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THE MYTH OF STRATEGIC AIRPOWER.
IGNORING THE NATURE OF WAR

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In the aftermath of the carnage of World War I military theorists struggled to come to grips with the changing character and conduct of war. The full effects of industrialization had led to warfare on a scale and scope far surpassing any pre-war conceptions. The quick victory envisioned in 1914 was lost in the realities of stalemate on the Western Front, the cold waters of the North Atlantic, and for the first time in the skies over all of the belligerents. Could this new third dimension of aerial warfare fulfill the quest for the quick decisive victory that had eluded commanders in World War I? From early airpower theorists came the resounding answer – yes!

The vision of the advocates of warfare in this new dimension offered a new panacea. Free from the constraints of the mud and gore of ground combat, and more importantly, able to strike in depth directly at strategic targets, airpower promised a swift decision. Unfortunately these new prophets, while correctly recognizing the changes in the character and conduct of warfare, had ignored the enduring nature of war. For this enduring nature would expose their theories for what they were, and in the case of modern conventional strategic airpower theorists are, bankrupt theories offering seductive arguments that fail to stand up to rigorous theoretical examination. This paper will examine the theories of the earliest airpower proponent Giulio Douhet and a modern theorist John Warden to demonstrate that the common thread missing from their ideas is an understanding of the nature of war. As a result of this missing component,

they and other airpower zealots have consistently credited strategic airpower with war-winning capabilities that simply do not exist.

The first advocate of the war-winning capability of strategic airpower was the Italian theorist Giulio Douhet. Writing in the immediate aftermath of World War I, Douhet recognized the change in character of war that the industrial age brought to combat. The ability to field and maintain large modern armies in protracted industrial age combat was based to a great extent on a society's ability to fully mobilize its full range of national power. The army provided a shield behind which the industrial might of a nation fed the war effort. In industrial age warfare, the ability to create the material to make and sustain war made the workers and industrial infrastructure as important to the war effort as the armed forces themselves and erased the distinction between combatant and noncombatant.¹

Douhet saw airpower as a new way of conducting war. Fighting in a new dimension, airpower would allow combatants to leap over the time-honored strength of a combatant, its army, and take the fight directly to the enemy's territory and ability to fill the material needs of a nation at war.² Douhet recognized that moral components make up the greater part of war, so beyond attacking the material base of the enemy, he advocated directly attacking the moral component of the enemy's civilian population base. To Douhet, aerial attack would make the conduct of war so terrible that the very social structure of

¹ Giulio Douhet, The Command of the Air, (Coward-McCann, Inc , 1942, reprint, Washington, DC Office of Air Force History, 1963) 10

the enemy would break down and the people would rise up and demand an end to the war. In addition to providing a strategic decision, airpower could do this so quickly that the enemy's army and navy would not even have time to mobilize.³ To Douhet the population and its will to conduct war replaced the object of the armed forces in an engagement.

While focusing on the character and conduct of war, Douhet made a fundamental mistake by failing to examine his theory in the context of the enduring nature of war. For although he did not explicitly state it, Douhet's theory was in fact suggesting a change in the nature of war.

The 19th century German theorist Carl Von Clausewitz had been the first theorist to focus on the very nature of war. Clausewitz described war as a paradoxical trinity consisting of primordial violence, reason, and chance as embodied respectively in the people, government, and army. Although Clausewitz understood that the relationship between the elements of the trinity was variable, he was convinced that any theory of war had to address all three elements. Any theory that ignored an aspect of the trinity or sought to fix arbitrary relationships between the elements was to Clausewitz so in conflict with reality that it "was totally useless."⁴

Clausewitz described the relationship between the elements of the trinity when he described the efforts necessary to translate the moral aim of "forcing

² Ibid , 9

³ Ibid , 57-59

⁴ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press, 1976). 89

the enemy to do our will" into action. To Clausewitz, the moral aim was achieved through the broad objectives of the armed forces, the country, and the enemy's will. These broad objectives translated into the physical actions of destroying the enemy's armed forces so they could no longer carry on the fight, occupying the country so new forces could not be raised, and breaking the will of the enemy by driving the government to sue for peace or the population to submit.⁵

Douhet's theory focused only on a single embodiment of Clausewitz's trinity, the people, and the corresponding objective of breaking the will of the enemy population. To Douhet, the new dimension of aerial combat allowed the protective shield of the armed forces to be bypassed and the focus of effort on a single embodied element of Clausewitz's trinity, the people. Had the nature of war in fact changed, or was Douhet's theory flawed? The answer would be found in the ashes of Japan's cities at the end of World War II.

The closest application of Douhet's theory came in the United States' strategic bombing campaign against Japan in World War II. While competing strategic airpower theories that aimed at enemy industry had held the prominent position in Europe, the strategic air campaign in Japan was clearly focused at breaking the will of the Japanese population.⁶ Airpower zealots saw strategic

⁵ Ibid , 90.

⁶ The original concept for the strategic bombing campaign in Japan followed the prescript of the European campaign and was focused in priority on (1) aircraft plants, (2) particular industrial factories, (3) industrial areas. In execution, poor weather in Japan limited visual bombing to only 7 days per month during the best weather and forced the Army Air Corps to adopt area bombing

attack of the Japanese population as the way to avoid a costly invasion of the Japanese home islands that was conventionally accepted as necessary to ensure victory. The mushroom clouds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki obscured the effect of the aerial campaign of terror, for the evidence pointed to Clausewitz and not Douhet as the true prophet of war.

Just as the expected carnage of World War I had continued by the unexpected capacity for war of fully mobilized industrial societies, the evidence from World War II demonstrated that the enemy population was much more resilient and resistant to direct attack than previously imagined. Douhet's vision of direct attack on the civilian population was fully realized in Japan. Strategic air attack inflicted more casualties upon the Japanese civilian population than were suffered by the Japanese armed forces.⁷ Despite this human toll and the destruction of 66 urban areas, the Japanese resolve remained unbroken. For although civilian morale did drop due to the fury of the American attacks, there was no tendency to express the drop in moral in any popular movement to revolt or in any pressure on the government to surrender. In fact, the majority of the population met the Emperor's announcement of surrender with "stunned

of Japanese cities. Fred Kaplan, The Wizards of Armageddon, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983) 42-43

⁷ Japanese civilian casualties in World War II were estimated at 806,000 men, women, and children. Japanese military casualties were estimated at 780,000. United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Summary Report (Pacific War), (Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 1946), 20 [database on-line], available from <http://www.anesi.com/ussbs01.htm>, Internet, accessed on 14 October 1998.

disbelief and dismay.”⁸ Even the use of a weapon of then unimaginable destructive power failed to sway the population’s will.

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan is often cited as the straw that broke the back of the Japanese population’s will. In fact, it was the reinsertion of Clausewitz’s third element, the reason of the government that brought about Japan’s acceptance of defeat. For all its terrible destructive power, the atomic bomb had no more of an immediate psychological effect on the population than the concentrated incendiary attacks that had destroyed the greater portion of Japan’s urban areas.⁹

While the Japanese people’s will was damaged but unbroken, the will of the government was broken by the realization that they were powerless to protect the nation from this new form of war. The destruction of the forces that mattered most in a maritime war with the United States, the navy and air force, left the nation without a protective shield. The nation and its populace were completely exposed to the terrible destructive power of the new atomic weapons.¹⁰ The occupation of Japan completed the disarming of the nation and led to the lasting peace between the United States and Japan that Clausewitz theorized would occur when all aspects of the trinity were addressed. The

⁸ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959) 138-139

⁹ *Ibid*, 140

¹⁰ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, 20

character and conduct of war had entered the atomic age, but the nature of conventional war remained unchanged.¹¹

The reality of World War II failed to deter the true believers in the myth of strategic airpower. During the Cold War, theorists wrestled with keeping the destructive power of the nuclear genie in the bottle through various theories of deterrence. While total war had entered a new epoch with the advent of nuclear weapons, the character of limited conventional war also entered a new era in the 1980s with the advent of precision weaponry and the accompanying emergence of conventional strategic airpower theory

Leading the resurgence of conventional strategic airpower theory is its newest prophet Air Force Colonel John Warden. Warden theorizes that an enemy state is like a living organism with leadership directing the nation's actions in the same manner that the human brain directs the activities of the human body. Warden believes that precision delivered aerial weapons allow today's military to deliver the equivalent of a head shot to the brain of the enemy state thereby paralyzing its ability to act. Expressing his model in five-rings (figure 1), Warden sees quick victory lying in the conduct of an inside-out attack concentrating whenever possible on the inner rings, thus bringing about the collapse of the outer rings. Like Douhet, Warden explicitly states that the aerial dimension allows the enemy's armed forces to be bypassed and makes their

¹¹ An argument can be made that the destructive power of nuclear weapons has changed the nature of war. Through their sheer destructive power, strategic nuclear weapons make Clausewitz's trinity irrelevant. The sole political question becomes one of destroying or not destroying the enemy vice coercing a political concession.

destruction largely irrelevant to the greater aim of the destruction of enemy leadership. Going a step further than Douhet, he rejects the preeminence of the moral component of war and focuses completely on the physical destruction of

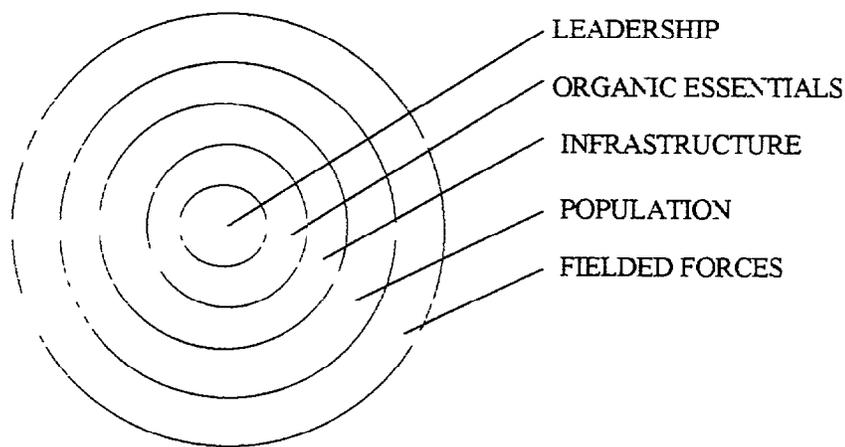


FIGURE 1 WARDEN'S FIVE STRATEGIC RINGS

the enemy's warfighting capability. To Warden, the dawn of information age warfare promises to eliminate fog, friction, and morale from the nature of war¹²

The weaknesses in Warden's theory are exposed by the arbitrary relationships that Warden establishes between the elements of Clausewitz's trinity. Warden's description of the human body and in particular the function of the armed forces is fundamentally flawed. To Warden, the armed forces are equivalent to the body's white blood cells, serving as an outer shell that protect

¹² John A. Warden, III, "The Enemy as a System," *Airpower Journal* 1 (Spring 1995) 1-3 [journal on-line], available from <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/warden.html>, Internet, accessed on 19 October 1998

the workings of the rest the body by defeating invading viruses that threaten the system. Warden's metaphor would be correct if a nation was a body that was not interacting with other bodies. The reality exposes Warden's theory for what Clausewitz described it would be – useless.

When a government makes a reasoned decision to use military action to achieve a political aim, it is making a determination of the relative ability of all of its elements of national power to achieve the political aim. In essence, the government is defining its ability to achieve its objective through the expression of military power. The reasoning on the ability of information, diplomacy, or economic power to achieve the aim has already been made and found insufficient to achieve the desired political aim. Military action is the resulting form of expression that takes place between the two nations in conflict. Since a reasoned decision has already decided that military power is the element of national power best suited for achieving the political aim, why logically can we expect to ignore the very element that the warring nation has affixed the most importance in the quest for a political aim?

A white blood cell is incapable of carrying the fight outside of the host body and likewise Warden's metaphor ignores the fact that the armed forces carry the fight for a nation engaged in conflict. Defeating the armed forces remains an essential element of war. The armed forces of a nation serve as both a shield and a sword, and both of these characteristics must be considered when waging war. Attacks on the strategic infrastructure and a nation's ability to

equip and sustain its armed forces are relevant only if the enemy is forced to expend energy and effort that requires replacement. In essence, Warden's inside-out attack focuses only on the supply side of conflict and ignores the fact that supply is irrelevant without demand.

Warden's theory was put to the test in the Gulf War and not surprisingly was found wanting. Warden's strategic onslaught against Iraq failed to bring about the paralysis predicted by his theory.¹³ Like the Japanese population of World War II, Iraqi leadership and infrastructure proved more resistant and resilient than Warden imagined. The Iraqis took the shot to the head, and although wounded, continued the fight. The Iraqis had defined their armed forces as the instrument capable of attaining and defending their objective of an annexed Kuwait. As long as this instrument was intact, no amount of indirect action was going to change their perception of the ability of their armed forces to achieve their aim.

Again, the quest for a "silver bullet" failed, and the shadow of Clausewitz's trinity loomed over the battlefield. The contribution of airpower to the coalition victory cannot be denied. But despite 40 days of aerial bombardment, the Iraqi quest for its political aim was only abandoned when its armed forces were

¹³ Warden clearly believed that the strategic air campaign he had designed for the Persian Gulf War would obviate the need for a direct ground attack to defeat the Iraqi armed forces. Warden listed the following "expected results" for the strategic air campaign: (1) national leadership destroyed, (2) Iraq's strategic offensive and defense eliminated for an extended period, (3) internal economy disrupted, (4) Iraq's ability to export oil not significantly degraded, (5) Peninsula nations would have combat capability to deal with residual Iraqi forces. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf*, (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1995) 186-191.

defeated. The Iraqis were defeated by a conventional outside-in approach, not the inside-out approach Warden envisioned.

The quest for more efficient means of conducting war and attaining a quick decisive victory is nothing new and promises to continue. Despite the evolution, and in some case revolutions, in the character and conduct of war, Clausewitz's description of the nature of war has remained timeless. Modern airpower has radically altered the conduct and character of war. Today the full depth of an enemy's capabilities can be brought under an unprecedented lethal and simultaneous attack.¹⁴ But despite the impressive contributions of modern airpower, and in some cases its dominance of the battlefield, strategic airpower remains incapable of single-handedly winning a war. The full realization of this power must, as Clausewitz theorized, be understood within the nature of war. As appealing as they may be on the surface, theories that proffer theoretical shortcuts by ignoring one of the elements of Clausewitz's trinity, and consequently the total phenomenon of war, must be exposed for what they are – useless. Theories that continue to promote the myth of strategic airpower as a war-winning instrument detract from the true contribution that airpower makes to the joint fight.

¹⁴ Current joint doctrine stresses the desirability of simultaneously engaging the enemy through the full depth of operations. The concepts of simultaneity and depth form the foundation for deep operations theory. "The intent is to bring force to bear on the opponent's entire structure in a near simultaneous manner. The goal is to overwhelm and cripple the enemy capability and will to resist." Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Pub 3-0 Doctrine for Joint Operations, (Government Printing Office Washington, DC, 1995) III-11