Kosovo: "The Limits of Air Power II"

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War Can Be Won With Airpower Alone!

On March 24, 1999 NATO began air strikes on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This military campaign known as Operation Allied Force was NATO's second combat operation in the Balkans in just four years.[1] NATO's plan was to use air strikes to force President Milosevic to stop the ethnic cleansing he ordered in Kosovo. NATO leaders agreed to a 2-day air strike, convinced that Milosevic would comply just as he had in Bosnia four years earlier. When Milosevic refused, the air campaign was gradually escalated into an around-the clock operation. Seventy-eight days later, on June 3, 1999 Milosevic finally surrendered to NATO demands.[2]

At the end of the war, air power advocates came out in force, claiming that Operation Allied Force fulfilled the prophecies of Giulio Douhet. However, these claims were not new; they had been repeated before by these same advocates after the Gulf War in 1991 and again after the Bosnia air campaign in 1995. What was different in 1999, were the one's doing the advocating…they were not wearing Air Force uniforms. For example, President Clinton said Allied Force proved "that a sustained air campaign, under the right conditions, can stop an army on the ground."[3] Even stronger, was historian and noted author John Keegan's editorial in the London Daily Telegraph:

> There are certain dates in the history of warfare that mark real turning points. November 20, 1917 is one, when at Cambrai the tank showed that the traditional dominance of infantry, cavalry and artillery on the battlefield had been overthrown. November 11, 1940 is another when the sinking of the Italian fleet at Taranto demonstrated that the aircraft carrier and its aircraft had abolished the age-old supremacy of the battleship. Now there is a new date to fix on the calendar: June 3, 1999, when the capitulation of President Milosevic proved that a war can be won by airpower alone….
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> All this can be said without reservation, and should be conceded by the doubters, of whom I was one, with generosity. Already some of the critics of the war are indulging in ungracious revisionism, suggesting that we have not witnessed a strategic revolution and that Milosevic was humbled by the threat to deploy ground troops or by the processes of traditional diplomacy, in this case exercised—we should be grateful for their skills—by the Russians and the Finns. All to be said to that is that diplomacy had not worked before March 24, when the bombing started, while the deployment of a large ground force, though clearly a growing threat, would still have taken weeks to accomplish at the moment Milosevic caved in. The revisionists are wrong. This was a victory through air power. [4]

Dissenters were quick to point out the failures of air power in the past and argued strongly against its efficacy in Kosovo. More importantly, they pointed out that air power failed to

prevent the very ethnic cleansing that prompted NATO to act in the first place.[5] For some this was not an air power debate but a political debate with huge ramifications on the future force structure of America's military and on U.S. defense spending itself—a debate the other services could not afford to lose.[6] Consequently, it is important to address the original claim, is Douhet right . . . can war be won with airpower alone?

A Prophet?

General Douhet was an Italian army officer who served when air power was in its infancy. He was air power's first advocate who could write convincingly about its role in modern warfare. He was also a forceful advocate for an independent air force. In his book, The Command of the Air, Douhet outlined his formula for victory: (1) gain air superiority; (2) bomb the enemy's strategic "centers-of-gravity;" (3) maintain a defensive posture with your ground forces.[7] It is interesting to note that 90 years later this formula looks amazingly like the strategy behind the air campaign used against Iraq in the Gulf War.[8]

The horrific loss of life in World War I caused by the introduction of new technologies like machine guns, tanks and poison gas had a profound impact on Douhet. Casualties were measured in the millions as nations fought for their very survival—this was total war—he believed future wars would be the same.[9] In the airplane, Douhet saw a solution to the trench warfare stalemate that characterized the first world war. The airplane could fly over the enemy's army and attack directly at his heartland, delivering a victory with much less loss of life. Douhet also realized that the key to this new strategy was targeting.[10] Again; it is interesting to see the past reborn in the present. One could argue that Douhet was the author of the currently much applauded "effects-based targeting" concept. For Douhet, the ideal strategic bombardment mission would use a combination of high explosives, incendiaries and gas to destroy an industrialized urban area. This combination would destroy the enemy's ability to wage war while at the same time, attack the morale of the people to continue support for the war.[11]

Although Douhet's "one-two punch" of air superiority first and strategic bombardment second were amazingly prophetic; history has proved him wrong in a number of areas. For example, all wars since World War I have not been total wars and poison gas has not been a politically acceptable weapon. The details of what he got right and what he got wrong are not important here since our focus is on Douhet's basic and most contentious belief—that air power alone can win wars. The general concluded his first edition of The Command of the Air by stating:

> If I may be so bold, I have mathematical certainty that the future will confirm my assertion that aerial warfare will be the most important element in future wars, and that in consequence not only will the importance of the Independent Air Force rapidly increase, but the importance of the army and the navy will decrease in proportion.[12]

Six years later, Douhet's final thoughts in his second edition were much bolder:

> Faced by these formidable machines, powerfully armed, strongly armored, with a radius of action wide enough to cross the ocean, and each capable of destroying

> the nerve center of a city, is it still possible to cling to the concepts of the use of the airplane which prevailed during the World War? One hundred planes of 6,000 horsepower may cost as much as a dreadnought; but the nation which, once it has conquered the air, can maintain in operation, not 100, but 50 or even 20 such planes, will have won decisively, because it will be in a position to break up the whole social structure of the enemy in less than a week, no matter what his army and navy may do. In face of this state of affairs, is it possible to deny that a revolution has taken place: Is it possible to refuse to admit the truth of the affirmation which forms the basis of this book—namely, that the command of the air is a necessary and sufficient condition of victory.[13]

According to historian Phillip Meilinger in, The Paths of Heaven, some air power advocates maintain that technology vindicated Douhet as early as World War II. They argue that an invasion of Japan was unnecessary because of the B-29 and the atomic bomb. However, Meilinger correctly points out that "If the only circumstance that makes Douhet relevant is nuclear holocaust, then he is totally irrelevant."[14] After the Gulf War, air power advocates argued again that Douhet had been vindicated by technology; this time it was precision weapons and stealth that proved the relevance of his airpower only approach. But the Gulf War could not vindicate Douhet in the eyes of his critics because it was fought with air, ground and sea assets. But Kosovo was a different story….

The Limits of Air Power

Mark Clodfelter's insightful book, The Limits of Air Power, describes an innovative way to appraise an air campaign. He looks back to the great military strategist Clausewitz to evaluate modern air power. According to Clodfelter, you cannot appraise air power by its battlefield effects or even its impact on the enemy's field forces. Instead, he argues "the supreme test of bombing's efficacy is its contribution to a nation's war aims."[15] Clodfelter reminds us that what Clausewitz published 170 years ago is still relevant today and more importantly, applies to air power as well: "War is merely the continuation of policy by other means….The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."[16]

Clodfelter's approach requires first, identifying the specific objectives of the war; and secondly, assessing the impact of the air campaign on the war's objectives. When applied to Kosovo, this is not an easy task since there was no single, defining document or source that identified either the political interests or the objectives. Incredibly, after 50 years of unprecedented cooperation in peacetime planning, this NATO operation was initiated, fought, and ended with no agreement among the 19 member nations on objectives, strategy, or even the limits of action.[17]

NATO's political interests were not documented until after the war. The Defense Department's Kosovo / Allied Force After-Action Report to the congress described four key NATO interests: (1) stability in Southeastern Europe; (2) human rights; (3) NATO credibility; and (4) maintain a positive relationship with Russia who opposed military action.[18] In the cover letter to the above report, Secretary of Defense William Cohen translated these interests into distinct NATO goals for the conflict. They were to (1) ensure the stability of Eastern Europe by stemming the flow

refugees out of the Balkans; (2) stop the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo through the application of military force if necessary; and (3) to maintain NATO's credibility by taking decisive action.[19]

In his book, Waging Modern War, General Wesley Clark, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, listed another set of goals for Allied Force. He said the air campaign had one objective, to drive the Serbs back to the negotiating table. The objective quickly expanded to include ending human rights abuses when Milosevic decided to accelerate his ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians. This came about following the start of the air campaign and President Clinton's promise not to use ground forces. Then, after the NATO summit, the G-8 foreign ministers spelled out five more objectives: (1) a cease-fire; (2) the withdrawal of all Serb forces; (3) deployment of a NATO led peace keeping force; (4) the return of all refugees; and (5) participation in a political settlement.[20]

Although Gen Clark believed there was only one goal at the start of the air campaign, his view runs counter to President Clinton's declared goals. In a speech to America on March 24, 1999 the day the air campaign started, President Clinton said, "Our mission is clear: (1) to demonstrate the seriousness of NATO's purpose so that the Serbian leaders understand the imperative of reversing course. (2) To deter an even bloodier offensive against innocent civilians in Kosovo and, (3) if necessary, to seriously damage the Serbian military's capacity to harm the people of Kosovo."[21] The published statements by the secretary of defense, the supreme allied commander, and the president highlight the fact that there were no consistently articulated goals for Operation Allied Force; and furthermore, the goals that were stated changed as the war progressed.

Dr. Ivo Daalder, a former Director of European Affairs at the National Security Council, described the Kosovo conflict in these terms:

> The conflict in Kosovo was two wars in one. NATO lost the first, but decisively won the second. The war it lost pitted more than 40,000 Serbian military, police, and paramilitary forces armed with more than 1,500 tanks and heavy weapons against a few thousand lightly armed Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighters….Belgrade forcefully expelled the ethnic Albanian populations from Kosovo's villages, towns, and cities. Within weeks, Serbian forces were successful—if not in completely defeating the KLA, then certainly in removing 1.3 million people from their homes and thus radically altering the demographic make-up of Kosovo.
>
> Had NATO not bombed, Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic still would have moved against the Albanian population (as he had the previous year), but the Serbians might not have accelerated the killing or expanded their deadly reach to so many communities for fear of provoking NATO intervention. In that ironic sense, NATO's decision to launch the air campaign while ruling out the use of ground forces lifted a key constraint on Milosevic. As a result, the allies utterly failed to achieve two of the three objectives Clinton listed the day the bombing started: "to deter an even bloodier offensive against innocent civilians in Kosovo and, if necessary, to seriously damage the Serbian military's capacity to harm the people of Kosovo." [22]

The world's best air forces could not defeat Milosevic because of the mismatch between NATO's strategy and the task of preventing ethnic cleansing. Having ruled out ground troops, NATO's strategy was further degraded by self-imposed targeting restrictions that permitted the Serb forces to disperse and conceal their troops and equipment while they were carrying out their ethnic cleansing campaign. NATO's air campaign was further degraded by the Serb's clever use of deception and decoys. In the end, NATO flew over 38,000 sorties but failed to hurt the Yugoslav army in Kosovo and; more importantly, failed to stop the ethnic cleansing.[23] As a result, the Kosovar Albanians suffered terribly. An estimated 10,000 were murdered while over one million Kosovars were either forcefully expelled from their homeland or displaced within Kosovo itself.[24]

So if Milosevic was winning, why did he quit? To find the answer, we have to look to the NATO summit in Washington, D.C. which began on April 23, 1999. The first thirty days of the war had gone horribly wrong for NATO in spite of the intensifying air campaign. The alliance had miscalculated Milosevic's response; the public perceived NATO's resolve as weak; and NATO's credibility, relevance, even its very survival was now threatened. This was not lost on the NATO ministers meeting in Washington; consequently, the summit became a turning point in the war. Each representative left with the conviction that NATO must emerge victorious; anything less, would potentially lead to the death of the alliance itself. A critical breakthrough occurred on the last day of the conference, April 25th, when Russian President Boris Yeltsin called President Clinton to discuss ending NATO military action against Serbia. Out of that conversation, came a commitment by the Russian president to end the war. Yeltsin set in motion a negotiating process that ultimately isolated Milosevic diplomatically and lead to the withdrawal of Serb forces from Kosovo.[25]

A post-war study by the RAND Corporation identified five reasons behind Milosevic's abrupt capitulation. First, his desire for coercive influence over NATO never materialized. He was convinced that civilian casualties from NATO bombing along with rising allied losses would sour public support for continued NATO involvement. Of course, neither did, instead his ethnic cleansing policy only strengthened allied resolve; plus, NATO suffered an unheard of zero combat fatalities. Furthermore, Milosevic assumed Russia would continue to support him but this too was a false assumption. Boris Yeltsin believed that a protracted conflict in the Balkans would only hurt Russia economically and was therefore committed to ending the conflict quickly.[26]

Second, the protracted bombing campaign made Serbia's populace war weary. After a month of air attacks, the popular mood began to change from one of patriotic support to concern for daily survival. This change soon resulted in public pressure to bring an end to the bombing. It also facilitated an atmosphere that allowed Milosevic to compromise with NATO. Conceding to NATO prior to this change in public opinion could have cost him his presidency.[27]

Third, NATO's attacks against infrastructure targets that had both a civilian as well as a military function brought tremendous pressure from within the regime for compromise. These targets included industrial plants, petroleum facilities, and electrical power plants. The loss of revenue from these plants threatened the regime's survival. The ruling elites who supported Milosevic owned many of the facilities being struck; as the cost of that support rose dramatically, so did the pressure to end the war.[28]

Fourth, Milosevic understood fully that if he rejected NATO's demands then allied bombing would continue. Unconstrained bombing would continue to erode his support from the ruling elites. To make matters worse for him, Russia had fully endorsed the peace plan offered by NATO. Milosevic understood the harsh realities that NATO bombing would bring if it carried over into the winter. If he continued to defy NATO, he risked a mutiny from both the general populace and the ruling elites. Consequently, to remain in power he acquiesced to NATO demands on June 3, 1999.[29]

Finally, Milosevic was offered a deal that was politically acceptable and allowed him to "save face." Unlike earlier offers, there was no longer a demand for a referendum in Kosovo which meant that Yugoslavia's territorial integrity and sovereignty would remain in tact. This was further affirmed by the United Nations Security Council. Thus, Milosevic could claim victory since he was able to force NATO to back away from a Kosovo referendum.[30]

So in the end, Milosevic backed down, NATO was victorious, and the alliance was saved. Air power advocates cheered and others like John Keegan hailed it as the beginning of a new era in warfare. Or was it? I strongly agree with Clodfelter that "the supreme test of bombing's efficacy is its contribution to a nation's war aims." Although the war aims were confusing, if you use President Clinton's March 24th objectives it's clear that Operation Allied Force was not nearly as successful as many believed. Only one of the president's three stated objectives was achieved. The campaign was successful in getting Milosevic to withdraw his forces out of Kosovo. However, the campaign failed tragically to stop the ethnic cleansing and also failed to appreciably damage Milosevic's fielded forces—on these last two points, there is no debate.

Clausewitz Not Douhet

Unfortunately, the current dispute over air power's effectiveness confuses more than it enlightens. Scott Cooper offers us his tremendous insight on the subject:

> That a gradual, incremental strategy is not the most efficient use of air power may not be as important as remembering that efficiency must sometimes be subordinated to political considerations. Those political considerations must be balanced against doctrine. That balancing act requires a close working relationship and frank dialogue between civilian policymakers and military professionals.
>
> The notion that it is inappropriate for civilian leaders to involve themselves in the details of military operations is pervasive in the military. It is also misguided. Rules of engagement and target selection will always be required to conform to political objectives. Those political objectives are articulated by civilians (who, to be sure, should know when to show restraint)….Only a candid and forthright civil-military relationship characterized by a shared sense of purpose will yield sound wartime policy.[31]

That brings us back to the original question: Can war be won with airpower alone? This air power advocate says no. Operation Allied Force did not affirm Douhet's basic idea that air

power is both "a necessary and sufficient condition for victory." There is ample evidence to support the premise that one cannot win without "command of the air"—that is a given—but air power alone will not bring victory.

It is more important to understand that air power is like any other instrument of statecraft. Instead of asking if air power alone can win the battle, the important questions are: how can it contribute to successful diplomacy and under what circumstances are its contributions most effective?[32] In the final analysis, air power advocates would be better served if they studied Clausewitz rather than debate the relevancy of Douhet's central beliefs!

Notes

1. David Halberstam, War in a Time of Peace (New York, N.Y.: Scribner, 2001), 423.

2. United States General Accounting Office, Kosovo Air Operations: Need to Maintain Alliance Cohesion Resulted in Doctrinal Departures, July 2001 (GAO-01-784), 3 and 19.

3. Lawrence F. Kaplan, "Clinton: What Went Right," The New Republic Online, 22 January 2001, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 11 December 2001, available from http://www.thenewrepublic.com/012201/kaplan012201.html.

4. John Keegan, "Please, Mr. Blair, never take such a risk again," London Daily Telegraph, Issue 1472, 6 June 1999, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 22 December 2001, available from http://www.portal.telegraph.co.uk/htmlContent.jhtml?html=%2Farchive%2F1999%2F06%2F06%2Fwkee06.html.

5. Daniel L. Byman and Matthew C. Waxman, "Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate," International Security 24, no. 4 (Spring 2000): 5.

6. Ibid., 6.

7. Phillip S. Meilinger, ed., The Paths of Heaven—The Evolution of Airpower Theory (Maxwell Air Force Base, Al.: Air University Press, 1997), 1.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 8.

10. Ibid., 11.

11. Giulio Douhet, The Command of the Air, trans Dino Ferrari (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 21.

12. Ibid., 91.

13. Ibid., 142.

14. Meilinger, 31.

15. Mark Clodfelter, The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam (New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1989), xi.

16. Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

17. Richard K. Betts, "Compromised Command," Foreign Affairs, July/August 2001, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 17 December 2001, available from http://www.foreignaffairs.org/Search/document.asp?i=20010701FAREVIEWESSAY4999.XML.

18. Department of Defense, Report to Congress: Kosovo / Allied Force After-Action Report, 31 January 2000, (Washington, D.C.), 3-4.

19. William S. Cohen, Secretary of Defense and Henry H. Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, message accompanying the Department of Defense, Report to Congress: Kosovo / Allied Force After-Action Report, 31 January 2000, (Washington, D.C.), 1.

20. General Wesley K. Clark, Waging Modern War (New York, N.Y.: Public Affairs, 2001), 417-418 and 423-424.

21. President Bill Clinton, address to the nation, Washington, D.C., 24 March 1999, transcript, on-line, Internet, 23 December 2001, available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/americas/newsid_303000/303693.stm

22. Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Unlearning the Lessons of Kosovo," Foreign Policy, Fall 1999, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 11 December 2001, available from http://www.brook.edu/views/articles/daalder/19990920FP.htm.

23. Colonel (retired) Alain Pellerin, "Fallout From The Air And Missile Offensive Against Yugoslavia," remarks presented at 1999 Topical Symposium—After Kosovo: Implications for U.S. Strategy and Coalition Warfare, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., 16-17 November 1999; Transcript; on-line, Internet, 11 December 2001, available from http://www.nyu.edu/globalbeat/balkan/Pellerin1199.html.

24. Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Winning Ugly—NATO's War to Save Kosovo," The Brookings Institution; n.p.; on-line, Internet, 23 December 2001, available from http://www.brook.edu/press/books/winning_ugly.htm.

25. Ibid.

26. "Why Milosevic Decided to Settle the Conflict Over Kosovo When He Did," RAND Research Brief RB-71 (2001), n.p.; on-line, Internet, 11 December 2001, available from http://www.rand.org/publications/RB/RB71/.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Scott A. Cooper, "The Politics of Airstrikes," Policy Review, no. 107, June 2001, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 11 December 2001, available from http://www.policyreview.org/jun01/cooper_print.html.

32. Byman and Waxman, 6.

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