

The Art of Targeting

A Comparison of Two Fundamental Theoretical Conceptions

When it comes to the employment of air power to attain political objectives in war, two major schools of thought can be discerned. There are those who argue in favour of a quick decisive blow against targets of higher strategic order and those who prefer the employment of air power against the opponent's fielded forces.

These two competing conceptions have found practical expression in actual campaigns over the last couple of years. In the air campaign over Kosovo and Serbia in 1999, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Wesley Clark (US Army), supported an air campaign which was directed against Serbian ground forces operating in Kosovo. On the other hand, the Commander of Allied Air Forces in Europe, General Michael Short (USAF), regretted that air strikes had not been aimed against leadership targets in Belgrade from the outset. This dichotomy was also apparent in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The air war started with a 'Shock and Awe Campaign' against leadership facilities in Baghdad. After these initial strategic strikes, the emphasis was shifted towards the Republican Guard divisions in order to soften them up for the advancing Army and Marine units.¹

The theoretical conceptions of these opposing schools of thought are brilliantly encapsulated in the writings of Colonel John A. Warden III and of Robert A. Pape. The former is a strong supporter of strategic strikes, which are aimed at paralysing the opponent's 'system', whereas the latter sees the true value of air power in a joint campaign against an opponent's forces in the field. John Warden has specifically prepared the article 'Strategy and System Thinking in War' for the Swiss Armed Forces Air Power Review and Robert Pape has kindly allowed the re-use of his recent Foreign Affairs article 'The True Worth of Air Power'.²

Very soon after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Colonel John Warden briefed General Schwarzkopf on how to best utilise air power against Iraq, by presenting him an operational plan called 'Operation Instant Thunder'. In his autobiography, General Schwarzkopf mentions: 'Warden had come up with a strategy designed to cripple Iraq's military without laying waste to the country'.³ Although the name of the plan changed and there were several refinements to the original outline, the initial August presentation was the basis of the January air campaign. How could John Warden come up with an operational plan so quickly? In the years prior to the Gulf War, he had devoted himself to the question on how to employ air power most

effectively on an operational level. As a student at the National War College (1985–1986), John Warden wrote his book 'The Air Campaign', in which he laid the foundation for his well-known 'Five Rings' concept. A major catalyst for his air power thinking and concepts was certainly his tour in Vietnam, where he flew 266 combat missions as an OV-10 pilot and forward air controller (1969–1970). He was involved in close air support missions with the Army 1st Air Cavalry Division as well as interdiction missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As a result of his experiences, John Warden is very critical of the conduct of air operations in the Vietnam War. It was clear to him that air power had not been properly utilised. During his post-Vietnam military career, John Warden was in command of an F-15 Fighter Wing at Bitburg Air Base, Germany (1986–1988). After the Gulf War, he became special assistant to the Vice President of the United States (1991–1992) and Commandant of the Air Command and Staff College (1992–1995). Following his retirement from the USAF in 1995, he founded a consultancy company and developed a new approach to combining business and war strategy.⁴ With regards to the employment of air power, John Warden's main argument is that we should not stop expanding the frontiers and operational utility of air power. Recent experience has shown, however, that the West has been too easily dragged into confrontations on the ground, into what is often considered to be the Achilles' heel of the West.⁵

In contrast, Robert Pape is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. He has always had a deep interest in national security affairs. In the 1980s, Robert Pape was drawn to the study of air power, developing a keen interest in understanding America's failure in Vietnam. He quickly discovered that air power was a key part of the story. According to him, a reason why it was hard to understand air power's failure in the Johnson years was that there was no systematic study of all major strategic air campaigns that would serve as a baseline to understand Vietnam. Hence, he set out to conduct such a study, writing his dissertation 'Coercive Air Power' in 1988 and expanding and extending that study in his book 'Bombing to Win' in 1996. Though Robert Pape has shifted the emphasis of his research to other areas of national security, such as economic sanctions and suicide terrorism, in recent years, he still retains a strong interest in what makes air power work. The reason for this is simple: it is only by understanding what air power can and, just as important, cannot achieve that we can avoid the over-

confidence that has often led to the failure of coercive air power in the past.⁶ Robert Pape argues that many air power practitioners in the West have misunderstood the true value of precision-guided munitions (PGM) in the wake of Desert Storm. It is widely believed that PGMs enable the United States to win wars within just days, by targeting the enemy leadership. Robert Pape, however, argues that the true value of PGMs lies in the support of ground power. They have rendered joint operations between air and ground forces in conventional campaigns so much more effective that air power is now doing most of the work.

The intention of the following two papers is to illustrate this fundamental debate on the correct employment of air power and to stimulate a fruitful debate on the use of air power. The two basic texts are John Warden's 'The Air Campaign' (translated into at least seven languages) and Robert Pape's 'Bombing to Win'.⁷ 'The Air Campaign' served as the conceptual basis of the opening air operations against Iraq in 1991. 'Bombing to Win' has been widely discussed and has attracted considerable attention by both scholars and practitioners of air power alike. It unleashed a heated debate in the academic journal 'Security Studies'.⁸

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¹ Air Component Commander of Operation Iraqi Freedom, General T M 'Buzz' Moseley (USAF) at the RAF Defence Studies Conference 'Iraq 2003: Air Power Pointers for the Future', RAF Museum Hendon, 11 May 2004.

² First published March/April 2004, Vol. 83, No. 2, pp. 116–130.

³ General H. Norman Schwarzkopf & Peter Petre, *The Autobiography: It doesn't take a Hero* (New York, London: Linda Grey Bantam Books, 1992), p. 318.

⁴ The Prometheus Process, for further information see www.venturist.com.

⁵ E-Mail from John A. Warden, 27 June 2004.

⁶ E-Mail from Robert A. Pape, 29 July 2004.

⁷ John A. Warden III, *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat*, rev. ed. (San Jose/New York/Lincoln/Shanghai: toExcel, 2000), first published in 1986, and Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁸ *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Winter 1997/98, pp. 93–214.