



# Forcing peace

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## By Squadron Leader C M Scott RAF

*'Air power is an unusually seductive form of military strength because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer gratification without commitment.'*

Eliot Cohen

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s I write this piece, a substantial coalition of allied airforces has gathered once again to force the Serbian leadership to review its strategy in the Balkans. The massed air power of the United States and Europe has already demonstrated in the region, during Op Deliberate Force, that it has the ability to change behaviour on the ground. The appeal to Western Governments, keen to be seen to act but reluctant to expose its personnel unnecessarily, is self-evident. Air power offers the opportunity to act decisively without committing its soldiery to a protracted

struggle in unfamiliar terrain. Air forces, enjoying English as a common language, with techniques driven by commonality of technology, readily form effective coalitions thus legitimising military intervention as truly 'international' in nature. Attack from the air is clean, fast, sterile and precise. The intrusion of the media can be annulled by the rapidity of the operation. It is indeed a seductive formula for international policing, but does it work, and if so how?

Coalition operations are, of course, by no means free of the friction generated by contrasting culture, doctrine and equipment. These limitations are gradually being overcome with concerted effort to evolve a common doctrine. But is the very basis of this seductive notion: that we can alter history without putting a man on the ground, fundamentally flawed?

## AERIAL COERCION

Aerial Coercion can be defined as the application of air power to influence an opponent's behaviour. It is clearly differentiated from the more familiar historical concept of deterrence, in that it seeks to change an existing pattern of behaviour by that force application, rather than discourage

the initiation of a course of action by threat. As such it is dependent upon several qualifying factors, including appropriate targeting, an understanding of the psychology that one would wish to influence, an established dialogue within which the subject may learn to respond and an effective coercive strategy to provide a context for that act of violence. The success, or failure, of Aerial Coercion would seem to vary greatly according to an ill-defined set of variables, with few historical examples reading effectively across to another conflict. It is intended here to consider a series of historical air power applications in order to establish whether such coercion can be consistently successful, and whether any identifiable common causes of failure can be identified and avoided.

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Thomas Schelling<sup>1</sup>, writing in the 1960s, attempted to define violence as 'brute force' – that applied for the physical denial of resources to an opponent, and 'coercive force' – that applied in order to hurt or punish an adversary. This indicates an implicit bargain between user and victim to deter or compel a certain type of behaviour. Whilst his choice of language – 'brute' – unfortunately suggests arbitrary and uncontrolled violence, the broad concepts of 'denial' 'coercion' and 'implicit contract' allow us to more fully explore the concept of coercive violence. This in turn leads to the question of targeting this force. It is essential in directing violence to establish the 'centre of gravity' for that assault. A target society may be broken down into 3 broad groups: Leadership, Population and Armed Forces. In determining where that persuasion will be most effective it is necessary to decide which of these broad groups, when subjected to unacceptable levels of pain, will most effectively communicate with the decision-makers within that society. It is here that a profound understanding of the social and psychological values of an opponent is critical to the process of compellence: failure to clearly define an appropriate target can result in negative effects, even re-re-enforcement of the behaviour one seeks to alter.

## HISTORICAL AERIAL COERCION

The most commonly quoted 'successful air coercion' campaign is that conducted by the RAF in Mesopotamia during the 1920s. Here Air Power appeared in its purest form, independent of ground forces, effectively policing a huge expanse of Empire at a fraction of the cost of an occupying army. Whilst the campaign did illustrate several of the appealing factors in selecting Air Power for coercion: it is cost-effective, extends the reach of global powers (over both distance and time) and reduces considerably the likelihood of friendly losses; it would be less than honest to claim the campaign as exclusively conducted by air. The campaign began with a massive air offensive by ten bomber squadrons, followed by the occupation of the area by small, mobile ground units. Thereafter selective and demonstrative use of air power was employed, under strict political control, against recalcitrant villages. Indeed, as the Army refused to support the operation it proved necessary for the RAF to develop its own armoured car units to exploit the initial shock effect of air raids:

'The successful tactical co-operation between such units (motorised infantry) and aircraft that was achieved in both in Iraq and Palestine obviously held promises for the future if the concept could be developed ... As it were, it seems that this experience was confined to the Air Force. Probably because this experience was at variance with the basic Air Ministry doctrine of the primacy of independent operations, it was forgotten.'<sup>12</sup>

Whilst the benefits of occupying the ground were temporarily lost to RAF planners, the psychological effect on the target populace was not:

'The Arab and Kurd...now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage; they know that within 45 minutes a full sized village...can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape...'<sup>13</sup>

The key to the success of this application may well lie in this well-judged psychological effect. The tribesmen had no means with which to respond, no prospect of deliverance other than capitulation and even in death the opportunity for heroism was denied.

A second campaign worthy of consideration was that in the upper Nile province between 1920 and 1935. As the duration of fifteen years suggests, this was not a decisive campaign. Though it is of value in that it illustrates another factor in considering the use of Aerial Coercion: that the population of the aggressor may be influenced by the employment of force. This was tacitly acknowledged by the British Government in using extensive Air Power experimentally in this remote region, unlike Mesopotamia which was well served by press and occupied by colonists, where it had been subject to tight political supervision:

*'...bombing by aeroplane was ordered by the General Officer Commanding very largely because he wished to exercise the RAF...also he wished it as an experiment to see whether bombing by aircraft would shake the morale of the Nubas to the extent of making them surrender at once.'*

**RAF Middle East HQ dispatch to the Air Ministry , 22 May 1926.<sup>2</sup>**

It did not lead to surrender. Indeed the prolonged and ineffectual campaign, whilst effecting some short-term compliance, had the long-term effect of disrupting the rural infrastructure, destabilising the region, hardening resistance in the populace and dispersing opposition to British rule over a greater area as the Nubas moved to avoid arbitrary bombing. It is an interesting observation that:

*'The military propensity to use violence varied according to the part of the Empire in question.'*<sup>12</sup>

This reflects the awareness, even in the early days of Air Power, that one's own population are sensitive to the application of force. Whether the tolerance of this use of bombing was the result of inherent racism in the British populace, or the absence of the media in the Upper Nile, is less important than the lesson learnt, which is: coercion is a contract between two opponents which can influence both parties, therefore public opinion cannot be disregarded: in fact it must be actively shaped.

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The common trait in those examples considered so far is the absence of effective response from the ground. Air Power was being deployed by the developed world onto primitive tribes below, guaranteeing a valuable 'shock effect' from the essentially alien offensive technology. The equation ought to be considerably modified by the acquisition of defensive capability. Prior to the development of effective Air Defence it is worth considering how the coercive contract is altered by the loss of this 'shock' factor.

During a rising on Jebel Akhdar in 1958 the British government was asked to assist the beleaguered Sultan of Muscat and Oman in clearing Saudi-trained Arab nationalists from this remote mountain region. Due to the reaction time required and the urge to minimise both cost and loss of British life, HMG elected to deploy Air Power to coerce the insurgents into surrender. Aircraft immediately began targeting the host population for the insurgent force.



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'During the week ending 12 September Shackletons dropped 148 x 1000lb bombs; 40 rockets were fired by Venoms and a large amount of 20 mm ammunition was expended. During the latter part of this month HMS Bulwark arrived in the Gulf of Oman, and her full complement of Sea Venoms and Seahawks joined in the attack.... Within the confines of a relatively small target area, air attacks continuing on this scale for week after week against simple agricultural tribes was a terrifying experience... There were increasing reports that villagers were pleading with their Imam Ghalib to go down the mountain and surrender.'<sup>13</sup>



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The long awaited collapse of will never came. It was not until a ground force specifically trained and configured to operate in this environment was deployed, (consisting of trackers recruited from the Northern Frontier District of Kenya, D Sqn SAS and a contingent of Baluchi mercenaries) that resistance faltered. Within 3 months the insurgency was at an end. The problem may have been one of targeting, in that the host population could in no way influence the decision-making process of a foreign-trained force thrust upon them, or it may have been an over-exposure of this part of the world to the technology involved, but the result was undeniable: the employment of aerial coercion in isolation failed to achieve the objective.

By the mid 1960s, when the US found itself drawn into conflict following the failure of the French war in Indo-China, the belief in the ability of Air Power, in concert with diplomacy and ground forces, to affect the decision makers was well established. The effect of the bombing campaign in North Vietnam, against a highly developed Air Defence system, is worth consideration. The intent to coerce was clear, as is witnessed by this address by the US President Richard M Nixon to the American people on Mar 30 1973:

*'On December 18 1972, when our hopes for peace were so high, and when the North Vietnamese stonewalled us at the conference table, I found it necessary to order more air strikes on military targets in North Vietnam in order to break the deadlock.'*<sup>14</sup>

The US Air Force, in response to this Presidential declaration, conducted 11 days of bombing, dropping 100,000 bombs on North Vietnam. In response 1,242 SAMs were expended by the North Vietnamese Air Defence Forces, destroying 26 B-52 aircraft. General Giap, a key decision maker the US President was attempting to influence, went on record with his response:

'(The bombing) hurt the North, yes, but having faith in the ability of the people to withstand the raids, Hanoi was confident that the war could have gone on. The Politburo interpreted the end of the Christmas bombing as the culmination of a last desperate effort by the United States to end the war. Now, they argued, the Americans would be prepared to make concessions...'<sup>15</sup>

The target leadership never lost sight of the possibility of eventual victory. The effect on the North Vietnamese populace, which had already received years of progressively heavier bombardment, was not the intended one:

'...2 million men and women had been formed into what were called 'shock brigades', which went wherever they were needed to repair the effects of air raid damage, especially to roads and railways. The slogan for them, and for workers in the factories, was 'Combat and Construct'. With so many men away in the Army, 70% of the brigades were women and half of the self-defence forces in the villages and towns were women too, all trained to fight with anti-aircraft guns, rocket launchers, grenades and rifles. Production sources were dispersed over dozens of locations to minimise the effect of loss by bombing of any one of them. Families were split up for the same reason. Everyone shared the danger, everyone lived at basic subsistence level...'<sup>15</sup>



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The bombing had the effect of uniting the population in defiance of the aggressor. The gradual stepping up of the application of force early in the campaign had allowed extensive preparation, both psychological and organisational, of the targeted population. It was not the accuracy of the bombing, or the sheer quantity of munitions deployed that failed, but the psychological context of the act had been misunderstood by the planners. The North did indeed come to the negotiating table, but with a hand strengthened by the bombing campaign. The total bombing effort expended in the course of the conflict was of unthinkable proportions:

'Between 1964 and 1971, 6.2 million tons of bombs were dropped- three hundred pounds weight for every man, woman and child; 22 tons of bombs for every square mile. Add the amount dropped during Operations Linebacker I and II (in 1972) and the total becomes nearly 8 million tons, 4 times the whole tonnage dropped by all forces everywhere in World War II.... American aircraft losses were ...4,869 helicopters and 3,726 fixed wing aircraft, costing \$225.2 billion. More than 8,000 American airmen died.'<sup>5</sup>

The campaign achieved neither 'denial' of the assets required by the communists to occupy South Vietnam or 'coercion' of their intention to do so. One could also argue at this stage that Air Power could no longer be considered inherently 'cheap'. The campaign also changed the nature of American society, generating significant social pressures to end the war. A single image, that of a young girl fleeing a burning village, draped in napalm, had a greater effect on American political will to continue the war, than its practical effect on the target. From this we can derive many lessons, not least that bombing seen to be indiscriminate hardens the resolve of the target whilst undermining the moral authority of the protagonist.

The most recent, effective use of Coercive Air Power to influence the outcome of a conflict was that employed by UN/NATO after much prevarication in Bosnia-Herzegovina during Operation Deliberate Force in late 1995. On this occasion no attempt was made to generate air effort in a diplomatic vacuum. There was a robust military presence on the ground, coercive diplomacy was being conducted by the US government, (largely against the sponsor government in Belgrade), economic sanctions were in force and the Bosnian Serbs were suffering setbacks in the field against resurgent Croat and Muslim forces. In a well orchestrated and accurately targeted aerial campaign the NATO air forces then contributed to an overall coercive package. The Bosnian Serbs had little option but to accept the inevitability of peaceful behaviour or military disaster. A respectable way out was offered by the diplomatic effort, which offered a Bosnian-Serb entity in the post war settlement, along with an end to the international isolation of the 'sponsor' nation Serbia.

This was a cohesive air/ground coercive mission, achieving synergy with a political campaign, against an opponent whose value judgements could be reasonably well predicted. Targeting was seen, by the global media as well as the recipient, to be precise. The campaign was not unnecessarily protracted, capitalising on the shock effect of Air Power. The Bosnian Serbs were unable to reply with asymmetric responses, (hindering aid distribution and taking international hostages), strategies which had served them well against isolated air campaigns in the past.

## **SUMMARY**

'Coercion' is force applied to change a course of action or behaviour, unlike 'deterrence' which is intended to prevent change, thus maintaining the status quo. Air Power has unique characteristics which make it inherently suitable for such application, such as: rapid reaction over considerable distance whilst maintaining apparent immunity from the opponent, concentration of force over a target and the possibility of minimising cost in life and material. It is unlikely to prove effective, however, in isolation, and suffers from the impression (which improved targeting is alleviating) of

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being an indiscriminate act. (The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were undoubtedly effective applications of Aerial Coercion; they are unlikely, however, to be attempted again, as they impact too heavily upon the psychology of the bombers' own population.)

Aerial coercion undoubtedly can prove effective. For it to do so consistently is difficult to guarantee. However, several key criteria to enhance the likelihood of effective compellence can be identified. It is imperative to induce a number of perceptions in the mind of the subject: first that he is impotent to withstand the onslaught; then that pressure is mounting inexorably against him, as a result of the synergy of coercive diplomacy and a reduction in his war-fighting capability; that his future aims cannot be met, therefore his prolonged suffering is meaningless; and finally that a clear way out of his predicament is available through moderation of behavioural patterns. It is, therefore, essential that the dialogue with which we began our understanding of the coercive contract is understood by both parties to continue throughout the conflict. As Per Erik Solli wrote in assessing the coercive campaign by UN/NATO in Bosnia during 1995:

'Conflicts and societies are different by nature. The different contexts require comprehension of the mechanisms – that is political, societal, cultural, socio-psychological and military factors... Therefore, there are two prerequisites for future use of air power in peace operations in internal conflicts: comprehension of contextual variables and the ability to deductively generate a strategy for each conflict.'<sup>6</sup>



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*In 1911 a Serbian army marching south to engage the Turks paused at the border of Kosovo and removed their boots. The army crossed Kosovo barefoot so as not to disturb the souls of their slain ancestors. Memories are long in the Balkans*

One must know who one is bombing and why; more importantly, he who is bombed must share this understanding.

Can we effect this contract in the Balkans once more?

If we are to act in this region, it is necessary that we understand the significance of Kosovo to the Serbian Nation. Kosovo is seen in Belgrade as the cradle of Serbian culture. On June 15 1389 the Ottoman Sultan Murad destroyed the Serbian army on the 'field of blackbirds', the plain of Kosovo, driving the influence of Muslim culture north into the central Balkans. For the next four centuries Christian children, though generally only one per family, were removed from their families in the Balkans and forcibly converted to Islam before undertaking military training and service in the fabled 'Janissary' regiments. Their legal status was that of slaves, without right to ownership or marriage. This may seem somewhat remote from the present conflict in the region. It is. But it is not forgotten. In 1911 a Serbian army marching south to engage the Turks paused at the border of Kosovo and removed their boots. The army crossed Kosovo barefoot so as not to disturb the souls of their slain ancestors. Memories are long in the Balkans. The degree of violence and coercion historically endured in the region is considerable and affects current culture.

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This is not to suggest that the Serbian activity in systematically destroying Albanian Muslim life in Kosovo is in any way justifiable. It is not. It is both morally repulsive and legally unacceptable to the International community, hence the mandate to intervene. But it is important that if we are to achieve the understanding required to achieve the 'coercive dialogue', we do not resort to the facile paradigm of 'Evil Empires'. Understanding may well encourage peaceful solution; it is also the key to effective targeting. Do we clearly understand who is committing atrocities on the ground, who is ordering this activity, and what mechanism can be applied to alter their behaviour? We must or we bomb in frustration and in vain. ('Punitive' bombing, such as the recent launch of cruise missiles into Sudan and Afghanistan by the USA tends to be counter-productive serving only to harden resolve



and alienate moral support in the global community.) It seems probable, in the light of Serbian previous experience, that the threat of air attack will prove sufficient. This is not the first time this decision-making mechanism has been exercised. The diplomatic, economic and legal ramifications of failure to comply ought to be well understood in Belgrade. But our own actions must be unequivocal. The decision to attack will fail if it is compromised by vacillation. The attack must be precisely targeted upon those factors most sacred to the decision-makers. It must also be overwhelming, brutal and psychologically damaging to the agents of genocide and repression in Kosovo. Attempting to 'soften the blow' with democratic moderation and genteel compromise will prolong the struggle, endanger our own aircrew more than is necessary and allow for the continued torment of the populace we are morally bound to support.

Understanding is the key to effective use of force.

#### NOTES

- 1 Thomas C Schelling, 'Arms and Influence', YUP, 1966.
- 2 Nils E Naastad, 'Policing the Empire from the Air,' NUPI 1997.
- 3 F Kitson quoted by Weale in 'Secret Warfare', London 1997.
- 4 Radio address to the US Nation, Mar 30 1973. Quoted in USAF Policy Letter, Washington, 1973.
- 5 MacDonald, 'Giap, the Victor in Vietnam,' London 1994.
- 6 Per Erik Solli, 'In Bosnia, Deterrence Failed and Coercion Worked,' NUPI 1997.

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