

Book Reviews

Airpower for Strategic Effect

By Colin Gray

Reviewed by Group Captain Chris Luck

Introduction

The context for understanding airpower, both in general and in particular historical circumstances, is almost desperately complex. There is a great deal not only over which an argument can erupt, but also over which it should erupt.'

Gray's *Airpower for Strategic Effect* is a distillation of decades of contemplation on strategic theory and practice, and is aimed at those responsible for delivering air power. For those who don't know Gray, he is both a thinker and a practitioner with a prolific pen; his life's mission has been to impose a discipline upon the meaning, understanding and purpose of strategy. This book is not about the 'stuff' that makes up air power, it is about its larger meaning and significance to war, warfare and its instrumentality for strategy. Critics will argue that Gray says nothing new and is in danger of becoming a proselytizing bore – in some ways they would be right as Gray's writing does convey a degree of weariness in having to repeat what should by now have taken root in the minds of those responsible for developing and deploying air power. The evidence, as Gray asserts, is that the message is not getting through. The tap root of disciplined thinking on air power remains firmly in the soil of execution, the 'doing', rather than the 'so what?' of it. As air strategists must bridge the gap between the political world that generates policy and the realm of air power, the 'so what?' of 'doing' air power is crucial. But all strategy, short, medium or long term, is hard to devise and deliver, because it cannot be delegated to mathematical formulae. The future context and outcomes of innumerable variables and

interactions, yet alone the enemy's own free will, is unknowable in sufficient detail to plan with certitude; strategy requires judgement born of education and experience.

Gray is adamant that air power 'can be devised and executed competently only by strategically well-educated, air-minded people'. This book aims to educate because 'poor theory does damage in the real world of behavior, as organizations and people are moved to action by ideas'. Divided into three parts, the first section attempts to lead us by the hand on the 'how to think' about theory, strategy and the instrumentality of air power. Central to the whole discussion in this section is the need to nest air power practice within a theory of war and strategy. This is depicted and expanded on in Gray's 'General Theory of Strategy in 21 Dicta'. His message is that air power (and any of the other geographical or functional 'powers') is only strategic (positively or negatively) when assessed against desired political outcomes. The strategist's task is to produce a net positive political outcome. As such, all activity undertaken is *tactical* in the doing and does not privilege any platform or capability as inherently *strategic*. Thus, he asserts that talk of strategic air bridges, strategic tankers, strategic ISTAR, etc is confused thinking and likely to do harm. As Gray hammers home, blessing the means with a quality of performance independent of the context, contingency and outcome has damaged air power's cause. Heretical though it may sound, Gray argues that there is *no* such thing as strategic air power other than in political outcome terms; strategy is done tactically but developed and actioned in order to maximise political choices in an unknowable and therefore unpredictable future. The consequence of this muddled understanding of what 'strategic' is, is that 'no one truly does strategy'. Gray aims to rectify the cause of this skewed thinking and therefore mitigate future damage to air power's story.

Gray is clear; the strategic value of air power is contingent and an unswerving belief otherwise harms thought, preparation and the employment of air power. Gray does not level this charge at air power alone; land and sea power thinking are not guilt free, with the relatively new realms of space and cyberspace at risk of the same theoretical and doctrinal pitfalls. To evidence his air power claims, and lay the foundations for what comes in part three, Gray revisits the whole temporal history of air power in the second part of the book. History is *the* evidential base that can be relied upon and Gray uses it to expose theory-as-doctrine malpractice and to distill air power's true successes. Gray concludes that the air power story overall is a strategic success, when sensibly viewed as a contributor to the net strategic effect required, rather than as panacea. The historical record points to air power's ability to adapt and adjust to meet the requirements of the emerging context and the contingency at hand, *despite* what doctrine demanded a priori. This fungibility of air power - agility, innovative synergy, flexibility and adaptability - is written into the strategic narrative of national security.

The strategic narrative that flows from the historical record allows Gray, in the third section of the book, to distill his 27 air power dicta, in effect to unravel its DNA. This is nested within his theory of strategy from section one and is his handrail for air power thinking. Gray is not ashamed to admit that these are perhaps blindingly obvious and intuitive, but still need stating,

as most practitioners believe the 'serious stuff' is 'doing it', not thinking why and how to do it. If no other section of the book is read, this is where the rubber hits the road. His dicta cover the enduring nature of air power; the how-to-think rather than what-to-think and spotlight what is truly important and timeless for those who have to do air strategy. He is clear that although the character of air power is ever changing - threats, technology, equipment, cultural and political mores - its nature is enduring and therefore knowable and by definition heuristic.

Gray's thesis is simple: strategy is the purposeful use of tactical instruments in tactical engagements to deliver policy ends. An examination of a hundred years of the air historical record clearly shows that the multirole strategic utility of air power 'cannot sensibly be challenged', but that understanding it is desperately complex. With air power now ubiquitous and indispensable, any conceptualising of warfare without absolute regard to air power is bound to disappoint; air professionals should be more confident in their hard-earned success. Joint warfare depends on and demands the geophysical parochialism that the single Services bring; the leadership challenge is for a 'unified and strategic grasp and grip upon the joint but separate tools in the military toolbox'. Gray would rest his pen if he thought that those responsible for the health of air power understood its nature and its instrumentality for strategy. The dicta of air power that he offers are a shortcut as to how to think about air power truly *strategically* - he has done the intellectual heavy lifting for us. This book is essential reading, as a whole, in part or even just the dicta dipped into, as air power is better directed and commanded by people who understand profoundly the tactical "grammar" of their instrument and the logic of its role in strategy and warfare.

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