

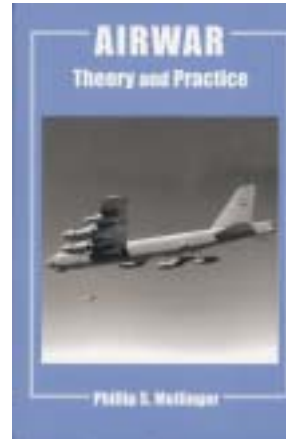
Book Reviews

Airwar – Theory and Practice

By Phillip S Meilinger

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Reviewed by Gp Capt C J Finn



This book, which is the latest in the CAS Studies in Air Power series, is the first to tackle the more theoretical and doctrinal aspects of air power. A collection of essays written between 1991 and 2001, the book predates 9/11 and the second Gulf War, and the author's views have to be seen in that context. The chapters in the book break down into 3 main groupings, although there is obviously some overlap. The first 8 deal with the history of air power thought, from Douhet through to the strategic bombing offensive against Japan in World War II. The next 5 take a more theoretical view, looking at modern air power theory, in particular the development of the concept of effects-based warfare and the debate between the proponents of coercive and denial theories about the offensive use of air power. The last chapter stands alone as a view of the problems facing the United States as the primary aerospace nation.

Throughout the book 2 consistent threads emerge, the first being historical. A lot of the examples in the book – Chapters 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7 – deal specifically with RAF history; for example the development of doctrine in the inter-war years, and the analysis that proponents of strategic bombing did not in fact have complete primacy. There are also some very pertinent observations re jointery, in particular its value, the negative effect of inter-service resource battles and the impact of personalities at the higher levels of command. The other thread is that of the philosophy of the use of air

power. In this the arguments about the merits of counter value and counter force targeting strategies emerge, as does the lesson of the need for control of the air, not for its own sake but to enable all other operations. Phil Meilinger also exposes ethical issues that have emerged, concerning the employment both of atomic and precision weapons, and concerning the political concept of gradual escalation.

Although in a couple of chapters Meilinger bangs a personal drum about the morality and value of sanctions against Iraq, this should not detract from the book as a whole. As one has come to expect, the historical aspects of the book are extremely well researched and argued, and are very readable. The book contains many useful lessons for RAF officers and aircrew in terms of the numbers of widely held preconceptions that it debunks. In its treatment of the development of air power theory the book is a useful summary of the key debates that one can trace through the last 100 years, in particular those concerning strategic bombing versus strategic effect and the theories as to how best to achieve the latter.

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