

Plotting a True Course:

Reflections on USAF Strategic Attack Theory and Doctrine,
the Post-World War II Experience

Edited by David R Mets and William P Head

Westport, Connecticut

Praeger, 2003

ISBN 0-275-97717-X

Illustrations, notes, bibliography, Index.

351 pages

Price \$US74.95

Reviewed by Mark K Wells

Scholarly volumes dealing with the topic of air power, and, most particularly any historical analysis of air power doctrine and theory, increasingly follow the format of this useful book. Rather than the reflections of a single author, these studies — now numbering more than a score — have generally presented the collective wisdom of several notable scholars. This approach certainly tells us much about the increasing complexity of contemporary thought on the subject, but also suggests that the fundamental debates about the role, impact, and ultimate influence of air power in modern war may never be finally resolved. In short, when the subject is air power, it seems clear that we cannot arrive at any consensus. Rather, it is by way of our continuing struggle to understand the issue that progress is made.

This book clearly adds to the body of argument and is fun to read. Like many of the earlier volumes, it presents a series of conference papers edited to develop a coherent primer on post-war airpower theory. The majority of these papers, originally presented in 1997 at the Air Force History and Museum Program of the Air Force Symposium, are authored by an impressive line-up. Dave Mets and William Head have put together four solid chapters bracketed by a thoughtful introduction on the dawn of the nuclear age and an insightful conclusion covering the last 50 years of air power.

To the extent that a single theme ties the essays of this book together, it is the question of whether or not technological change drives doctrine, or the other way around. Mets opens the debate in a review of General Carl Spaatz's legacy and determines that bureaucratic

negotiation and compromise were as much a factor in the organizational changes of the post-World War II US Air Force as were technology and doctrine. William Head contributes a well-written chapter on the use, or, more properly, misuse of B-52s during the Vietnam War. Avoiding any tendency to argue whether or not the air war there might have been 'won', he nevertheless accurately suggests that airmen came away from the experience convinced that airmen, and airmen alone, must fully control air power assets in any future conflict. Moreover, with the stakes so high in other areas of the world, most of them preferred to avoid struggling with the air power issues raised by limited conflict. Mark Conversino's chapter on deterrence nicely summarizes 50 years of American nuclear policy. He makes the point quite clearly that the Air Force's response to the ongoing development of nuclear weapons in the late 1940s drew heavily from air doctrine and theory developed during the Second World War. Moreover, contemporary notions of strategic targeting, parallel warfare, and potential escalation — perhaps with modern precision weapons — continue to rely on widely accepted airpower theories tracing back to the Cold War. Colonel P Mason Carpenter's essay on strategic air attack in Gulf War I accurately reviews the planning and conduct of that campaign. Carpenter suggests, with strong justification, that new technologies, particularly stealth and precision, have "staggering implications" for air power doctrine and future employment. Even so, arguing that airpower is the sole solution for military conflict is to set it up for failure. Head weighs in again with an astute analysis of the 1999 Kosovo air campaign. Noting the increasing requirement for the mobility and responsiveness of airpower, Head suggests that Kosovo seemed to demonstrate to air power advocates that, at least in some situations, air power could carry the day.

Addressing this fundamental assertion may be the ultimate value of this book. Despite its rather steep price, it should appeal to the growing coterie of scholars interested in the debate. Can airpower, however transformed by technology and applied by up-to-date doctrine, truly be decisive? Mets' and Head's book suggests that the answer to this contentious question is less important than the intellectual investigation itself.

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