



## Strategic Air Power in Desert Storm

By John Andreas Olsen

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The debate as to whether offensive air power armed with conventional weapons can, independently of land or maritime operations, achieve strategic effect is as old as the application

of air power itself. The first phase of the debate started with the creation of the RAF's Independent Force in 1918 and culminated in the arguments about the effectiveness of the combined bomber offensive against Germany and the strategic bombing offensive against Japan in World War II. For the next 45 years of the Cold War, strategic was synonymous with nuclear. However, all this was to change in the autumn of 1990 with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Operation DESERT STORM in early 1991 to restore Kuwaiti sovereignty. Whilst a number of books have been written on the use of air power in DESERT STORM, not the least being the authoritative *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, all have concentrated on the war or the air campaign as a whole. In addition, all characterised the strategic air campaign as being against the leadership, power generation, fuel and lubricants production, the transportation infrastructure and the Iraqi IADs target sets. What is different about John Olsen's treatment of the subject is that he concentrates only on the genuinely strategic aspects of the air campaign, ie those attacks tended to induce 'strategic paralysis' on the regime and, to a lesser extent, on the counter-SCUD operations.

In Chapter 1, Olsen looks at the political and air power doctrinal background, explaining the primacy of the air/land doctrine within the US Tactical Air Forces. Chapter 2, the Genesis of the Strategic Air Campaign Plan, is also, to some extent, a scene-setter as it covers the philosophical differences between the standpoints of the author of the INSTANT THUNDER plan, Colonel John A Warden, who saw air power as providing a war-winning and indeed regime toppling capability, and General Schwartzkopf, who in August 1990 only wanted a retaliatory option, and his Air Component Commander, General Horner, who saw the forthcoming air war primarily in terms of providing support to the inevitable land battle. Chapter 3 covers the evolution of the strategic air campaign plan, from the production of the INSTANT THUNDER plan in August 1990, through its evolution into Phase 1 of a much broader campaign plan that was finally executed the following year. Olsen also addresses the problems that the Checkmate team had selling their plan both to the theatre

commanders and within Washington, and why in the end only a couple of Checkmate staff, not including Colonel Warden, remained in Riyadh to contribute to the in-theatre planning and execution of the final campaign. As a necessary precursor to Chapter 5, which examines the effectiveness of the strategic air campaign itself, Chapter 4 is a detailed analysis of the Iraqi regime's political power structure. In his analysis of the strategic air campaign itself, Olsen concludes that whilst attacks on leadership and command and control amounted to only 2.4% of the overall effort, and those on SCUDs to a further 4.2%, "the strategic air campaign, in conclusion, contributed strongly in rendering the Iraqi leadership largely ineffective as a strategic entity". He also makes the point that overthrowing the Iraqi regime was not a coalition aim, although one that was certainly in the minds of the Checkmate team when they planned INSTANT THUNDER. His conclusions reiterate the preceding point but suggest that, more importantly, the development of the INSTANT THUNDER campaign plan by

the Checkmate team marked a radical shift in air power doctrinal thinking away from the air/land battle of the central region of NATO to a broader understanding of the potential of air power in post-Cold War expeditionary conflicts.

Olsen's book is both well written and very readable, in particular in his treatment of personal and organizational dynamics. The book also provides, although somewhat implicitly, a good analysis of what has now come to be regarded as the doctrine of 'effects-based operations', particularly in his treatment of the political and psychological aspects of coercive operations at the strategic level. This book, therefore, is highly recommended for those interested in gaining a deeper understanding into both the concepts and practicalities of using conventional air power to achieve strategic coercion; it would be an interesting exercise to apply Olsen's methodology to the 2003 Iraq conflict.



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