



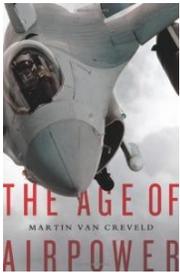
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## The Age of Airpower: An Interview with Martin van Creveld

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*The Age of Airpower* by Martin van Creveld.

**To what extent were the strategic bombing campaigns during WW2 against Germany and Japan (focused on targeting the vital factors - transportation infrastructure, the critical industries - that make a war economy to tick) decisive in changing the strategic calculus and in forcing the surrender of their leaderships?**

Over the last few decades an entire library has been written about this issue. Some, mostly using the U.S Strategic Bombing Survey, consider that the campaign in question was decisive in breaking the German and Japanese economies; others deny this. They argue either that the really important role was played by tactical airpower—in Europe—or that the strategic bombing campaign was wasteful and that the resources it consumed had better been spent in building up the army, or the navy, or whatever.

The trouble with this debate is that, so far, nobody has succeeded in constructing—or, to the best of my knowledge, has even attempted to construct—a model that would combine *all* the relevant factors and, what is more, tie them to each other in a realistic way. Certainly such a model would have to comprise hundreds, probably thousands, of different factors. Among them are many "squishy" but very important ones, such as leadership, morale (both military and civilian, on both sides of the front) and others that are not easily assessed, let alone quantified and related to the rest. As a result, the question has not received a definitive answer and is mostly unlikely to get one in the future.

This being the case, the really important question is not what happened in the past—after all, history is only history. It is the way in which the debate concerning the various ways of using airpower was carried over into the Cold War years. For decades on end, it helped shape strategy, doctrine, organization, technology, and everything else.

**It is stated that Operations Rolling Thunder in Vietnam was the wrong way of using airpower in order to break the will of an opponent. Why? And which is the right way?**

As Jesus once said, by their fruit will thou know them. Given the vast cost of Rolling Thunder, and the meager results it yielded, there can be no question that it was a foolish waste of resources. It was only made possible by the fact that it was carried out by the richest nation in history at the very peak of its economic power and psychological *hubris*.

The real question is, had the "gradual approach" been replaced by a short, sharp, all-out attack, would it have worked any better? To my mind the answer is almost certainly negative. Look at "Shock and Awe" as carried out both in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Both of these offensives employed weapons infinitely more sophisticated, and in many ways much more powerful, than the ones the Americans used in Vietnam almost forty years earlier (though some aircraft, notably the venerable B-52s, may well have taken part in both campaigns). Both depended their success, if indeed one can talk of success, on the presence of troops of the ground. Vietnam, though, was primarily a guerrilla war. Expanding ground operations into North Vietnam, as some in Washington DC demanded, would merely have made things even more difficult for the Americans.

**The outcome of the NATO air war against Milosevic was seen by many observers as an "ugly victory". How would you rate the record of the effectiveness of the NATO air campaign in targeting the on the ground ethnic cleansing capabilities of the Serbs? After all, this was one of the initial stated purposes of the NATO mission.**

I am not sure what an "ugly victory" means. After all, what we are talking about is war; the most terrible activity known to men, in which people are deliberately perforated by bullets, crushed by overpressure generated by shells and bombs, shredded by flying metal fragments, buried alive under debris, burnt to cinders, asphyxiated (when chemical weapons are employed) and killed and wounded in a whole variety of other interesting ways.

I would argue that the performance of NATO in this case was very bad indeed. In part, this was due to political differences among its members. In part, though it was due to appalling inefficiency, as is evident from the fact that most aircraft only flew 0.75 sorties per day on the average. As a result, it took no fewer than seventy-eight days to bring Serbia, a small nation which, after the first few days of the campaign was practically defenseless, to its knees. We know that, when the shooting stopped and the smoke cleared, the Serb Army emerged practically intact from the woods in which it had hidden. To that extent, the campaign was a failure.

**After Operation Allied Force, Lieutenant General Michael C. Short, commander of NATO air forces flying in the campaign, 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. Why did Milosevic decide to settle the Kosovo issue? Why did Milosevic accept NATO's will when he did?**

I wonder what, talking about strategic targets, the honorable general may have meant? After all, many "strategic" targets in Belgrade *were* bombed; this included, besides command centers, anti-aircraft defenses, barracks, the bridges over the Save and the Danube, power plants, and much

more. So when the general speaks of strategic targets, did he mean the zoo which the Luftwaffe bombed in April 1941?

As to the question why Milosevic ultimately threw in the towel, the truth is that we do not really know. Some believe that it was the Russians, by refusing to intervene, who forced his hand; others that he could no longer take the destruction his country was suffering for no good purpose at all.

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

It is now (2011) almost exactly a hundred years since the Italians in Libya first used airpower, initially consisting of nine aircraft and three airships, in war. During this period, airpower has changed out of all recognition.

Yet one thing did *not* change. In Libya, after the first few months, the Italians learnt that airpower was much more useful in conventional war—where it proved its worth in reconnaissance and artillery-spotting—than in anti guerrilla operations. At first, it is true, the remaining Turks and their Arab supporters were frightened by Italian airpower and did not know how to cope with it; soon, however, they adjusted, learning to camouflage their movements and to shoot back. In fact, so useless, even counterproductive, did Italian air strikes prove that it was decided to drop leaflets instead of bombs.

With some interruptions, the operations in Libya, which originally were supposed to be over in a matter of months if not weeks, lasted for twenty years. It was only in 1932 that the country was finally pacified, and then mainly at the hands of about a quarter of a million ground troops who herded much of the population into concentration camps.

Since then this story has been repeated many times. There can be no doubt that, since the early years of World War II, carrying out large-scale military operations on land—and, even more so, at sea—without enjoying command of the air has become extremely difficult, perhaps impossible. On the other hands, terrorists, guerrillas, insurgents, freedom fighters etc. very often *can* fight and prevail even in the teeth of what the most modern, most powerful, air forces can do. A century ago as today, those who deny this and insist on building more powerful combat aircraft are merely putting their heads into the sand.

**Having in mind the past record of the age of airpower, what do you think about the current status of the NATO air campaign in Libya? Is it a stalemate? Should NATO try to target more the strategic (economic) assets of the Gaddafi's inner circle in order to trigger pressure from inside?**

It is almost impossible to know what NATO is targeting, given how little hard news is coming out of that country. I strongly suspect they do not know themselves. However, as far as I can make out, after three months of bombing by the most sophisticated air forces in history operating with almost no opposition, the end does not appear to be in sight. If that does not convince

people that the whole question of using airpower in war is over-due for a thorough re-examination, review, then nothing will.

*Martin van Creveld is an internationally recognized authority on military history and strategy. The author of 22 books that were translated into 20 languages, he has lectured or taught at many strategic institutes in the Western world, including the U.S. Naval War College. Born in the Netherlands, he holds degrees from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and London School of Economics. He lives near Jerusalem.*

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