The Seductive Promise of Air Power:

Strategic Coercion in Vietnam (and beyond?)

They made a Wasteland and called it Peace

(Tacitus)

Coercive air power has been one of the key concepts and war fighting strategies of the 1990's and in an age where governments, and the United States in particular, appear less and less willing to commit ground forces, it is likely to prove of ever increasing importance. But questions remain as to how effective it really is, and over the most suitable methods to adopt. In order to explore the nature and requirements for the successful application of coercive airpower this paper will focus on the two major interdiction campaigns of the Vietnam war: Rolling Thunder and Linebacker. Whilst the conflict finished over a quarter of a century ago, an understanding of its conduct can provide useful lessons and pointers for the uncertainties of today, and into the future.

Analysing the air war over Vietnam is always a complex affair for, as David MacIsaac has argued, it is possible to identify (at least) five separate, yet often concurrently running, operations with widely varying foci, methods and duration.[1] Nevertheless, a study of Vietnam is of great interest for, amongst other reasons, the air offensives mounted against the country were the heaviest in the history of warfare. Operation Rolling Thunder alone saw the delivery of more than eight times as much tonnage as was dropped by all the allied air forces in all the theatres of the Second World War. This enormous concentration of firepower resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 civilians and 8,000 aircrew.[2]

The 1972 Linebacker offensives, though considerably shorter in duration, saw an increase in the intensity of destruction. And yet the US, indisputably the most powerful nation on earth, still lost the war. Coercive air power had failed. An analysis of the two campaigns therefore also serves as a useful reminder that technological superiority is not enough to win a war. Again, in the age of stand-off attack and billion dollar weapon platforms, this is a lesson worth reiterating.

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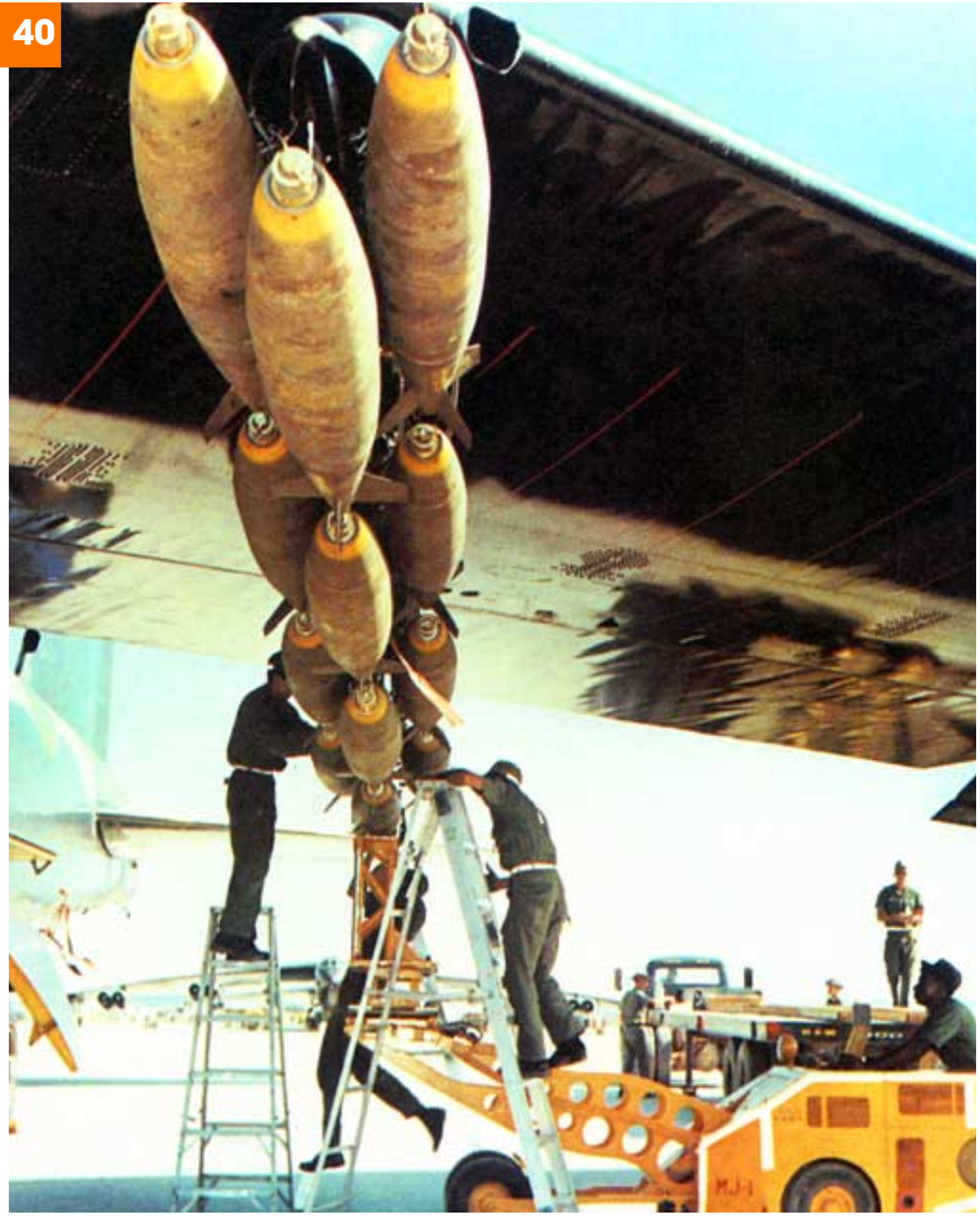

In this paper, therefore, the two campaigns will be compared and contrasted: their aims, their methods, and their results. In order to achieve this the conceptual framework underpinning the application of coercive air power will be examined, as will its practical application and limitations.

AIR OPERATIONS: AIMS

Operation Rolling Thunder commenced on March 2nd 1965 and lasted until October 31st 1968. The overall aim of the campaign was to force the Northern regime, led by Ho Chi Minh, to stop its support for the communist uprising in the South, and this was to be achieved by a two-fold strategy: the destruction of the political resolve of Hanoi in the face of ever increasing costs and American firepower; and the simultaneous interdiction of the supply routes to the South. Thus, according to Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, the goal was to pressure the North into negotiating '...explicitly or otherwise...' *and to* '...reduce the flow of men and supplies from North to South.'[3] A further, subsidiary, hope was that this display of American commitment and technological superiority would help to bolster the flagging morale of the South Vietnamese military and political elites. Thus, from the very beginning, the campaign was beset by a lack of unity or clarity over aims, a conflation of the military with the political, the grand strategic with the operational.

The resumption of air operations over the North during 1971-2 can be subdivided into two primary operations: Linebacker 1 (May 10 - October 23 1972) and Linebacker 2 (December 18 - 29 1972). Once again, the overall aim

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was to halt the North's support of the southern insurgency, but by then the circumstances of the war had changed significantly. Whereas in 1965 the US was in a confident position and facing what it considered to be a containable guerrilla threat to the Southern regime, by 1972 it was hastily withdrawing its demoralised ground forces from what had escalated into an essentially conventional war. Saigon was forced to rely, in the main, on the abilities of the US equipped Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), backed by massive American air support.

Linebacker 1 was launched as a response to the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) powerful – and potentially war-winning – Easter offensive. The US was determined that this assault should fail and that the North be forced onto the negotiating table; they wanted to be perceived as withdrawing from the war with honour.[4] Linebacker 2 was a further extension of this goal as it was ordered to force the North back into serious negotiation following months of stalling and diplomatic stubbornness.

AIR OPERATIONS: RESULTS

Rolling Thunder was a total failure, indeed it should '...go down in history as the most ambitious, wasteful and ineffective [air] campaign ever mounted.'[5] None of the original aims were met: infiltration increased throughout the long years of the campaign, whilst the political will of Hanoi remained unwavering in its commitment to support the Southern insurrection. Furthermore, US casualties, in the face of an increasingly sophisticated air defence network, were very heavy, both in terms of equipment and manpower. It can therefore be argued that the campaign proved counter-productive, that the net gain in a cost benefit analysis was less than zero: Hanoi emerged as the real victor. The US was seen to be deploying massively disproportionate force against a Third World enemy, giving the impression of a neo-imperial bully in the

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eyes of the world. Indeed Ramsay Clark has noted: 'Few people can identify with well-fed representatives of a rich society journeying ten thousand miles to pilot multi-million dollar B-52's dropping death and destruction on underfed Indochinese.'[6]

The Linebacker operations, on the other hand, were a qualified success, in that they met their more limited goals. The impressive early advances of the NVA Easter offensive were neutralised by early July, and it soon became apparent to the Northern political leadership that a military victory was not imminent, and maybe even impossible.[7] Realising that the only chance of making progress lay thousands of miles away, in the calm negotiating rooms of Paris, they switched their attention to formulating a political settlement knowing that with the US steadily withdrawing its forces, it was only a matter of time before they could resume their conquest.[8] By October 21/22 Henry Kissinger (US National Security Advisor and chief negotiator) and Le Duc Tho (the North Vietnamese negotiator) were on the verge of signing an agreement. However, the South, under President Thieu was soon stalling.[9]

Thieu, not surprisingly, was unhappy that the provisional agreement failed to force Hanoi to withdraw its forces from the South, and he demanded that 69 amendments be made to the document.[10] This, and the ensuing political cold-feet in Washington, effectively killed the agreement and set the stage for the later resumption of bombing. Negotiations dragged on but the North returned to its earlier position, whilst the Americans could see no satisfactory way of placating Thieu. The Americans therefore had to compel the North Vietnamese to change their diplomatic position, to employ coercive violence in order to secure a political objective. Their primary tool was the Christmas Linebacker II offensive. For 11 days the Americans initiated a high intensity bombardment against key Northern targets and on December 29 Hanoi signalled its willingness to compromise, and from then on they proved more willing to give the Americans diplomatic leeway.[11] The Paris Accords were signed in January 1973; the US was free of its massively damaging commitments at long last. Thus, in as far as the latter offensive forced the North to alter its behaviour in relation to its favoured course of action, Linebacker 1&2 can be judged a success.

In summary, therefore, it can be seen that the overly ambitious Rolling Thunder failed abysmally whereas the 1972 offensive(s) succeeded, at least in terms of its more modest objectives. In order to account for the massive difference in outcomes it is first necessary to (briefly) examine the conceptual framework underlying the application of strategic airpower, and then to examine the conditions that were present in the Vietnam conflict: to match theory with practice.

AIR POWER THEORY: A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

The central motive underlying the use of strategic air power is to force the enemy to change their behaviour by manipulating costs and benefits. This is achieved by targeting a country in such a manner that it is forced to act in a way that it would otherwise prefer not to; such as withdrawing forces, negotiating, or even surrender.

One of the fathers of airpower theory is Giulo Douhet, whose inter-war writings are full of confidence in the potential for military forces operating in 'the third dimension' to become the dominant factor in the conduct and outcome of future war. His is a pure strategic theory, in that it focuses on the belief that the infliction of high civilian casualties and infrastructural damage will shatter civilian morale and therefore undermine the will and the ability of a government to continue to fight.[12] Douhet was not concerned with defeating the enemy on the battlefield, in the belief that this was unnecessary, a redundant method condemned to the pages of history.

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Due to the powerful memory of stalemate and the atrocious casualties that had characterised the Western Front, this idea gained widespread attention during the inter-war period, and it was utilised by both the Germans and the Allies during the Second World War, as demonstrated by the massive area bombardment of cities spanning the continent and in Japan. However, it proved to be deeply flawed, mainly due to the fact that '...the more bombs dropped the lower the morale – but not necessarily a significant lowering of the will to resist.'[13]

The simplistic, and horrifyingly brutal, Douhetian strategy was thus shown to be inferior to the hybrid strategic-tactical integration model proposed by Mitchell, and vindicated on the battlefields of Europe. As Bernard Brodie has argued this combination of attacks on military units and their supply columns and material resources led to far greater success than flattening cities, a method which was '… never completely convincing to uncommitted observers. Against Germany the [area-bombing raids] came too late to have a clearly decisive effect; against Japan they were imposed on an enemy already prostrated by other forms of war.'[14] The direct degradation of the enemy's front-line combat capability combined with the restriction and eventual destruction of the military infrastructure – command and control facilities, fuel and ammunition supplies etc. – had a more decisive effect on the outcome of the war than the levelling of cities.

Nevertheless the Second World War demonstrated that the extravagant claims of the earlier pioneers and air-power prophets were hopelessly optimistic: war could not (yet?) be won by conventional airpower alone; ground forces would always be needed to secure territory and maintain the initiative; and civilian and political determination was not so easily undermined. Air power reached its maturity during the bitter years of the Second World War, but these hard won learned lessons were often later forgotten (or ignored), and Vietnam – in the early stages, at least – serves as a paradigmatic case of historical amnesia. As Asprey has charged: 'In the momentous months of 1964 and 1965 Johnson and his advisors displayed massive historical ignorance of airpower.'[15]

Following the Second World war, and from under the enveloping shadow of atomic weapons, new theories and strategies emerged. However, post-war strategic thinking has been dominated by a concentration of nuclear issues, particularly acute in the two decades following the war, and this led to conventional warfare being overshadowed, or at best subsumed within more general nuclear-strategic frameworks. The 1950's and 60's saw a massive growth in the number of 'defence intellectuals' who applied the latest academic models to strategy. Theorising about air warfare became '…almost an industry unto itself, one heavily populated with game theorists, structurally orientated behavioural scientists, economists, and other social scientists – many of whom seem[ed] addicted to a jargon that may be subconsciously aimed at making the unthinkable appear rational.'[16] These theorists tended to concentrate on deterrence and the possibilities of preventing, limiting, or even winning nuclear wars – again leaving thinking about conventional, let alone unconventional, warfare a distant priority.

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The most important of these theories was developed by Thomas Schelling and, like the work of the original prophets of air power, it focused on the perceived vulnerability of civilian populations. Instead of the concentrated application of force in an all out initial effort, Schelling introduced the idea of 'gradual escalation', and of anticipated violence as a coercive tool: 'To be coercive violence must be anticipated.'[17] The idea of calibration, of control and finesse in the application of force, meshed well with many in the defence establishment and with the systems-obsessed Secretary of Defence McNamara in particular. This was to have important consequences in Vietnam, where the tempo and pattern of Rolling Thunder was based on Schelling's insights.

US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara

A further model, identified by Robert Pape (but earlier highlighted by Brodie) as the 'Interdiction Model', argues for the enforcement of political will through the targeting of the enemy's *military* infrastructure.[18] This idea again emerged from the Second World War, where it was shown to be highly effective, although as noted it was employed in conjunction with other, less useful, strategies. The central idea is to make it impossible for an enemy to achieve their political goals through the application of force.[19] It is therefore not the targeting of civilians, in either the moral or economic sphere, nor is it the targeting of a nation's industrial infrastructure that achieves success; rather it is the removal of the ability to conduct operations of the type necessary to achieve victory on the battlefield – it is the neutralisation of the means of violence. This may appear to some observers as being an obvious ploy, but this does not alter the fact that it has rarely been successfully achieved, or even attempted, during a century of major wars.

This summary is by no means intended as an exhaustive survey of competing ideas about aerial coercion; rather it highlights the fact that the conceptual framework underlying the implementation of strategic bombing for the purpose of political coercion has rarely, if ever, been characterised by a coherent operational focus. Different strategies, based on different conceptions of means and ends, have rarely been concisely delineated. This intellectual failing was to have major implications in the air war against North Vietnam, where US planners failed to heed the lessons of recent history, and further confused matters by trying to implement all of the aforementioned strategies simultaneously, though in often diluted form. Again, this is a lesson that the air planners of today and tomorrow ignore at their peril.

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VIETNAM: A SUITABLE TARGET FOR COERCIVE AIR POWER?

Vietnam was not the sort of state, nor the type of war, that the theorists had in mind when they originally developed their models of coercion in the air-conditioned offices of the RAND corporation and the Pentagon. They planned for an assault on a Western style, highly industrialised state, with an easily identified and vulnerable economic infrastructure – namely the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe. Vietnam, however, had an agrarian economy where industrial output accounted for a meagre 12% of GNP.[20] Therefore heavy industry was not a critically important asset, and furthermore when it was neutralised the loss was more than made up for by supplies sent from both China and the Soviet Union. Indeed, the US appeared to '...ignore the fact that North Vietnam...was essentially a conduit through which Soviet and Chinese material passed on its way to the South.'[21]

Ho Chi Minh and his people had been at war for nearly thirty years and the gradual escalation of military force directed against their country was not going to destroy morale overnight. Furthermore, the US failed to take into account the strength and resolve of the Vietnamese people, or their ability to absorb punishment; this resolve being a combination of traditional Vietnamese nationalism and strong political indoctrination.

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The failures in intelligence and political imagination were compounded by the fact that the US was fighting a limited war and that therefore the full might of its military could not, for socio-political reasons, be brought to bear. As Richard Crockatt has observed '…defeating communism was never a live option if that meant risking all-out war with China and full American mobilisation on to a war footing.'[22] Thus even at the height of Linebacker 2, the most intense of the offensives, there was still (luckily) no systematic area bombing of the major northern cities. The US was therefore trying to implement thoroughly unsuitable (and irrelevant) strategies in a watered down form.

A further problem that faced the US military was the inappropriate nature of much of its military material. If coercive air power was to be successfully employed in such a demanding environment then the very best, most suitable, weapons platforms and systems would be required – if any existed at all. But this was not the case. As David MacIsaac has argued, the US Air Force, following the war in Korea, concentrated its funding on Strategic Air Command (SAC) and its assumed role as the force of nuclear deterrence and the 'air-atomic mission', at the expense of the rapidly deteriorating Tactical Air Command (TAC) and other conventional systems.[23] Thus not only was Vietnam an inappropriate target, but the US was not suitably equipped to fight the war. This material paucity is best demonstrated by the regular shortages of munitions, which saw aircraft embarking on dangerous sorties carrying only one or two bombs.

And yet interdiction was still regarded as the key, the only potential method for winning the war. The costs to the North of attacking its industrial infrastructure were minimal, whilst for political (and moral) reasons her cities were not targeted. This left the critical target opportunities, outlined by Pape, as central to the success of coercive airpower operations – the vulnerability of the military infrastructure. This vulnerability increased significantly as the war progressed, as the North moved from supporting an insurgency to fighting a conventional war, and it is here that the reasons why Rolling Thunder failed and why Linebackers 1&2 resulted in success, can be found. It is here also that the limits of aerial coercion can be discerned.

AIR OPERATIONS: ROLLING THUNDER (WAYS AND MEANS)

With the benefit of hindsight it can be seen that Rolling Thunder was doomed to failure before it started. It was an attempt to superimpose a conventional, though politically limited, strategy onto a highly unconventional war. Following from the primitive computer models of the defence intellectuals the campaign was '…intended to be the most carefully calibrated military operation in recent history.'[24] Throughout the three year period that the campaign ran, the conflict in the South was predominantly a guerrilla war fought by indigenous Southern units with a limited amount of Northern support. However, the US high command appeared to be under the impression that the communist forces relied almost totally on the North for support, and that if they could interdict the supplies then the insurgency would be crippled. If this level of dependency existed, and if the interdiction could be achieved in practice, then in theory Rolling Thunder should have been a success. However, both assumptions were catastrophically inaccurate.

A study conducted on behalf of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in mid-1965 estimated that the whole Viet Cong (VC) force deployed throughout the South (the equivalent of 125 battalions) in addition to the one suspected NVA Division (the 25th) in the zone of operations, required a total of 14 tonnes of supplies per day.[25] As the Soviets and Chinese were pouring an estimated 6000 tonnes per day into the North, only a fraction needed to get through.[26] The numbers did not compute but the Americans, lacking any superior strategy, safe in their incorrect assumptions about the nature of the war and confident in their military doctrine and technology, continued this impossible endeavour for three bloody years. As President Lyndon Johnson once remarked to an advisor 'the generals only know two words – bomb and spend.'[27] However, as Vincent Cable has noted 'It could have been concluded in the first month of the new air campaign that...Rolling Thunder had impaired neither the will nor the ability of the North to prepare for and engage in effective military action.'[28] It was a pointless, wasteful exercise.

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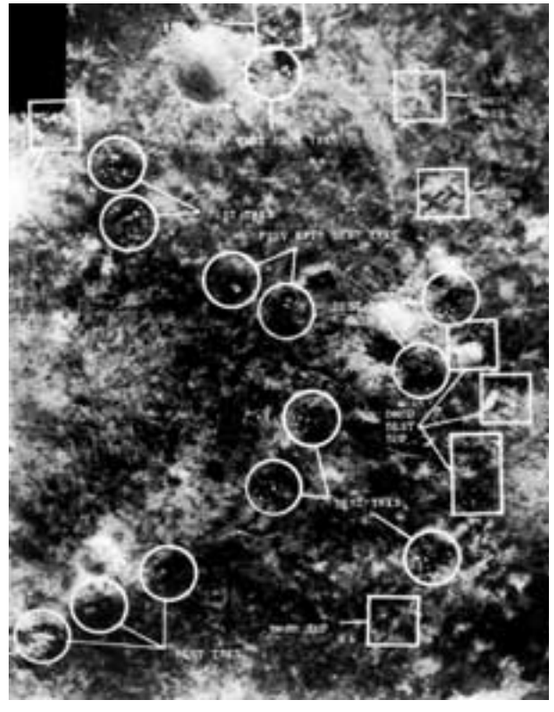

USAF destruction of HO Chi Minh Trail

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These problems were compounded by the nature of the supply route that was the main target of the interdiction. The so-called Ho Chi Minh 'trail' was in fact a complicated system of interlocking and expertly disguised tracks, some only a matter of feet wide, others the size of highways. The total length of these routes was in excess of 13,000km and, in addition, the South had over 1,000 miles of exposed coastline around which 50,000 sampans conducted their trade.[29] It was this massive, ungainly arterial system that the US invested billions of dollars trying to cut, in a futile attempt to halt the flow of a few tons of supplies per day.

Furthermore, there were serious operational difficulties, with the campaign beset by a '…debilitating disunity of effort in the direction and use of air power.'[30] Inter-service rivalry, a convoluted chain of command, politically motivated (even chosen) targeting policy and poor tactics all combined to further weaken the campaign. However, even if all had been running smoothly the eventual outcome would have been the same: abject failure.

Despite the massive scale of Rolling Thunder, and the impressive display of firepower and technology, the Americans had '…difficulty in understanding that technologically advanced weaponry and vastly superior firepower will not always be sufficient to produce victory.'[31] The US in juxtaposing the methods and ideas of a 'techno-industrial' paradigm of war at which they excel with the guerrilla insurgency that characterised the early stages of the conflict, condemned themselves to humiliation in the eyes of the world. The guerrillas could not be interdicted militarily, and the US was doomed to fail in its massive endeavour.

AIR OPERATIONS: LINEBACKER 1&2 (WAYS AND MEANS)

Linebacker succeeded where Rolling Thunder failed because by 1972 the nature of the war had changed; no longer was the North supporting a guerrilla insurgency, rather it was fighting a conventional war. For its Easter offensive the NVA committed 14 Divisions and 26 Regiments fully equipped with tanks, heavy artillery, APCs and all the associated paraphernalia of a modern mechanised army.[32] This formidable force destroyed most of the early ARVN resistance, and it appeared that it could sweep ever further South. At first the Americans responded with what Pape terms a 'Ceremonious Schelling' strategy[33] – Operation Freedom Train – whereby massive US air reinforcements were sent to the region and an easily recognisable pattern of gradual escalation, familiar from Rolling Thunder, was initiated. When it became apparent that this was having little effect the US switched to a concentrated effort to interdict the lines of communication, to exploit the increased *military* vulnerability. Linebacker 1 ensued.

A conventional army measures its supply requirements in the thousands of tonnes per day and it was this material that Linebacker targeted. As President Nixon explained 'the goal was to compel Hanoi to cease its conventional offensive through the destruction of North Vietnam's war assets and delivery system.'[34] Thus an almost exclusively military orientated targeting policy was adopted, and it proved very successful. By June the North's offensive had stalled and they were compelled to negotiate.[35]

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Linebacker 2 followed a similar pattern, with much repeat targeting and it forced the North back onto the table. In general the operation was directed at bombing those targets north of the 20th parallel that had not been bombed since October 23.[36] There is much dispute over Linebacker 2, with some commentators arguing that it was unnecessary[37] whilst others claim that it, solely, was responsible for the peace accords. Both of these cases have been overstated; the operation should be judged in the context of the overall interdiction effort in 1972. It was successful in itself, but without the background work of Linebacker 1 it would have been insufficient. However, the success of the Linebacker offensives should not be overplayed. They were far more limited in their aims, and should be understood in this context; indeed they can be seen as a mere saving exercise by the Nixon administration, as a final fling to leave the impression of withdrawing with honour.

ENDNOTE

In a retrospective analysis of the War – chillingly reminiscent of the 'stab in the back myth' propagated by German Right in the aftermath of WW1 – Richard Nixon claimed that '…in the end, Vietnam was lost on the political front in the United States, not on the battlefront in Southeast Asia.'[38] This is quite simply a mistake – the very nature of the war dictated the likely success of the American response; Vietnam was lost because the Americans were ill-prepared for the type of war in which they found themselves, and ill-equipped to fight it once engaged.

Traditional models of coercive air power have proved inadequate when it comes to forcing an enemy to change their political goals. The targeting of civilians achieves little apart from unnecessary suffering, and can be counter-productive if it leads to a shift in other states' diplomatic or material support. Furthermore, targeting the industrial-economic infrastructure is also problematic as was displayed in the Second World War (and again in Kosovo?), whilst against an agrarian economy it is of negligible impact.

As argued, the most efficient method of coercive airpower is to target the military vulnerability of the enemy, and yet in Vietnam it was only with the transformation of the ground war from a guerrilla interdiction to a conventional conflict that the US could begin to exploit this vulnerability. But by that stage it was too late to affect the overall outcome of the war, and all that could be salvaged was a perception of withdrawal on America's own terms.

It is ironic that if the North had not been so successful in the ground war, allowing it to climb the ladder of escalation (and hence commitment of resources), it would not have been as vulnerable to air power as it was in 1972. This leads to the conclusion that it is simply not enough to hold total air superiority – for airborne coercion to be successful it is also necessary to hold the initiative on the ground, for without this the enemy can calibrate their flow of personnel and material, and in doing so raise or lower their level of military vulnerability. A guerrilla war cannot be combated purely from the air, a lesson that is as relevant today as it was a quarter of a century ago.

The US tried to impose its conventional and unwieldy war fighting doctrine (ideology?) in an unconventional conflict, to make the war fit the strategy rather than the other way round, and the result was the disastrous Rolling Thunder campaign. Furthermore, a study of the campaigns, and the war in general, highlights confusion over aims as well as methods, and a failure to adequately delineate the political from the military. Viewing the recent operations over Iraq, the Former Yugoslavia and Kosovo, can it be truly be said that the politicians and air-planners of the late 1990's have learnt from the costly mistakes of a quarter of a century ago?

NOTES

1 David MacIsaac, 'Voices from the Central Blue: the Airpower Theorists' in Peter Paret (ed), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1986). MacIsaac differentiates between: the war over the South; the war over the North; the war over Cambodia: the war over Laos: and the war along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. p.645.

2 Michael Maclear, *Vietnam: the Ten Thousand Day War*, (London: Mandarin, 1981), P.232.

3 Robert McNamara quoted in Vincent Cable, 'The Air War in Vietnam 1964-69' in D. E. Showalter, *An American Dilemma*, (New York, 1993) p.124. For a revealing profile of McNamara and his attitude to strategy and the war see Paul Hendrikson, *The Living and the Dead: Robert McNamara and Five Lives of a Lost War*, (London: Papermac, 1996).

4 On the desire for peace with honour see, for example, Robert D. Schluzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy Since 1900*, 4th ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 291-296, 301-304 & 309-312.

5 CIA analyst Raphael Iungerich quoted in Robert F. Dorr, *Air War Hanoi*, (London: Blandford Press, 1988), p.115.

6 Quoted in R. Asprey, *War in the Shadows*, (London: Little, Brown & Company, 1994), p.937.

7 Asprey, *War in the Shadows*, p.1038.

8 Furthermore the US was continually watering down its negotiating position and demands in order to make it easier for the stubborn North Vietnamese to agree.

9 See Schluzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy Since 1900*, 4th ed. pp. 301-304.

10 Robert Pape, 'Coercive Air Power in the Vietnam War', *International Security*, 15:2, Fall 1990. p 139. For a comparative study of the Second

World War and Vietnam, see Robert Pape *Coercive Air Power* (University of Chicago, 1988).

11 Pape, 'Coercive Air Power' p.139.

12 Guilio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans. Dino Ferrari, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1942). The apparent success of air operations in the Second Gulf War (1990-91) led a few commentators, notably Eliot Cohen and Edward Luttawak, to claim that the original prophets of airpower, Douhet foremost amongst them, had been proven correct. For a convincing refutation of this naïve view see Claudio G. Segré 'Guilio Douhet: Strategist, Theorist, Prophet?', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.15, no.3 (Sept. 1992).

13 Asprey, *War in the Shadows*, p.93.

14 Bernard Brodie, quoted in David MacIsaac, 'The Evolution of Air Power since 1945: The American Experience', in R. A. Mason (ed.) *War in the Third Dimension: Essays in Contemporary Airpower* (London: Brassey's, 1986), p.12.

15 Asprey, *War in the Shadows*, p.935.

16 David MacIsaac, 'Voices from the Central Blue: the Airpower Theorists' p.639. For an excellent overall introduction to the myriad theories/theorists see Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, (London: MacMillan, 1981).

17 Thomas Schelling, 'The Diplomacy of Violence' in G. Chaliand, The Art of War in World History (University of California Press, 1994) p.1016.

18 Pape, 'Coercive Air Power' p.111.

19 Pape, 'Coercive Air Power' p.104.

20 Pape, 'Coercive Air Power' p.125.

21 Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (London, Pimlico, 1994) p.471.

22 Richard Crockatt, *The Fifty Years War: The US and the Soviet Union in World Politics*, 1941-1991, (London: Routledge, 1995), p.239.

23 For more detail see MacIsaac, 'Voices from the Central Blue: the Airpower Theorists' p.643.

24 John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

25 Quoted in Cable, 'The Air War in Vietnam, 1964-69' p.126.

26 Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* p.469. Karnow estimates that a total of 600 t/day were reaching the forces in the South.

27 Johnson quoted in Schluzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy Since 1900*, 4th ed. p.276.

28 Cable, 'The Air War in Vietnam, 1964-69' p.120. One of the greatest tragedies of the period was that Robert McNamara soon began to develop serious doubts about any chance of victory, and yet he remained in office whilst overseeing a hugely costly campaign. In addition, once he had returned to civilian life he still refused to voice his concerns, and the war rolled on. See Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995) for an attempt at explanation.

29 Figures from Cable, 'The Air War in Vietnam, 1964-69' p.126.

30 Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History*, 1946-1975 (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1988) p.55.

31 Macisaac, 'The Evolution of Air Power since 1945: The American Experience' p.31.

32 Pape, 'Coercive Air Power' p.132.

33 Pape, 'Coercive Air Power' p.133.

34 Pape, 'Coercive Air Power' p.134.

35 The military targets included military logistic centres, POL depots, transport arteries, bridges and rail lines. In addition the Harbour at Haiphong was mined. This concentration reduced the North's import capacity by 80%. The U.S was also deploying increasingly sophisticated weapon systems by this stage, notably Precision Guided Munitions (PGM) which allowed for much more accurate and destructive targeting. Furthermore the tactical use of B-52's (i.e at An Loc) proved devastating for the NVA.

36 Pape, 'Coercive Air Power' p.138.

37 Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), p.450.

38 Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, (London W.H. Allen, 1986), p.15.

Myths of the Gulf War

Some 'Lessons' Not to Learn

THE EUPHORIA HAS DIED down over our "triumph without victory"[1] in the Gulf War, but the harm it can do is still with us. It is time to examine what we think we saw and learned from both the television imagery and the postwar interpretations. We need to assess with a more dispassionate eye what did and did not take place. Much – indeed, perhaps most – of what the public knows to be true about the Gulf War simply is not so. This article examines a number of assertions about the war and disputes the conventional wisdom on the subject.

What follows is a list of propositions about the Gulf War that are commonly accepted as true by the American public in general and by many policy makers and members of the military as well. They are at best half-truths, if not outright myths. One can quibble with all of them, but they constitute the conventional wisdom on the Gulf War. It is important that we assess these propositions carefully. If not, we shall take the wrong "lessons learned" from the experience. Doing so will mean mismanagement of increasingly scarce defense resources and the development of an inappropriate strategy with which to confront the future. We can ill afford either.

When the US military is called upon again, as it will be, the public is the enabling agent for its employment. Our image of defense of the nation and our vision of our security will provide the context for that decision. A public beguiled by myths of the Gulf War and false expectations about our capabilities and future success is dangerous. When policy reach exceeds practical grasp, disaster often results. Hence, this article ultimately is an effort to diminish the oft-unfounded confidence in US capabilities as a result of the Gulf War.

…young American males were safer in the war zone than in peacetime conditions in the United States. That doesn't seem like what we think of when we think of war, does it?

It Was a War

Magnificent, But Was It War?

Angelo Codevilla, *Commentary*, April 1992

The Gulf War matches our conventional image of warfare, but it was an anomaly nonetheless. It looked like a war to the American public and the world at large, given the extensive television coverage provided by Cable News Network (CNN). It was a war by definition, but it was a very odd one. It also had remarkably few casualties for the ordnance expended. The 146 combat deaths suffered by the United States (346 total from all causes) out of 511,000 troops deployed from 6 August 1990 to 12 February 1991 represent a loss rate one-tenth of what the Israelis suffered in the Six-Day War of 1967. In fact, the number of deaths was so low that young American males were safer in the war zone than in peacetime conditions in the United States.[2] That doesn't seem like what we think of when we think of war, does it?

It was not a war in a classic sense. For most of the "war," only one side fought. For most of the 43 days of the air campaign and the one hundred hours of the ground campaign, with few exceptions, the Iraqi military didn't

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fight. Iraq's planes stayed on the ground or fled to Iran, and most of its naval forces eschewed combat. There were few pitched battles – the Battle of Khafji being the major exception, but even that was a limited encounter by most standards. The famous "left hook" envelopment meant that we largely avoided contact with the enemy, and vast numbers of Iraqi troops fled north to Basra or surrendered rather than fight. In many ways, we won a battle – the battle of Kuwait – and not a war. We achieved a truce, not a peace.

When you are winning a war, almost everything can be claimed to be right and wise.

Winston Churchill

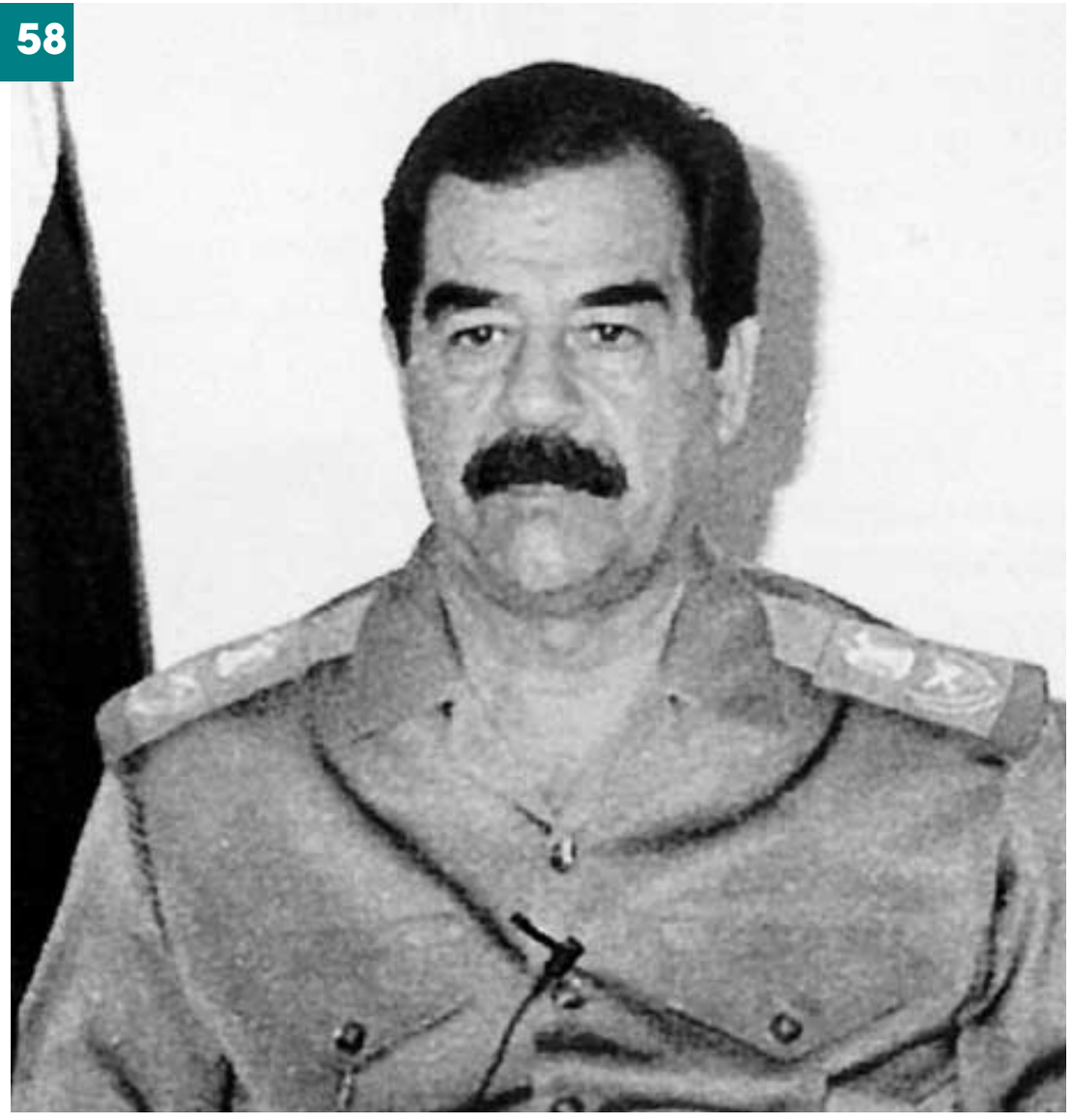
It didn't end the way most wars we have fought in this century have ended. We didn't occupy enemy territory, democratize the political system, administer the country, or invest in its infrastructure after defeating it, as we did with Germany and Japan. We didn't leave tens of thousands of ground troops in the area to insure that it doesn't happen again, as we did after World War II and Korea. Nor did we totally leave the country, as we did after Vietnam. For all the one-sidedness of the military triumph, victory has proven to be elusive, with the central issue – Iraqi claims on Kuwait – unresolved. The circumstances after the Gulf "War" in many ways are not terribly different from their antecedents. Save for the destruction of many targets, what did we accomplish? Is there a better peace after the war than existed before it?

It's Over

Battle Stations

***Newsweek* Article on US Deployments to the Gulf, 16 February 1998**

The war is not over. Its impact lingers on in many ways, and the region may be no more secure than it was eight years ago. The US Navy had six ships on station in the Persian Gulf region in July 1990. In the spring of 1998, it had 15 deployed to the area. The US Air Force had two composite wings – one at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, and one in Incirlik, Turkey – with roughly two hundred planes. It had none in the area in July 1990. As a result of the most recent incident of



Iraq did not win militarily, but it did not lose politically. It still has claims on Kuwait as its 19th province. Saddam Hussein is still in power. On his scorecard, he "won" by not losing politically

Saddam's jerking our chain, more than 44,000 service members deployed to the region in the spring of 1998. Even after reducing the force by more than half, we intend to leave approximately 19,000 troops in the area.[3] Meanwhile, US planes patrol the skies, implementing no-fly zones in Operation Provide Comfort – now Northern Watch – in northern Iraq and in Southern Watch in the south. Each of these flights merely bores holes through the sky. The pilots do not practice air-to-air combat, close air support, or bombing skills. They just put hours on engines and airframes that further deteriorate in the desert heat and sand. Both our skills and our equipment – Guard and Reserve as well as active duty – are being seriously degraded in these operations.

The Iraqis were not beaten as badly as we thought. The two hundred thousand Iraqi casualties turned out to be more on the order of a fifth of that number, perhaps as low as eight thousand killed.[4] Most members of the vaunted Republican Guard – with over half of the best armor in the Iraqi army and 70 percent of Iraq's troop strength, according to analysis by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency – escaped north to Basra and were neither killed nor captured. Ammunition stocks were not seriously depleted in most ground units because little fighting occurred. Many items, save combat aircraft, destroyed in the war have been replaced over the years. Events since the war have shown that our knowledge of both the nuclear and chemical/biological weapons capability of Iraq proved woefully inadequate. Although these weapons remain under United Nations (UN) monitoring, they are far more extensive than we originally believed and have neither been destroyed nor decommissioned in their entirety.

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power. On his scorecard, he "won" by not losing politically. He survived and has less domestic opposition now than before August 1990. We have deployed large forces to the region three times since the end of the Gulf War. As for those people who thought sanctions would work – Colin Powell chief among them – nearly eight years have passed since they were established. With sanctions and the Gulf War itself, not much has happened to change Iraqi policies or the regime of Saddam, save to make him even more paranoid. The population, not the government, has felt the impact. Meanwhile, our support in the region has waned considerably compared to 1990.

We Won

Saddam defined victory as "defending ourselves until the other side gives up."

Gen Perry Smith, USAF, Retired, *How CNN Fought the War*

We did not win politically or militarily, for we did not accomplish our objectives on either front. Saddam remains in power, and his vaunted Republican Guard was not destroyed. The casualty estimates, our success in destroying Iraq's nuclear capability, and the time it would take Iraq to reconstitute its forces were all woefully miscalculated. We forced Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait and did so with very few casualties – even fewer than in the Spanish-American War. But all was not good, for 35 of the 146 US casualties were attributed to the oxymoronic term *friendly fire*.

We did not "play" it the way Americans have come to expect wars to be fought. It neither ended nor started in the ways we have come to think about war. US forces were not engaged for five and one-half months after the aggression occurred. The rhetoric proved far more heated than the actions for most of the period of confrontation. President George Bush likened Saddam to Hitler. When the war started, *we* decided when to pull the trigger, not the enemy. When the war ended, the Iraqis didn't sue for peace; we just stopped it unilaterally and then had them agree to our terms. We didn't seek unconditional surrender, confirmed by occupying the enemy's country. We did not insist on reparations or complete prisoner-of-war exchanges. There were no war-crimes trials. There was no comprehensive settlement. Things just sort of stopped after the magic one-hundred-hour ground campaign. Gordon Brown – Gen Norman Schwarzkopf's chief foreign-policy advisor at US Central Command (CENTCOM), on loan from the State Department – told interviewers, "We never did have a plan to terminate the war."[5]

Although we scored lopsided military successes, we didn't win in many ways. We reclaimed Kuwait, but Saddam remains. We did not change the leadership or the preferences of the regime that caused the war in the first place. And the degree of

For all the destruction visited on Iraq, it is questionable if Saddam is any more deterred by our "triumph without victory"…

punishment that we thought we meted out proved in retrospect far less than we had imagined. For all the destruction visited on Iraq, it is questionable if Saddam is any more deterred by our "triumph without victory" or if the balance of forces in the area has been fundamentally transformed in our favor. We are the ones who have seen our military forces cut by roughly 40 percent. Saddam's are building up, not diminishing. UN inspections notwithstanding, we cannot be sure of his capability to have or utilize weapons of mass destruction.

We Accomplished Our Objectives

Our military objectives are met.

George Bush, 27 February 1991

They were not. Nor were our political objectives realized. This was in large measure because we terminated the war unilaterally – earlier than we should have – without realizing the more important of our political goals and military objectives. We failed to meet our own criteria and were confused as to the larger purposes of the struggle we waged in the Gulf. War termination was not well specified because we had no clear end state in mind.

President Bush stated four objectives for US involvement in the Gulf War: (1) withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait; (2) restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait; (3) protection of Saudi Arabia and other states in the Gulf from Iraq (which implicitly guaranteed the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf); and (4) protection of American citizens abroad.[6] We accomplished the first two of these political goals. The third and fourth constitute an open-ended commitment that we may have to demonstrate again. According to the operations order, the military objectives for Operation Desert Storm were to "[1] Attack Iraqi political/military leadership and command and control; [2] Gain and maintain air superiority; [3] Sever Iraqi supply lines; [4] Destroy chemical, biological and nuclear capability; [5] Destroy the Republican Guard forces; and [6] Liberate Kuwait."[7] We achieved items (2), (3), and (6). Item (1) proved a partial success at best, and we did not accomplish items (4) and (5).

Two divisions of the Republican Guard along with nearly seven hundred tanks escaped north to Basra, avoiding capture or destruction – likely outcomes, had Gen Frederick Franks and VII Corps moved faster at the outset and not turned as they did. Safwan was not even in our possession when we designated it the site for talks after a cease-fire. We returned Iraqi prisoners without liberating captive Kuwaiti citizens in return and allowed the Iraqis to use helicopters to put down nascent rebellions among Kurds in the north and Shiite rebels in the south, both of whom we had encouraged in their efforts against Saddam. It was not our finest hour.

Technology (PGMs) Won the War

In 1991, approximately 85 percent of smart bombs hit within 10 feet of their aiming points.

Richard Hallion, *Storm over Iraq* (1992)

High technology certainly did play a role in the Gulf War, but it had as much to do with communications, surveillance, navigation, and the use of space-based assets as with PGMs

In the Gulf War, we enjoyed a several-orders-of-magnitude improvement in aerial bombardment, compared to our previous experiences. The combination of stealth and precision-guided munitions (PGM) may provide a vast improvement in accuracy and capabilities. But there is more to it than that. The simplistic image of a bomb going down an air vent, as replayed on CNN many times, is not an accurate reflection of the reality of aerial bombardment in the Gulf. It belies the true accuracy and frequency of use of PGMs. The great bulk of ordnance used – roughly 95 percent – consisted of "dumb" bombs, not "smart" ones. We are still far from the much ballyhooed "one target, one bomb" claim issued immediately after the war by defense contractors and Air Force leadership. A Government Accounting Office (GAO) assessment[8] of the effectiveness of the Gulf War air campaign suggests that although the results were a great improvement over previous air campaigns, they were nowhere nearly as good as claimed.

High technology certainly did play a role in the Gulf War, but it had as much to do with communications, surveillance, navigation, and the use of space-based assets as with PGMs. The role of the Global Positioning System (GPS), secure satellite communications, night-vision devices, and massive aerial refueling and tanker operations was routinely more important than that of smart bombs, antiradiation missiles, cruise missiles, and Patriot missile defenses against Scud missiles. Things that didn't go "bang" were the more important technological accomplishments. But our lead in these areas of military technology is dissipating rapidly. One can buy GPS receivers commercially; contract with private companies to get overhead space imagery; and use notebook computers, cellular phones, and direct-broadcast satellite capability to run a war from virtually anywhere.

Effects are the important metric, and PGMs give us an order-of-magnitude improvement over bombing results in the past. This development makes modern war a very expensive proposition. The biggest problem in realizing the potential of PGMs with one-to-three-meter accuracy is that they require one-to-three-meter precision intelligence to enable them. We're not there yet.

The "Vietnam Syndrome" Is Over: US Military Might and Prestige Are Restored

> *When we win, and we will win, we will have taught a dangerous dictator and any tyrant tempted to follow in his footsteps that the US has a new credibility and what we say goes.*
>
> **George Bush, 1 February 1991**

I guess Slobodan Milosevic, Raoul Cedras, Mohammed Farah Aidid, and the leaders of North Korea weren't watching the Gulf War or listening to President Bush. The half-life of this demonstration in military capability, at least in terms of conventional deterrence or diplomatic leverage, seems to have been very short – if it ever existed at all. We seem to have no more impact on events since the Gulf War than we had before it. Under the Clinton administration, amid the shambles of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Haiti, one could argue that we have considerably less to say about conflict in the world than we had during the bad old days of the cold war. Saddam Hussein still threatens Kuwait despite what we both say and do.

If anything, the United States is even less willing, or more reluctant, to go to war now than it was before the Gulf War. The unique aspects of the Gulf War set an unrealistic standard that we will likely never realize again. These aspects included a quick, high-technology, low-casualty, coalition war, all of which are unlikely to be repeated collectively again. Hence, to the degree that they represent the public's test of military success in the American democracy, the standard may prove too difficult to replicate. If it can't be replicated, it was an anomaly that says little about current or future US military performance in war. The American public has little stomach for war and is becoming disenchanted with humanitarian missions as well.

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As mentioned above, the United States has approximately 40 percent fewer military forces to devote to fighting a war than it had in 1990. By 1997 the defense share of the gross national product was the lowest since before Pearl Harbor. We will have a 340-ship Navy, down nearly 50 percent from the goal of the Reagan years, and an Army with significantly reduced manpower. The reserve components of the US armed forces have long outnumbered their active duty counterparts. Citizen soldiers are a proud part of America's military tradition, but we cannot fight a war without mobilizing the reserves, and there are political as

More American lives were lost (18 killed and 76 wounded) in a single, violent firefight in Somalia – a peacekeeping operation – than during a single combat incident in the Gulf War

well as economic consequences to doing so for long or with frequency. Given our propensity of late to shake first a fist and then a finger, the United States is even less effective in deterring would-be aggressors than in the past. More American lives were lost (18 killed and 76 wounded) in a single, violent firefight in Somalia – a peacekeeping operation – than during a single combat incident in the Gulf War.

We Can Do It Again If Necessary

On Alert for Desert Storm II

***Newsweek*, 17 October 1994**

Social Security has defeated national security as the main issue for the US body politic

We might fight and win a Gulf War II ultimately, but we could not do so quickly and with few friendly casualties unless we used weapons of mass destruction. Conventionally, it would be very much more difficult. This is true for reasons that are political and economic as well as military. Politically, several factors have changed. Turkey now has a fragile coalition government as well as a growing Islamist movement and political party. Next time, that country may or may not grant us use of its airfields or permission to launch offensive operations – NATO member or not. Without Egyptian overflight rights and the use of Cairo West as a staging area, merely getting there may be difficult or impossible. In the future, given the strength of Islamic fundamentalism in the country, Egypt may not be able to support us as it did in the past. In addition, one senses that the aftermath of the Gulf War – not to mention Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti – may have sapped American strength and will rather than bolstered them. Social Security has defeated national security as the main issue for the US body politic.

Given our peacekeeping experience (Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti), the political instability of major allies (France and Germany), and the economic disruptions in the world economy (Japan and East Asia), the willingness to join in another international effort may be slim to nonexistent. Currency fluctuations, national-debt levels, inflation, high unemployment, sluggish world trade, and recessions in many allied nations make contributions to such an effort on the scale of the Gulf War highly improbable. Saudi Arabia now has huge debts and is borrowing to pay interest and make defense purchases. The oil glut means that most Middle East revenues have fallen and remain at very low levels. Japan can no longer contribute the financing of another Gulf War, and the turmoil in Asian stock and currency markets makes us all more fragile.

If things appear bleak on these fronts, they may well be worse militarily. Despite new materiel coming on-line, at the moment we do not have the excess stocks of munitions consumed in the Gulf War, the transport capacity, or the large numbers of personnel to do it again as quickly or easily. The services are rife with problems of recruitment, retention, and readiness. We do not have some bases in Europe from which to generate tankers or provide ramp space to support the ferrying of combat aircraft to the Gulf theater. The downsizing of the US military establishment means that the United States now has eight fewer divisions in the US Army; 20,000 fewer active duty marines; 14 fewer fighter wings in the Air Force; and 182 fewer ships on active duty in the Navy than it did when Saddam invaded Kuwait.[9]

Others Paid for the Cost of the War

Estimated cost of the Gulf War as of 20 April 1991: $100 billion.

US General Accounting Office

Others did pay for the great bulk of the cost of the war. They paid for over $49 billion of the total cost of $56 billion. But the United States still put up $7 billion for the effort and forgave Egypt $7 billion in debt to have it participate in the 35-member coalition. We paid for fewer of the direct costs of this war than of any war we have ever fought as a nation. Although that may be good on one level, cartoons of a US GI with tin cup in hand in front of coalition members were not a positive commentary on our circumstances. GAO estimates of the direct costs of the war are more than double what we collected.[10] Our total is closer to $100 billion. But direct war costs to eventual war costs for the United States yield an average ratio of one to three. That is, the total cost of the Gulf War – after we factor in medical costs, pension costs, survivor benefits, and so forth – will be more like $300 billion. This may sound far-fetched, but it is not. In 1990 when the Gulf War started, the US government sent out 51 cheques for survivor benefits to relatives of veterans of the US Civil War! Thus, the monetary costs alone are far greater than we have led the public to believe. Budget difficulties caused by redeployments to the Gulf, a lack of supplemental funding for peacekeeping operations, and the battle between readiness and modernization have conspired to make things even worse.

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But the US military is still feeling the real costs of the Gulf War. Medical and retirement costs will continue for a century. Equipment costs are also significant. Approximately one-third of the C-141 cargo-plane fleet was in depot maintenance during the year following the Gulf War. We are retiring C-141s three times faster than we are acquiring their replacement C-17s. The life of engines, airframes, onboard computers, control systems, wing spars, and so forth on nearly all the aircraft utilized during

The United States is paying, and will continue to pay, for the cost of the Gulf War in increased maintenance, shortened life of weapons systems and platforms, and replacement of equipment expended from surplus stocks during the Gulf War. The last of the F-15Es from the 4th Wing at Seymour Johnson AFB, North Carolina, which were among the first to deploy in August 1990, didn't return home until July 1994, after supporting the no-fly zones in Iraq. They have many more hours on their engines, and the airframes have been badly degraded by sand, heat, and desert sun, as well as increased rates of use. This is just one example. Because of downsizing throughout the military, the United States will attempt to field a force with fewer people; fewer reserves; less maintenance capability; fewer spare parts; more miles on aircraft, ships, and vehicles; and less margin for error and redundancy than was the case before the Gulf War.

the Gulf War and the ensuing no-fly zones has been seriously degraded. Although operational readiness rates were maintained at an average of 90 percent or better for nearly every type of aircraft used in the Gulf War, spare parts – together with the frequency and intensity of required maintenance – have a delayed cost of considerable magnitude. Mission-capable rates are down and still falling in many units, while cannibalization grows.

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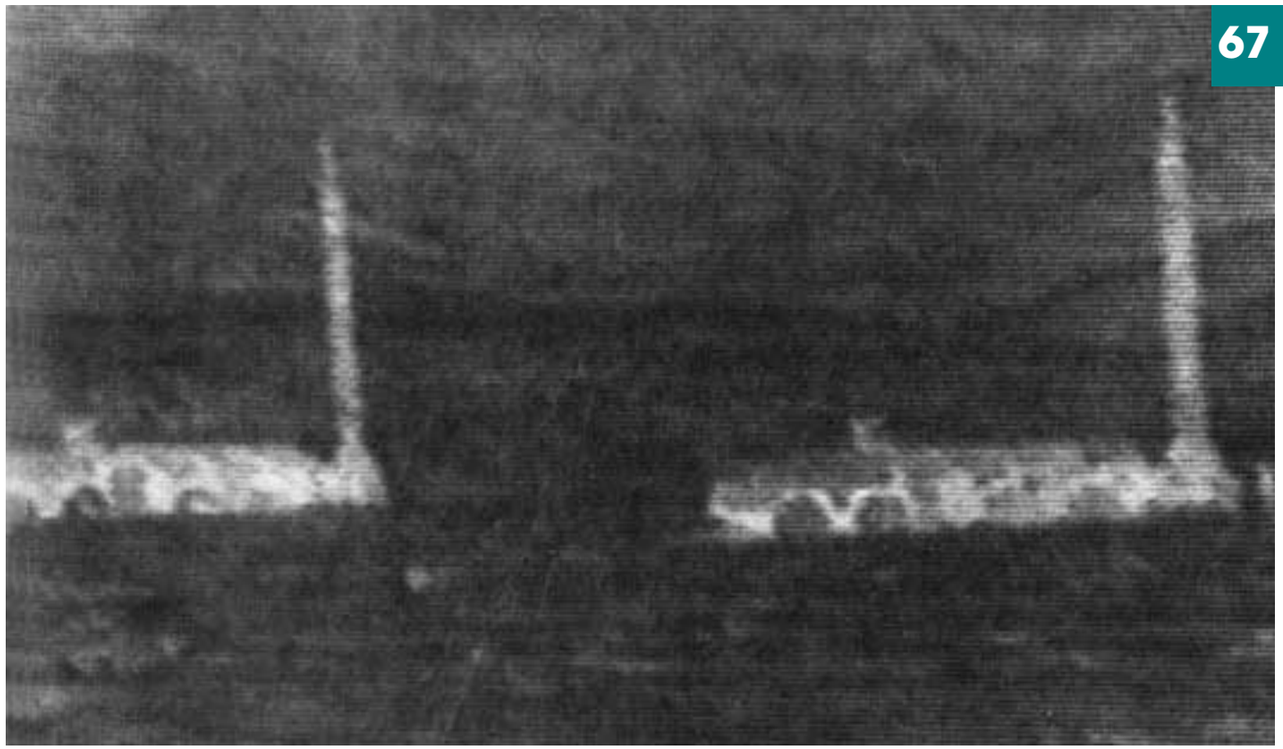
Gulf War Represents an Almost Unblemished Record of Success, Superior Military Performance, and Accomplishment

Public confidence in the military has soared to 85 percent, far surpassing every other institution in our society.

David Gergen, *US News and World Report*, 11 February 1991



Despite an overwhelmingly positive display of military prowess and accomplishment, the failures of the Gulf War are many, large, and of considerable significance. We tend not to pay heed to them or give them the dissemination and discussion they deserve. Without seeking to take away from the very considerable accomplishments of our men and women in the armed services who performed admirably in the Gulf War, we must address some glaring failures. The bulk of these involved targeting – especially the failure to identify, locate, and destroy such salient targets as the key elements of Iraqi capability. Taking them out is serious business. We must improve our capacity to locate, identify, target, and destroy key targets – military and political.

The inability to locate and destroy Scud missile launchers (there is not a single confirmed destruction of a mobile Scud launcher during the Gulf War) is the most serious failure. As it turned out, the Iraqis had nearly double the number of mobile launchers we thought they had – some 220 total. We flew twenty-five hundred sorties against them.[11] Although we took out several fixed sites, we did not do well at all against mobile ones. Despite flying an average of 11 sorties per launcher, we left Saddam with many – and over two hundred Scuds as well. This is regrettable all the more because it is not a novel problem but an old one that we ignored. Scuds were reminiscent of V-2 missiles from World War II. We had no better solution for them in 1991 than we did in 1944. All we could do was bomb the launch sites, hope we got lucky, and eventually overrun them on the ground. We didn't.

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But there were other failures that we must contemplate and correct as well. These constitute problems that we caused ourselves. Most important among these was the number of deaths caused by friendly fire. That reality remained hidden until postwar investigations uncovered the problem. During the war, we created too good an image of our military prowess on television and a tendency to claim more than was our due. Nearly every initial claim later proved overblown. This in turn led to

an exaggerated faith in technology and, by extension, in our national security achieved through technological superiority. Alas, such is not the case. Many of the systems that appeared the most effective – for example, the Patriot antimissile missile[12] – have, upon closer scrutiny, proven to be almost militarily irrelevant in the war. Some very expensive weapons systems – notably the B-1B – didn't participate. We simply do not have the resources to afford the redundancies of the past or to procure systems we don't need or cannot or will not use.

The Promise of Airpower Was Finally Fulfilled

Gulf Lesson One is the value of airpower.

George Bush, 15 June 1991

Airpower did not win the war. It made it much easier for us to achieve the appearance of victory, but since that eluded us, we cannot say that airpower won. No one in the ground forces or among our coalition partners would have wanted to fight that war without the tremendous contribution that airpower made to it. But neither could the US Air Force, the major custodian of airpower, have "won" or achieved what was accomplished without the use of Navy, Army, and Marine air and surface assets, deployed or employed in the theater. Airpower came closer to being decisive in the minds of most people, but it did not achieve victory. Ironically, even its success was not unique.

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To understand this point is critical. Democracies in general and America in particular have a fetish for firepower over manpower. We would far rather spend dollars than lives. Airpower is the quintessential way to have standoff power that risks fewer lives than sending in ground-combat forces. There is no disputing that. Airpower can punish, severely diminish, and destroy large portions of enemy forces. It can do so rapidly and globally. Was it decisive in the Gulf War? Maybe. If your definition is "critically important," the answer is yes. If it is "conclusive," the answer is no. But airpower came far closer to achieving its goals and accomplishing our military aims than ever before. We should have known that it would.

We think we learn from the past, profit from our mistakes, and learn from previous experience so we won't have to relearn painful lessons. Would that it were so. We have little sense of history. Hard lessons have a short half-life equal to about half a generation, let alone more. We often fail to learn what we should or forget what we think we have mastered. The following quotation is interesting in this regard:

What are the chief lessons with the strategic use of air power in the last war?

[1] One lesson is that the time we were given to make our preparations was an absolutely essential factor in our final success. . . . It is unthinkable that we should ever again be granted such grace.

[2] Air power in this war developed a strategy and tactic of its own, peculiar to the third dimension.

[3] The first and absolute requirement of strategic air power in this war was the control of the air in order to carry out sustained operations without prohibitive losses.

[4] We profited from the mistakes of our enemies. To rely on the probability of similar mistakes by our unknown enemies of the future would be folly. The circumstances of timing, peculiar to the last war, and which worked to our advantage, will not be repeated. This must not be forgotten.

[5] Strategic air power could not have won this war alone, without the surface forces. . . . Air power, however, was the spark to success. . . . Another war, however distant in the future, would probably be decided by some form of air power before the major surface forces were able to make contact with the enemy in major battles. That is the supreme military lesson of our period in history.[13]

That is an accurate assessment of the US performance in the Gulf War and sound advice for the future. It is a set of insights we would do well to heed. But it was not written about the Gulf War. It was written *45 years earlier* by Gen Carl A. "Tooey" Spaatz as his assessment of the fulfillment of strategic airpower in World War II! If the promise of airpower was fulfilled, it was fulfilled in that war. The Gulf War was merely another demonstration of the effectiveness of airpower and the necessity for the United States to project power at great distance for strategic effect using the third dimension. Somewhere between World War II and the Gulf War, we either failed to learn or conveniently forgot these lessons. Why did airmen not understand what we had achieved over 50 years ago? How did they let these insights disappear from their understanding of war and the application of airpower? As Yogi Berra would say, "It's déjà vu all over again."

The Gulf War was merely another demonstration of the effectiveness of airpower and the necessity for the United States to project power at great distance for strategic effect using the third dimension

EPILOGUE

This list of myths of the Gulf War is not exhaustive. The image of prowess and success at very low cost that the public has of the Gulf War is a dangerous delusion. The myths reveal a gap between perception and reality. Unchallenged, they have distorted public perception of the Gulf War, our role in it, its significance, and the degree to which it should serve as a reference for future engagements abroad. A poor model on which to base assumptions about future wars, it was unique in many ways. All wars are.

We should not repeat the mythical lessons of our experience in the Gulf as a policy guide. These unfounded "lessons" of the Gulf War are dangerous in the extreme. Misperceiving to such a degree something as momentous and fundamental as a large-scale conventional engagement of international significance is a serious matter in its own right. Basing ill-founded policies on fallacious assumptions about the past, our strengths, and our supposed accomplishments is a volatile brew. Similarly, not understanding the essence of airpower and its contributions to how wars may be fought and won risks disaster via another route. If airmen don't understand and articulate to others what airpower can do, who will? The implementation of Instant Thunder – the strategic air campaign plan for the Gulf War – was a very close-run affair, despite Spaatz's comments of 45 years earlier.

Misreading ourselves or the world flirts with failure. Doing both virtually guarantees it. We have seen American power erode steadily, the Gulf War notwithstanding. It is a matter of attitude as well as aptitude. It is not our military might that is in question. Rather, it is our political purpose and ability to lead that is suspect. We are less likely to act unilaterally. Both our national security strategy and our national military strategy presume coalition warfare. We need others to permit, pay for, and participate in our wars. We have to have the approval of others to permit us to use military force abroad through UN sanctioning of our nascent crusades. We require others to pay for the use of our force abroad. And we wish others to participate in the application of that force, or we are reluctant to act.

The newfangled term *cooperative security* may be no less bankrupt than the collective security under the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s. Someone – usually the most powerful – must take the first step to intervene, whether it be to stop aggression, punish violators of human-rights standards, stop genocidal warfare, or save large numbers of lives amid the refugee crises of people fleeing famine and disease. Not doing some of these things may indeed be regrettable. But worse yet is to think we can handle all such problems, take the initiative to do so, and then find we are unable – even if not unwilling – to do so. That is likely to be the case, given the defense budgets and policies of the moment. The fact that this reality is at odds with public myths of the Gulf War represents a grave danger we should avoid. Understanding the myths of the Gulf War is a necessary antidote to having our moral and political reach exceed our military grasp.

NOTES

1. This is the title of one of the initial accounts of the Gulf War. U. S. News and World Report, *Triumph without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Times Books, 1992).
2. The average death rate for those personnel deployed in the Gulf was 69 per one hundred thousand. For males 20 to 30 years of age living in the United States during the same period, the death rate was 104 per one hundred thousand. These comparisons are based on statistics provided by the US Department of Defense and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and are presented in "Harper's Index," *Harper's*, May 1991, 17 and 70. One may find a more detailed study in James V. Writer, Robert F. DeFraites, and John F. Brundage, "Comparative Mortality among US Military Personnel in the Persian Gulf Region and Worldwide during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 275, no. 2 (10 January 1996): 118-21.

3. Dan Priest, “Military Reduces Presence in Gulf,” Washington Post, 27 May 1998, 1A.
4. For varying analyses of Iraqi casualties and captured troops, see US Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War, Final Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, April 1992); Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Gulf War Air Power Survey: Summary Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993); RAND analyses cited in James A. Winnefeld, Preston Niblack, and Dana J. Johnson, *A League of Airmen: U.S. Air Power in the Gulf War* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1994), 159; studies by George W. S. Kuhn, Alfred Hashim, and Anthony Cordesman referenced in *Triumph without Victory*, 406-8; and John G. Heidenrich, “The Gulf War: How Many Iraqis Died?” *Foreign Policy*, March 1993, 108-25.
5. Michael R. Gordon and Gen Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals’ War*: *The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 461.
6. President George Bush, “The Deployment of US Armed Forces to Saudi Arabia,” address, 8 August 1990, reprinted in *Military Review,* September 1991, 82.
7. Less the numbers inserted for reference, they come verbatim from CENTCOM Operations Order 91-101, dated 17 January 1991. Cited in Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 20-21.
8. See United States General Accounting Office, *Operation Desert Storm: Evaluation of the Air War*, GAO-PEMJD 96-10 (Washington, D.C.: US General Accounting Office, July 1996). For a synopsis of the GAO report, see Tim Wiener, “‘Smart’ Weapons Were Overrated, Study Concludes,” *New York Times*, 9 July 1996, A-1, A-7. For earlier reports of the inaccuracy of Gulf War munitions, see Vincent Kiernan, “Gulf War ‘Hits’ Were Often Misses,” *New Scientist* 139, no. 1889 (4 September 1993): 8.
9. Data comparisons are from figures provided in the 1990 and 1996 issues of *Defense Almanac*.
10. For a detailed breakdown of the accounting, see House, *Statement of Frank C. Conahan, Assistant Comptroller General, National Security and International Affairs Division, US General Accounting Office, before the Committee on the Budget: Cost of Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm and Allied Contributions*, 15 May 1991, GAO/T-NSIAD-91-34.
11. See the discussions in Winnefeld, Niblack, and Johnson, 132-34, 166-67, and 269.
12. A rather unseemly but terribly important private, then public, debate erupted between Dr. Theodore Postol of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on the one hand and Raytheon (makers of the Patriot) and the US Army on the other, with a flurry of charges and countercharges. Raytheon was banking on some $3 billion in Patriot sales, which Postol’s analysis placed in jeopardy. The saga is recounted in Stephen Budiansky, “Playing Patriot Games,” *U.S. News and World Report* 115, no. 20 (22 November 1993): 16; Seymour Hersh, “Missile Wars,” *The New Yorker* 70, no. 30 (26 September 1994): 86-98; and Jock Friedly, “MIT Torn by Bitter Dispute over Missile,” *Science* 271, no. 5252 (23 February 1996): 1050-52.
13. Gen Carl A. “Tooey” Spaatz, “Strategic Air Power: Fulfillment of a Concept,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 1946, 394-96. (Paragraph numbers have been added for clarity.)

The quality of a person’s life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor.

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