the time. From there, the article moves on to briefly examine the execution of the air campaign, specifically looking at the notion of 'Shock and Awe' which the campaign quickly became synonymous with and seeks to draw out the implications this had for both the Coalition and Iraqi forces. In doing so, and whilst not doctrinally correct, the article considers the air campaign to include both air and aviation assets. Furthermore, whilst the air campaign is considered to have been executed over the period 19 March – 18 April 2003 (as defined by US Central Command<sup>3</sup>), it also notes the significance of Operation SOUTHERN FOCUS, the campaign to systematically degrade Iraqi

air defences in the south of the country prior to the start of OIF. Having assessed the air campaign from a military perspective, the article seeks to assess it from the perspective of the information domain, examining whether or not the military and technological superiority displayed by the Coalition extended to the public relations battle. However, it should be noted that analysis of the air campaign's impact on public relations at the time is complicated by much of the available material being bound in general opinions on the war rather than providing specific insights into the air campaign. Furthermore, some of the official reporting on the air campaign either remains classified and cannot be included here, whilst other open source material is drawn from potentially unverifiable interviews and blogs.

## The Air Campaign

It has been argued that the air war in Iraq in 2003 was effectively won during the first Gulf War in 1991<sup>4</sup> when large numbers of the Iraqi Air Force's aircraft were either systematically destroyed in their supposedly hardened shelters or fled to Iran having escaped the Coalition attacks.<sup>5</sup> In order to more fully understand the OIF air campaign, it is worth examining the concepts involved in its planning and how it compared to the 1991 air campaign and the concept of "Shock and Awe".

The 1991 DESERT STORM campaign was in reality one of separate ground and air campaigns brought together rather than being a fully integrated joint campaign. The initial plans drawn up by US Air Force's Tactical Air Command and the US Navy seemed to draw inspiration from the Vietnam-era Rolling Thunder campaign, suggesting that the relatively static Cold War had stifled innovation and thinking. In this sense, the initial air plan for DESERT STORM saw air power to be a strategic asset<sup>6</sup> only in so much as the numbers of aircraft, distances flown and numbers of bombs dropped were as important, if not more important than assessing how the air campaign contributed to the overall strategic effect. Eventually, a revised air plan was drawn up, heavily influenced by a team lead by Colonel John A Warden III. The revised plan - Instant Thunder - was based around incapacitating Iraq's strategic leadership and destroying key military capabilities. Warden believed that hitting these centres of gravity simultaneously would lead to strategic paralysis and would force the Iraqis to comply with UN and US demands. Although Warden's plan morphed once in the hands of the theatre planners, his target sets remained at the heart of the air campaign which had developed into a plan to achieve four operational-level goals: a "strategic" component, suppression of enemy air defences in the Kuwaiti theatre of operations, shaping the battlefield and support to the ground campaign.<sup>7</sup> Although widely portrayed as a success, Murray and Scales suggest that the overall plan was disjointed. Rather than maximising the synergistic effects of air and ground forces, the 1991 air campaign was conducted in isolation from the ground campaign, and was actually a composite campaign with the "strategic" element in Iraq remaining separate from the element in Kuwait which focused on destroying Iraqi military hardware.<sup>8</sup>

Just as the 1991 air campaign had its roots in an earlier conflict, the plan for the 2003 air campaign evolved against the backdrop of Afghanistan when CENTCOM Commander General

Franks was ordered to update the plan for invading Iraq. However, unlike the 1991 campaign in which the air and land components operated within their own distinct environments, General Franks, echoing Secretary Rumsfeld's thinking, was heavily influenced by the ongoing Afghan campaign where the use of precision airpower and special forces achieved in weeks what might have taken 50,000 ground troops months or years to achieve.<sup>9</sup> Rumsfeld in particular viewed the successful combined action by US Special Forces and Northern Alliance at Bai Beche in the battle for Mazar-e Sharif in November 2001 as a prime example of what could be achieved by lighter, mobile ground forces supported by precision air power<sup>10</sup> and was as such the ideal template for operations in Iraq. This approach, sometimes dubbed "the Afghan Model",<sup>11</sup> signified a move away from the Powell Doctrine of overwhelming mass used in 1991 to a new doctrine of overwhelming force – the Rumsfeld Doctrine.<sup>12</sup> This new approach sought to use airpower to target the institutions supporting the Iraqi Regime, simultaneously attacking the Iraqi military forces, rather than targeting national infrastructure and the Iraqi people. This integrated approach was a direct contrast to the 1991 campaign where the air component effectively operated in isolation from the ground component.<sup>13</sup>

As with Warden's Instant Thunder plan, the air-heavy nature of the initial 2003 plan caused consternation amongst the Washington planners who demanded significant amendments. CENTCOM air planners wanted an opening air campaign based on the Gulf War model,<sup>14</sup> the original plan for an initial twenty day air campaign was gradually cut back to three days of air operations only to have the land campaign begin before the massive air offensive.<sup>15</sup> Whilst much of the detailed planning for OIF remains classified, it is not inconceivable that criticism of the initial air-heavy plan had as much to do with opposition to Secretary Rumsfeld's ideas on defence transformation as it did with the plan itself. Rumsfeld's ideas effectively required a wholesale cultural change which ran contrary to the belief in some quarters that the Army's role should be to prepare for conventional wars rather than 'non-traditional missions'.<sup>16</sup> In these 'non-traditional missions', precision firepower, rapid mobility and situational understanding favoured lighter, high tech forces supported by the full spectrum of air power capabilities over the 'heavy metal' of the Cold War army. Set against the background of the 'Rumsfeld transformation', planning for OIF was not only a debate about how to fight a war, it was a debate on how to organize, equip and resource the future US military.<sup>17</sup> With the lack of open source reporting on the planning process, it is difficult to assess airpower's intended role,<sup>18</sup> but according to the Ministry of Defence the air campaign intended to:

1. Neutralize the Iraqi Air Force and its Integrated Air Defence System.
2. Conduct strategic attacks against leadership targets.
3. Provide armed air support to own ground and maritime forces.
4. Deter and counter possible threats from Iraqi ballistic missiles.
5. Destroy the Republican Guard.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst campaign planning was ongoing, the US and UK had already started using airpower to prepare the Iraqi battlespace for future operations. From summer 2002 onwards, the US and

UK intensified operations in the southern No Fly Zone, implementing Operation SOUTHERN FOCUS to degrade the Iraqi air defences,<sup>20</sup> with the attacks in early 2003 intended to prepare the ground in advance of any invasion force. This allowed the initial air effort to focus on gaining air supremacy over the rest of Iraq and attacking strategic targets.<sup>21</sup> It seems clear that SOUTHERN FOCUS was an integral part of the Coalition's broader air campaign, executed in advance of OIF starting on 19 March 2003.

Central to the wider understanding of the OIF air campaign is the principle of 'Shock and Awe'. It was thought that by combining a total knowledge of the enemy, rapidity, brilliance in execution and control of the environment, a smaller invasion force could induce 'shock and awe' in the Iraqi Regime, rendering it impotent.<sup>22</sup> This concept gained momentum as it resonated with Rumsfeld's thoughts on transforming the US military to one of effect rather than mass. It also gained media attention,<sup>23</sup> and when General Franks promised that four times the ordnance used in Desert Storm would shock the Iraqis into submission<sup>24</sup> it seemed to confirm 'Shock and Awe' was the basis for forthcoming operations.

The air campaign's execution surprised many on both sides. The attempted decapitation strike on 19 March 2003 caused confusion amongst Coalition air commanders<sup>25</sup> as well as amongst Iraqi commanders such as Gen Hamdani (Republican Guard II Corps Commander) who expected a repeat of the first Gulf War.<sup>26</sup> Hamdani's thinking echoed Saddam's, who also expected an initial bombing campaign before the ground war. Believing the Iraqi Air Force could not mount a credible defence, Saddam reportedly ordered it to disperse its aircraft for future use.<sup>27</sup> Whilst Woods believes this points to Saddam's belief that the Regime would survive it also implies recognition by the Iraqi Regime of the Coalition's overwhelming airpower dominance.

### **Assessing the Air Campaign**

It should be difficult to describe any campaign that lasted three weeks and seized a country the size of California as anything less than a brilliant victory.<sup>28</sup> However, to label the air campaign as a success or failure is to over simplify it.

Before OIF started, the media expected a short decisive campaign to break the Regime within days. As the Regime was built around Saddam, Ullman believed his swift removal might be sufficient to cause its collapse: "...if you kill the emperor, the empire's up for grabs. And had we killed him, it would have been a classic application [of the theory]: \$50m of ordnance, and we won the war."<sup>29</sup>

This thinking puts the 19 March and 7 April decapitation strikes into context; however, both strikes were unsuccessful leading to suggestions that all they achieved was to create a state of uncertainty.<sup>30</sup> The apparent failure of airpower to decapitate the Regime and forestall a protracted campaign seemingly substantiated Pape's argument that air power cannot in itself achieve strategic effect.<sup>31</sup> From the perspective of the air campaign as an independent

strategic action, this key element appeared to have failed.

As well as an apparent failure to achieve independent strategic effect, the air campaign also appears to have been unable to achieve air supremacy, despite pre-emptively targeting the Iraqi air defence network and Saddam grounding the Air Force. This failure was seen nowhere more clearly than during a deep strike operation against the Republican Guard's Medina Division by the US Army's 11th Attack Helicopter Regiment on 23 March 2003. Thirty Apache gunships were launched against armour and artillery targets in the Karbala area, but the mission failed after coming under heavy surface-to-air fire, resulting in the loss of one aircraft, its crew later appearing on Iraqi television,<sup>32</sup> and the remaining twenty-nine aircraft aborting, some with heavy battle damage without causing any appreciable damage to the Medina Division.<sup>33</sup> The months of Coalition airstrikes had the unintended consequence of familiarizing the Iraqi military with Coalition capabilities, leading them to use simple but effective localized tactics based on optical tracking, cell phones and low power radios<sup>34</sup> rather than an integrated air defence system. Despite their technological inferiority, the Iraqis demonstrated they could still mount an air defence, albeit an unconventional one and at a local level, leaving the Coalition only with sufficient control of the air rather than blanket air supremacy.

11 AHR's failure at Karbala also pointed to deficiencies in the initial air-land integration process, further questioning whether the air campaign could be described as a definitive success. V Corp's Fire Support Coordination Line (FSCL) was set to enable them to employ organic aviation and ATACMS<sup>35</sup> to shape operations in depth. However, in doing so, it also meant that V Corps created a barrier to air assets operating between the Corp's forward lines and the FSCL, limiting the air component's ability to attack targets that ground forces could not effectively hit. Indeed the outcome of 11 AHR's ill-fated Karbala mission, which fell in the gap between the forward line and the FSCL, all but closed the air space to the very air assets that could have assisted the ground forces.<sup>36</sup> For all the air component's advances in technology, it appears that in the early days doctrinal incompatibility between the Air and Land Components effectively prevented the use of precision air power at the cost of missing at least one full night of fixed strike targets inside the FSCL.<sup>37</sup> Not only did the failure of the decapitation strikes support Pape's ideas that air power was more likely to achieve success when used in direct support of ground forces – so called hammer and anvil operations – the failure to address battlespace coordination issues, something previously highlighted at the end of the 1991 campaign<sup>38</sup> – meant that airpower could also be limited in its tactical utility by Component parochialism.

Despite these failures, when viewed in a broader sense, a number of aspects point to the air campaign being highly successful above and beyond what are effectively procedural rather than doctrinal failings. Despite failing to achieve their aims, the attempted decapitation strikes demonstrated the Coalition's ability to respond to strategically important time sensitive targets in cluttered urban environments. From the initial tasking by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to striking the targets during the strike on 19 March 2003 was approximately four hours,<sup>39</sup> whilst

the strike on 7 April 2003 was conducted within twelve minutes of intelligence agencies receiving reports of Saddam's location.<sup>40</sup> The ability to minimise targeting cycle timelines allowed the Coalition to get inside the Regime's OODA loop and prosecute a further 156 time sensitive WMD, leadership and terrorist targets as well as enabling the air component to dynamically re-task airborne assets against a further 686 highly mobile and tactically significant targets.<sup>41</sup> This was a major development compared to the 1991 campaign where the Land Component complained that air tasking was fixed to the seventy-two hour ATO cycle,<sup>42</sup> demonstrating improvements since 1991 in airpower's ability to deliver effect against precision targets of opportunity in a cluttered and congested environment.

Higher order effects of the failed decapitation strikes concerned their disruptive effects on Iraqi strategic command and control. Iraqi command and control was already limited by its highly centralised nature and the elaborate steps Saddam put in place to ensure his protection. The ability to conduct short notice precision air strikes against key targets forced Saddam to implement increasingly restrictive security measures, effectively paralysing the Regime's ability to act and hindering Saddam's ability to direct senior commanders as these security measures hampered the ability to arrange meetings.<sup>43</sup> The resulting paralysis was clearly seen on 2 April 2003 when Saddam, believing that the Coalition's main advance was coming from the west rather than the south, ordered commanders to move forces to the north of Baghdad.<sup>44</sup> Although Saddam was receiving intelligence reports, they were worthless by the time they finally reached him. As many senior commanders lived in fear of death for acting on their own initiative rather than Saddam's orders,<sup>45</sup> Saddam's continued existence was an important part of maintaining the sense of paralysis. Contrary to the notion that the decapitation strikes were a strategic failure, they are useful examples of the second and third order benefits the Coalition derived from its ability to conduct precision strikes at a time and location of its choosing. That the intended target was not at either location appears to have more to do with the quality of the intelligence reporting rather than the air component's inability to prosecute the targets.

Technological improvements in ISTAR, aircraft avionics and precision guided munitions (PGMs) also contributed to the air campaign's effectiveness by enabling air assets to operate at night and in poor weather. When the *shamal* set in on 25 March 2003, Iraqi commanders repositioned their forces using the weather as cover. However, Coalition ISTAR assets such as JSTARS allowed Iraqi movements to be tracked even under sandstorm conditions.<sup>46</sup> The prevalence of PGMs (sixty-eighty per cent of all munitions vs. ten per cent in 1991)<sup>47</sup> along with infra-red sensors and laser designators allowed air assets to precisely target Iraqi ground forces in all weathers and at day or night. This induced incapacitating fear in Iraqi troops as the Commanders of both Republican Guard I Corps<sup>48</sup> and the Al Nida Division described during post war interviews, the later describing how his Division dissolved in the face of Coalition air power.<sup>49</sup> Saddam's orders to his Air Force not to fight and the Republican Guard's unwillingness to fight clearly illustrate the successful deterrent and coercive effects of Coalition airpower on Iraqi forces.

## The Public Relations Battle

The controversial and divisive nature of OIF meant that public relations and information would always have a significant role in the campaign, helping participating governments present their messages and influencing key audiences. The media and information battlespace of 2003 was very different from that in 1991. During the 1991 Gulf War, CNN introduced the concept of 'real-time' war with its twenty-four hour news coverage of the campaign. By 2003, the twenty-four / seven news concept had grown across the major western networks<sup>50</sup> but importantly now also included regional Arab networks such as Al Jazeera. The growth of the internet also created a new breed of independent journalist, able to transmit alternative messages to a global audience,<sup>51</sup> free from the constraints of the official government line. In the context of the air campaign, such reporting provided a unique and personal view of events by individuals on the receiving end of the Coalition's precision strikes.

The immediacy of the news environment was a major challenge facing the Coalition in its efforts to influence public relations. As Sambrook noted, during the first Gulf War one or two editors had the luxury of checking facts and reaching judgements in order to present an accurate account of events; by 2003 they were not afforded that luxury. The general public of 2003 were entering the information chain far earlier than in 1991,<sup>52</sup> making it even harder for officials to counter potentially damaging stories, requiring an innovative public relations approach.

The aim of the UK's information campaign was 'to influence the will of the Iraqi regime, the attitudes of its security forces and civilians as well as the regional audience, and to inform international audiences'<sup>53</sup> whilst the US position was a simple acknowledgement of the role that the media would play in shaping "public opinion now and in the years ahead."<sup>54</sup> The public relations strategy was centred on formal Press Information Centres (PICs) in theatre and the use of media personnel embedded directly with combat units (embeds). Whilst the PICs provided an overall appreciation of and context to the campaign, embeds provided a real time view of events on the front line directly to TV studios. As well as influencing domestic and wider public opinion, efforts to influence Iraqi military and domestic opinion through the use of a coordinated information operations campaign were vital, leading to descriptions of OIF being "a conflict in which information fully took its place as a weapon of war."<sup>55</sup>

## Assessing the Public Relations Battle

Against the background of widespread scepticism about the need for the war, the air campaign suffered from negative publicity before it began. Unfortunately, rather than focusing on its potential to shorten the war and minimise casualties, the concept of 'Shock and Awe' quickly turned into a public relations disaster.

Ullman's use of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to illustrate the principles of 'Shock and Awe' did nothing to pacify anti-war protesters who argued the air campaign would be little more than 'terror inducing destructiveness',<sup>56</sup> comparing it to the bombing of Guernica and Nazi Blitzkrieg



tactics.<sup>57</sup> Once the air campaign started the negative publicity continued, even extending to generally pro-war newspapers such as the Daily Telegraph with its headline 'Baghdad Blitz' alongside images of explosions in Baghdad.<sup>58</sup> Despite Pentagon officials' attempts to distance themselves from the concept of 'Shock and Awe',<sup>59</sup> and Ullman arguing that the air campaign was not actually about 'Shock and Awe',<sup>60</sup> significant damage had already been inflicted on the air campaign's image.

The public relations campaign was further weakened when elements of the media seemed to view the air war as little more than 'infotainment' or a video game. Having created the expectation of a decisive campaign, elements of the media began comparing the air war to an action movie or computer game, potentially trivialising what the Coalition were trying to achieve and prompting Colin Powell to warn that "this isn't a video game, it's a war. It's a real war."<sup>61</sup> As well as Powell's criticism of the media coverage, the British Commander in theatre openly accused the media of turning the war into a spectator sport,<sup>62</sup> effectively warning against the dangers of western populations sympathizing without suffering and empathizing without experiencing, thanks largely to media providing all the imagery and information necessary for its information-hungry audiences to develop a relatively shallow interest in events until the next stimuli appears.<sup>63</sup> Whilst sport and war share many sociological characteristics, they have key differences; for Bill Shankley football was more important than life and death, but for those directly involved on both sides of OIF, it was exactly a matter of life or death.<sup>64</sup> However, in aiming to satisfy the demand for twenty-four / seven news coverage, the resulting trivialization of the conflict was a serious set back to the credibility of the public relations and information campaigns.

Neither was the faltering domestic information campaign improved by the in-theatre information campaign and public relations strategy. There were some tactical successes to offset the weaknesses of the domestic campaign, with the use of capabilities such as the EC-130 Commando Solo aircraft to broadcast radio messages to both military and civilian populations, along with and radio broadcasts from HMS Chatham and USS Tarawa targeting southern Iraq combined with more traditional leaflet drops.<sup>65</sup> Such efforts served to undermine the Regime and encouraged desertion amongst both enlisted soldiers and importantly amongst some officers.<sup>66</sup> However, these tactical successes were effectively negated by operational level information and public relations failures linked to the air campaign's strike list and the Coalition's management of the Arab media. Regime media and propaganda targets were deleted from the strike list in the hope that they might be used to help facilitate Regime collapse. However, failure to restrict the Regime's propaganda capability simply allowed it to exploit Arab and Western media, providing it with a voice to the world<sup>67</sup> as well as demonstrating to the Iraqi people that Saddam was still in alive and in power.

However, the biggest public relations failure was potentially the Coalition's failure to effectively manage the media across Iraq and the broader Arab world. Despite an estimated 800 embedded media across the Coalition, there were no Arab embeds with UK forces and only

one with US forces.<sup>68</sup> From a UK perspective, the primary target was the domestic audience, which needed to be influenced to help bolster support for the forces and the government.<sup>69</sup> Such attitudes towards Arab embeds meant that a significant opportunity to reinforce the Coalition's message was missed. In a campaign intended to liberate the Iraqi people, but about which many were sceptical, the failure to actively engage with the Arab media could only ever lead to Arab news agencies presenting their own independent views. The fallout from the Coalition's mishandling of the Iraqi and Arab media were editorials criticizing the Coalition's public relations campaign by condemning the western media's independence and credibility<sup>70</sup> along with damning Arab media interpretations of events such as the front page of the Saudi Arab News with its headline "Liberated by US bombs" alongside images of dead Iraqis.<sup>71</sup> Whilst the Coalition media effort focused on a quick victory, the Arab media concentrated the human cost of the war, something the Coalition seemingly failed to grasp.<sup>72</sup>

The general opinion of the Coalition campaign amongst Arabs was rooted in the concept of pan-Arab solidarity. Many Arabs demonstrated hatred for Saddam but sympathy towards the Iraqi people in equal measures and viewed the Coalition campaign as a war *against* Iraq rather than a war *for* Iraq. Although only one source,<sup>73</sup> an anonymous Baghdad resident known only as Salam Pax,<sup>74</sup> produced an internet blog which achieved international acclaim for its open and sometimes critical descriptions of the invasion and the effect that the air campaign was having in particular on the Iraqi people it intended to benefit:

*23/3 .... Today before noon I went out with my cousin to take a look at the city. Two things: 1) the attacks are precise. 2) they are attacking targets which are just too close to civilian areas in Baghdad ... There are no waving masses of people welcoming the Americans nor are they surrendering by the thousands. People are doing what all of us are, sitting in their homes hoping that a bomb doesn't fall on them and keeping their doors shut.*<sup>75</sup>

*2/4 ... Two hours ago we could hear the rumbling of the planes over us and it took them ages to pass. Afraid is not the right word. Nervous, edgy, sometimes you just want to shout out at someone, angry. I wish the Iraqi and the American governments would stop saying they are doing this for the people. I also want to hold a "not in my name" sign ... Non stop bombing. At the moment the US/UK are not winning any battle to "win the heart and mind" of this individual. No matter which way this will go my life will end up more difficult.*<sup>76</sup>

Whilst the Salam Pax blog was only one voice amongst the millions in Baghdad, it was heard by an international audience. Furthermore, as a voice of the people that the campaign aimed to liberate rather than an institution with an agenda, Salam Pax's experiences achieved a resonance across both the western media outlets, especially those with an anti-war agenda, but also across an already largely sceptical Arab world.

Against this background, the only way that an aggressive air campaign would be accepted was

through an Arab face in much the same way that Saudi Arabia's Prince Khalid occupied a key position within the 1991 Coalition. In doing so, Prince Khalid effectively became the Arab face of the campaign and providing a degree of acceptability and credibility to a predominantly occidental force operating in the heart of the Middle East. However, the highly divisive nature of the 2003 campaign denied the Coalition the benefits of such a unifying Arab face. Ahmed Chalabi, a dissident Iraqi opposition politician, was arguably the closest the Coalition came to an Iraqi face; however, he was quickly discredited by, amongst other things, accusations by sections of Iraqi society that he was little more than a western stooge.<sup>77</sup> The Coalition's failure to appreciate the need to actively manage the Iraqi and regional Arab PR campaign created anger and resentment amongst the people the campaign was supposed to benefit. This anger quickly developed a physical form with ordinary Iraqis taking up arms against Coalition forces<sup>78</sup> along with the first signs of foreign fighters, who would later form a significant part of the insurgency, heading to Iraq.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

As a standalone, independent strategic bombing effort, the air campaign was at best a qualified success. The attempted decapitation strikes failed in their objectives, highlighting air power's reliance on inconsistent intelligence to be effective, almost single-handedly corroborating one of Pape's key arguments, whilst years of attacks against the Iraqi air defences also failed to guarantee air superiority. But as a key component in an integrated multi-dimensional campaign, it showed that air power has a vital, war winning role and its success in OIF must be viewed in this context. This success appears, in part, to have been linked to an understanding of airpower and its capabilities amongst key planning staffs who noted what airpower had achieved in Afghanistan. When the capability developments since 1991, coupled with an appreciation of how they might be best utilised to support dynamic operations, were combined with the planning staff's flexible approach to airpower employment, it enabled Coalition forces to maximise airpower's tactical effect which in turn conferred strategic benefits in a relatively quick campaign.

In doing so, it further brings into question how relevant Pape's arguments are in the context of the OIF air campaign which was never about large scale attacks on population centres and Iraq's military-industrial infrastructure. Where Pape is correct is in his scepticism of some of the more definite claims about airpower's ability to independently deliver campaign success.<sup>80</sup> However, the OIF air campaign showed that air power rather than being as simple as a blunt instrument or a rapier,<sup>81</sup> is an instrument of policy that is most effective when its capabilities are clearly understood and matched to specific operational requirements. In this respect, the OIF air campaign clearly demonstrated that it is the consequences of airpower's employment that should be considered in a strategic sense rather than the capability itself. The OIF air campaign, simultaneously executed across all levels of warfare, as well as across geographic and temporal boundaries effectively raised questions as to whether previous absolute theories on airpower's strategic utility are still relevant to complex, non-linear twenty-first century campaigns.

However, if the Coalition demonstrated a thorough understanding of the application of air power, they demonstrated a poor understanding of how to effectively influence public opinion – most importantly that of the sceptical population on whose behalf they were allegedly fighting. The advent of mass, uncontrollable media effectively opened another front, but in a virtual rather than a physical war, a front where success is based not on military capabilities but on perceptions and the integrity of the message being disseminated. The Coalition's handling of the regional Arab media and information campaign failed to recognise the importance of this key centre of gravity to the overall success of the campaign. Or rather, if as Tatham<sup>82</sup> and Rantapelkonen<sup>83</sup> suggest that Coalition leaders did actually recognise the importance of the local rather than domestic public relations and information campaigns, good intentions appear to have become bogged down by operational security, mistrust and most importantly a misunderstanding of the local information environment. Although commenting on irregular warfare, Freedman's assertion that: "... superiority in the physical environment is of little value unless it can be translated into an advantage in the information environment. ..." <sup>84</sup> could have been written with the OIF air campaign specifically in mind. Thus, whilst the physical manifestation of the air campaign took weeks, the failure to effectively manage Iraqi and Arab sentiment had significant longer term implications. In this respect, the air campaign can only be described as a resounding military success but an information and public relations disaster.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the Iraq campaign was known as Operation TELIC in the UK Ministry of Defence, this article will use the name Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) to cover all Coalition operations to minimise confusion and simplify the analysis and discussion.

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<sup>5</sup> Lambeth 116

<sup>6</sup> Murray and Scales p158

<sup>7</sup> Lambeth p106

<sup>8</sup> Murray and scales p160-161

<sup>9</sup> Richard Andres, "Deep attack against Iraq," in *War in Iraq Planning and Execution*, eds. Thomas Mahnken & Thomas Keaney (London: Routledge, 2007), 71.

<sup>10</sup> U.S Department of Defense, "Secretary Rumsfeld Speaks on "21<sup>st</sup> Century Transformation" of U.S. Armed Forces", US Department of Defense, <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=183> (Accessed 16 Aug 2011)

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<sup>14</sup> Dale, *OIF: Strategies, Approaches, Results and Issues for Congress*.

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- <sup>19</sup> Ministry of Defence, "Operations in Iraq: First Reflections," Ministry Of Defence, <http://www.mod.gov.uk> (accessed June 12, 2011).
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- <sup>22</sup> Dr Harlan Ullman, "Shock and Awe Revisited," *RUSI Journal* 148, no.3 (2003): 10.
- <sup>23</sup> CBS News "Iraq faces Massive US Missile Barrage," CBS News, <http://www.cbsnews.com> (accessed June 13 2011).
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- <sup>26</sup> Kevin Woods, "The Iraqi Perspectives Report: Saddam's Senior Leadership on Operation Iraqi Freedom from the US Joint Forces Command Report," (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 125 & 151.
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- <sup>34</sup> *ibid.*
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- <sup>37</sup> Lt Gen Daniel Leaf, Director Air Component Coordination Element to the Coalition Land Force Component Command in David Johnson, "Learning Large Lessons: The Evolving Roles of Ground Power and Air Power in the Post Cold War Era", 134.
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- <sup>39</sup> Murray & Scales, *The Iraq War: A Military History*, 154.
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