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The Use of Air Power in Limited Wars: Interview with Professor Earl H. Tilford, Jr.

by Octavian Manea

Editor's Note: This interview continues Octavian Manea's counterinsurgency inquiries. Octavian is the Editor of FP Romania, the Romanian edition of Foreign Policy.

How would you describe the doctrinal mindset of the US Air Force on the eve of America's involvement in the Vietnam War? To what extent were the WW2 experiences (the air wars against Germany and Japan) the core, formative experiences of the US Air Force doctrinal mindset? What meant “the right use of the air power” for the US Air Force doctrinal Weltanschauung?

The doctrinal mindset of the United States Air Force in 1960 and 1961, on the eve of America's involvement in the war in Vietnam, was focused on strategic deterrence through atomic and nuclear dominance over the Soviet Union. The efficacy of strategic bombing had its roots in the post-World War I period when people like Italy's Giulio Douhet, Britain's Sir Hugh Trenchard, and the American air power advocate Billy Mitchell sought a way to avoid the carnage experienced in ground warfare, especially on the Western Front in France, by going to the enemy's heartland and destroying both the enemy's war making capacity and will to fight by strategic bombing to devastate industry and the socio-economic infrastructure of the opposing force. The origins of that strategy can be traced to General William T. Sherman's “March to the Sea” in the closing months of the American Civil War in 1864 and early 1865.

The atomic bomb made the difference. In theory, the atomic bomb wedded to the delivery system provided by the four-engine, Boeing B-29 bomber, made it possible for air power to be decisive in warfare. That established the foundation for the establishment of a separate United States Air Force, a service enjoying equal status with the US Army and US Navy.

In the immediate post war period, after the U.S. Air Force gained separate service status in September 1947, bomber pilots dominated its leadership and the Strategic Air Command, established in 1946, became the premier command within the US Air Force because its mission epitomized “the right use of air power” (capable of destroying any enemy's industrial and war-making capacity), in the Air Force's doctrinal *weltanschauung*. By 1961, the budget for the Air Force was nearly twice that of the US Army. In fact, the budget for the Strategic Air Command was larger than that allocated for the entire US Army.

Why was the Korean War perceived as the archetype of a “wrong war”/or at least as the wrong paradigm for the employment of the strategic bombing/the wrong use of the air power/ by the standards of the US Air Force doctrinal Weltanschauung?

When North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, the US military was confident they would “be home by Christmas.” Instead, for a variety of reasons, it turned into a stalemate and over 60 years later a tense armistice is all that the US has to show for nearly 40,000 combat deaths. It was not only the US Air Force that thought it was “the wrong war.” Perhaps, more to the point, a war fought in the wrong way.

By 1950, the Russians had the bomb thus destroying a monopoly US intelligence believed would remain intact for at least a few more years. Strategic bombing played only a side role in the Korean War. The Air Force did not use SAC bombers for fear of affecting the “atomic” deterrent. Instead, Air Force Reserve B-29s were used to bomb what few strategic targets there were in North Korea, including infrastructure targets like railroad yards.

Close air support flown by Air Force and Navy fighter-bombers played a key role. From June 1950 until September, as United Nations (mostly US) forces were being driven back by the North Koreans, fighter-bombers bombed the enemy’s ever-lengthening lines of communication. This weakened the North Korean Army so that When Gen. Douglas MacArthur pulled off the invasion at Inchon Harbor, the enemy collapsed rapidly. After China entered the war in November, MacArthur and other generals advocated attacking the Mainland with atomic weapons. A few Air Force generals, notably the commandant at the Air War College, advocated attacking the Soviet Union. This reflected the general assumption that Pyongyang simply danced like a puppet to strings being manipulated in Beijing and Moscow. To some extent, that was not a misconception.

After the war, when Dwight D. Eisenhower became President in 1954, air power advocates simply reflected the new Republican administration’s policies on national security. Eisenhower believed that it was imperative for the US to avoid “future Korea-like” wars. These conventional wars demanded large standing armies and large numbers of ships to support them as well as fighter-bombers for close air support and transports for troops. A large conventional military is far, far more expensive than a smaller force build around strategic deterrence. So, according the Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’ declaration, in future limited war contingencies the US reserved the right with “means and at places of our own choosing.” That meant that if war broke out in Southeast Asia or Africa, instead of fighting a limited war there with conventional forces, the United States would go to the source: hit China or Russia, nuking them “until they glowed.” And by 1955, SAC had the capability to do it.

There also was an assumption that atomic and, later, nuclear weapons could and should be used in limited warfare. The overall doctrinal paradigm held that if you could fight and win the big war, you could always fight and win smaller wars with incrementally less application of the same kinds of force.

How would you describe the main objective of the Rolling Thunder operation? To determine a change of the will and the behavior of the enemy, or to break its will by destroying its war-making capability? Why did the operation fail? Is that because the US Air Force was not focused on targeting the right centers of gravity?

Operation Rolling Thunder got underway on March 2, 1965, originally planned as a limited duration bombing of North Vietnam. At that time it had three objectives, the primary one being “strategic persuasion” or air power at a relatively low level at first but then increased and expanded over time to convince North Vietnam to stop supporting the southern insurgency and

negotiate an end to the war. Strategic persuasion was simply a form of coercive force used to affect the will of the enemy.

The secondary objective was interdiction something that involved bombing roads, bridges and railways. By July 1965, when General William C. Westmoreland asked Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara for 44 maneuver battalions deployed to South Vietnam, it was evident strategic persuasion wasn't working. At that point, Rolling Thunder became primarily an interdiction campaign. Ultimately it failed to interdict because a determined enemy found ways to defeat the efficacy of US air power.

Rolling Thunder failed for three reasons. First, it was conventional air power used against North Vietnam in an effort to defeat a war inside South Vietnam. The effort at strategic persuasion failed because North Vietnam, an agricultural age nation, did not have an industrial heartland supporting the war. Its "Ruhr" was in China, the Soviet Union, and the Warsaw Pact nations. The major operational flaw was that President Johnson did not mine the harbors at Haiphong and Dong Hoi, through which supplies poured into North Vietnam.

As Dr. Mark Clodfelter so ably pointed out in *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*, Johnson's major strategic mistake was that his objectives were negative: NOT to widen the war into a confrontation with China or the USSR and also NOT to lose the war. It was impossible to put a coherent strategy toward negative objectives.

Additionally, the US Air Force had the wrong planes, poor training for conventional warfare, and leadership that got progressively weaker the higher up the military rank structure you went. The generals had a World War II mindset. Beyond that, their primary concern was to "protect" the institutional Air Force after the war was over. It was not so much that American air power failed to target "the right centers of gravity," rather it was a combination of all the above along with convoluted and excessive rules of engagement.

Over time, ultimately, the US lost the war in Vietnam for the same reason all nations lose wars. American national will was broken. Most obviously, that happened with the Tet Offensive in 1968. The American people began to turn against the war and had it not been for the anti-war movement, reliant as it was on well-meaning but mis-guided college kids and the remnants of the Old Left joined by a counter-cultural "New Left" that mixed in drugs, music and outlandish behavior along with absolutely stupid rhetoric like Jerry Rubin of Chicago Seven fame claiming, "The real enemy is Richard Nixon not Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Mao Tse Tung.. They are our heroes!" Of course they were murderous dictators, but in the tempo of the times, the rhetoric caught on. In the end, the "anti-war" movement probably lengthened the war by two to three years.

To what extent did the Linebacker 2 (the so called Christmas Bombings from 1972) validate the Air Force's Weltanschauung of the strategic application of air power (the intense & continuous focus on vital centers as the right way to break the will of the enemy)?

Operation Linebacker II, which took place between December 18 and December 29, 1972, validated the Air Force's doctrinal *weltanschauung*. In the minds of air power true believers, North Vietnam had been "brought to their knees" because 729 B-52 sorties unloaded 15,000 tons of bombs on rail yards and storage areas around Hanoi, Haiphong, and Vinh while USAF and US Navy fighter-bombers delivered 5,000 tons of bombs on airfields and other

targets. That Linebacker II somehow “won” the war in Vietnam was a major excursion into self-delusion.

It was the mining of the harbors and the use of precision guided munitions to take out the rail and highway bridges near the Chinese border, things that took place during Linebacker I that crippled North Vietnam’s Spring Offensive. The critical element in making Linebacker II work was the destruction of the surface to air missile storage facility on December 26th. That meant US bombers could roam at will over North Vietnam.

The major strategic point, however, was that Hanoi had an excellent treaty in hand. American forces were going to leave and Hanoi’s leadership knew Nixon was mortally wounded by Watergate. The Americans were not “coming back.” So they signed. We gladly signed. Eighteen months later the North Vietnamese Army was in Saigon.

Indicative of the bankruptcy of US Air Force strategic thinking was Gen. Curtis Lemay’s contention that American air power, applied as vigorously as it was during Linebacker II, could have “won the war in any two week period you care to name.” Other leaders like William W. Momyer, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, and successor like Gen Charles Boyd on up to Lt. Gen. David Deptula echoed much the same line.

It is usually stated that during Operation Allied Force, the NATO decision to rule out from the beginning the use of ground troops was a strategic blunder. Why?

Fast forward to Operation Allied Force in the Balkans in the mid-1990s. By this time the US Army had rebuilt itself into a lean and highly effective force, albeit by 1995 it numbered less than half the manpower extant at the end of the Vietnam War. The Air Force was also smaller but precision guided munitions and stealth planes like the F-117 Nighthawk and the B-2 bomber were on line.

President Bill Clinton did not want US casualties in the Balkans. Again, air power was supposed to use precision strikes to take out a third-world army...that of the Serbs. To mollify the left wing of the Democratic Party, Clinton announced that the US would not commit ground troops. That was a major blunder on the part of the US and NATO.

Nations like Serbia depend on ground forces supported by Cold War legacy force weapons, including air platforms from the MiG 21 to the MiG 29, to stay in power. US and NATO airpower could wipe out any third world air force very rapidly...then as now. Ground forces, however, need to mass to be effective against other ground forces. Absent that threat, the Serbs could disperse and dispersion is the key to obviating the effects of precision strikes. The Serbs simply forwent tanks and military trucks to drive around the countryside in sedans and mini-vans slaughtering Albanian Kosovars with their AK-47s. And US air power couldn’t stop it. If the Serbs had to fear a ground invasion they would have had to have concentrated their armor and artillery thus creating "a target rich environment" for US air power. As it was, carloads of thugs simply drove around Kosovo murdering Albanian Kosovars.

So, the question becomes if air power didn’t stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, didn’t defeat a dispersed and largely unemployed conventional Yugoslav Army, why did Milosevic bow to NATO’s will?

Operation Allied Force showed that precision strike could have a strategic effect without the widespread casualties normally caused by strategic bombing. NATO airpower went after Milosevic’s power structure and the personal assets of his inner circle. Additionally, destroying

the bridges over the Danube threatened the economic viability of Belgrade and, to a larger extent the rest of the country, perhaps even much of eastern Europe just beginning to emerge from the effects of four decades of Marxist rule.

With precision strike, it is possible to target electrical grids to take out “vital centers.” Take away certain nodes, such as a nation’s cyber capabilities, and a modern nation state can be crippled.

After Operation Allied Force, Lieutenant General Michael C. Short, argued that if it had been left up to him he would have severed “the head of the snake on the first night” by bombing strategic targets in Belgrade. Such an approach would have stopped Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo by putting “a dagger in the heart” of the Serbian leadership. Was this doctrinal mindset of the US Air Force on the eve of Operation Allied Force shaped by the lessons learned in the first Gulf War?

After OAF, Lt. Gen. Michael C. Short argued that if it had been up to him, he would have “severed the head of the snake on the first night” by bombing strategic targets in Belgrade. Such an approach, he believed, would have stopped ethnic cleansing in Kosovo by putting “a dagger in the heart” of the Serbian leadership.”

One might think this mindset of “going to the vital center” was a result of “lessons learned” from Operation Desert Storm when much was accomplished by the precision bombing of Iraqi infrastructure targets like “my counter-part’s headquarters” in Baghdad, taking out the electrical power not by blowing away a dam but by taking out the electronic control room for the power grid, hitting secret police headquarters, and dropping the bridges over the Tigris/Euphrates rivers. This is another instance of a “Linebacker II moment” on the part of Air Force leaders and air power true believers.

In 1991, the Iraqi armed forces were second only to the Israelis in competence, armament and experience—a distant second, but better than any of the Middle Eastern armed forces. It was an Industrial Age armed force and taking out those infrastructure targets fit with USAF Colonel John Warden’s “five rings” strategic bombing model developed by Checkmate and then articulated in the theater a team headed by then Lieutenant Colonel Deptula.

After the war, a myth grew up among air power advocates that fed on the idea that the 39 days of bombing had so weakened the Iraqi forces that they merely crumbled within a “100 hours” after the ground campaign got under way. Facts show something different. For instance, hits on M 1A main battle tanks occurred in the rear, after they broke through the sand berms, meaning Iraqi soldiers were still combat ready when the ground assault began. Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous to claim the bombing did not degrade that army’s fighting capabilities and moral. Keep in mind, however, we were dealing with a “distant second” to the Israeli armed forces.

The idea of: “going to the vital center” goes back to Douhet and Mitchell and is vital to the Air Force’s Weltanschauung. The advent of precision strike added to that argument and led, eventually, to the development of the Halt Phase Strategy in the late 1990s, a strategy which proved to be little more than “old wine in new skins” and appropriate only to a vast armored forces moving across an open area with presumably little to no anti-aircraft capabilities. This is simply an updated version of Billy Mitchell sinking anchored battleships which were totally undefended...the equivalent of shooting tethered goats.

Keep in mind that Operation Iraqi Freedom was initiated by a botched attempt at severing “the head of the serpent” with an attack on a location where Saddam Hussein was thought to be located. He wasn’t. Since the US and virtually every other nation and military force involved in OIF firmly believed the Iraqis possessed chemical and biological weapons and were prepared to use them, the ground campaign had to begin quickly, before all units were in place. Thus one of the treasured tenets of air power true believers compelled an early attack for which the US was not as fully prepared as it could have been. Fortunately, we were facing a degraded version of the Iraqi force faced in 1991. It collapsed quickly. However, Allied forces did not find, fix and annihilate the two Republican Guard Divisions. No doubt many of these well-trained and dedicated soldiers went on to play a key role in the insurgency. In effect, our attempt going to the “inner ring” set in motion a strategic chain of events that led to the longest military involvement in US history. Thank you air power.

You said that the “Operation Allied Force showed that precision strike could have a strategic effect without the widespread casualties normally caused by strategic bombing. NATO airpower went after Milosevic’s power structure and the personal assets of his inner circle”. Could NATO have the same strategic impact on Milosevic’s will without an imminent threat of a ground invasion?

It is difficult to say whether or not Milosevic would have capitulated absent the threat of a ground invasion. He capitulated.

The difference was that the Serbian army did not have to prepare to meet a competent ground force. They also did not need tanks and artillery to carry out ethnic cleansing, which they did. Even taking out Serbian secret police headquarters and killing Serbian leaders probably would have had little effect on determined Serbs anxious to kill Croats and Muslims. Hatred driven by religious zeal and extending back through the centuries cannot be deterred by precision guided strikes. Anyway, PGMs are virtually useless against compact sedans filled with four thugs armed with AK-47s. This is especially so when bombing is from 15,000 feet.

Reading your critique, published in Parameters back in 1990s, I found an excellent passage that I think is the best summing up of the Clinton and Obama administrations belief in the miraculous effects of the strategic use of air power: *The Johnson Administration assumed that North Vietnam could be coerced into stopping its aggression in South Vietnam by limited bombing. Johnson, who wanted to focus his attention and that of his Administration on domestic issues, did not want to engage in a land war in Indochina. Air power advocates claimed that with relatively little expenditure of effort and comparatively little risk, they could bring Hanoi to its knees through coercive bombing.*” Just switch the word Hanoi with Belgrade and Tripoli. Is my feeling correct?

Just as nearly half a century ago the Johnson Administration turned to air power to coerce Hanoi into stopping its aggression in South Vietnam, favoring the use of air power over the more costly commitment of US forces to a conventional land war in South Vietnam, but also fearing to apply the kind of massive employment of air power that might have had a strategic effect out of fear of endangering spending on his “Great Society” and prompting a poor image abroad, the Obama administration turned hesitatingly toward air power looking for a “quick fix” in Libya with Operation Odyssey Dawn.

Both were enormous mistakes. Just as South Vietnam’s army could not handle the threat of a determined insurgency---much less a concerted onslaught by a better led and better armed

North Vietnam, the Libyan rebel army hasn't got a chance against Libyan regulars, especially supplemented by trained and well-armed mercenaries. NATO air power may be able to keep the Libyan army from concentrating, but over time the prospects for the rebels seems dubious.

Despite denials, bombing Gaddafi's compound is an attempt at regime de-capitation. It is perfectly moral and legal to attempt to kill Muhamar Gaddafi. He is a military leader and a terrorist in the same league as Osama bin Laden.

Nevertheless, the Obama Administration failed to ask the important question of to what extent is the situation in Libya in America's vital national interest? Military force should be a last resort. Once unleashed, violence becomes unpredictable and what may be conceived as a short war can, indeed, become a long one.

After so many campaigns, which are the lessons of the use of air power in limited wars? Should we be more conscious about the inherent limitations of what air power can and can't do?

After so many campaigns in which air power has not delivered on its promises, what are the lessons we can take away? Well, the news is not all bad. There have been cases where air power was used very effectively in limited warfare. The war in northern Laos during the larger Vietnam conflict is a case in point.

While US Air force planes were used in that war, the war in northern Laos, as opposed to the mindlessly routinized bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (Operation Commando Hunt) run by USAF leaders in Saigon, was run by the Central Intelligence Agency through the office of the Ambassador in Vientiane. Support came from Headquarters 7/13th Air Force at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base Thailand. The key combat components were the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Fighter Wing consisting of two squadrons of F-4s, one squadron of RF-4s and associated support aircraft. Much of the effective bombing was carried out by the 56th Special Operations Wing located at Udorn and the unmarked T-28 piston engine fighter-bombers flown by American, Thai, and Hmoung pilots.

The Royal Laotian Army (RLA) being about as militarily effective as a battalion of blind conscientious objectors from the First World War, was basically useless. The war in northern Laos was conducted effectively by Hmoung or (Meo) tribesmen, roughly equivalent in attitude and fighting qualities to the Serbs who fought as Partisans during World War II. They were fierce and brave mountain men. The logistical support provided by Air America was also vital to their success. The Raven Forward Air Controller program, using US pilots in civilian clothes who lived at the Lima Site landing strips in Laos, provided a key component.

Air power in northern Laos was used with precision. Elsewhere in Vietnam, it was used like a bludgeon and, in the end, did far more strategic harm than good.

To understand the misuse of air power by the US Air Force, one has to understand Air Force culture. At the time of the Vietnam War, the Air Force was barely a quarter of a century into its existence. It needed to prove that it could deliver military victory quickly, decisively, and at far less cost than traditional forms of the kind of warfare extant at the time, Industrial Age warfare dependent on large numbers of troops and, in accordance with "the American Way of War," employed with overwhelming firepower support. That also means high casualties. However, until the advent of precision guided munitions, absent the use of nuclear weapons or massive bombing campaigns, the Air Force found itself using large numbers of planes dropping

high tonnages of bombs and most often missing their targets altogether or, when they did hit their targets, the targets were often irrelevant to the war going on in South Vietnam.

By the time the USAF got to the Twenty-first century, let us say on September 10, 2001, air power true believers were touting “We are now the supported rather than supporting service.” This means ground and sea forces were there to support the USAF in precision strikes as the decisive instrument in future wars. Actually, much the same thing was said in the late 1940s after World War II when the US had an atomic monopoly. In both cases the advocates were wrong.

Ten years into the “War on Terror,” air power has become nothing so much as the “supporting” service. This has been a ground war and, at its best, a special operations war. With the cost of a first-line fighter plane, the F-22 for instance, becoming so prohibitive as to argue against using it in the kind of combat in which we are engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq, and with Cold War legacy systems like the F-15 and F-16 rapidly aging, the Air Force has turned to drones with mixed, often counter-productive results.

Given the coming economic “train wreck” in the federal budget, a radical reorganization of the US Department of Defense is needed. Among the first steps should be the re-integration of the US Air Force back into the Army. Strategic strike is no longer the purview of manned-bombers or even missiles. The largest, most accurate and most costly “precision strike” in the history of airborne warfare was carried out by 19 poorly trained fanatics who commandeered four airliners and turned them into the most deadly PGMs in history. A nuclear bomb can be delivered by a mini-van, a sampan, or, for that matter an ox-drawn cart. You don’t need a B-2 to hit a target that can cause a shift in the strategic paradigm. Hezbollah showed us that when they struck the US Marine Barracks in Beirut and caused the Reagan Administration to change US policy in Lebanon. The US Air Force, as we know it, is rapidly approaching the fate of the Roman Legion.

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