

SAASS 628
Academic Year 2021

Air Power in an Age of Limited War

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Instructors:

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Syllabus Approved: _____

Date: _____

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Air Power in an Age of Limited War

Introduction:

This is a history course. It concentrates largely on the experiences of the United States Air Force from 1945 to the present. It aspires to balance the timeless and timely elements of historical study, and to be relevant for today's practitioners of air power, broadly conceived. Air power was born and passed its formative years in the milieu of total war. From 1945 forward, however, it has confronted the more normative form of war: limited conflict. This adjustment was uneven for military forces and political leaders in general, but perhaps even more so for airmen and air forces because they lacked substantial personal *and* institutional experience with limited war.

This course will examine this accommodation to limited war. In times of peace, the course asks how well did military officers understand their recent experiences, grasp their present circumstances, and see the future; in times of war, the course assesses how well civil and military authority related political objectives and military action—the nexus of military strategy.

Intellectually, the course supposes there is no such *thing* as air power, or land or sea power for that matter. There *are* air forces, armies, and navies—and there *is* military aviation, which may or may not be *powerfully* employed. Many variables influence the powerful employment of military forces; among these are technical proficiency, tactical prowess, operational skill, strategic aptitude, and political competence. This course addresses each of these, though it concentrates more on the latter than the former factors. In all of this, SAASS 628 hopes to foster a pattern of thought and a habit of inquiry that will contribute to sound judgments about the use of air and space power in the pursuit of national objectives.

Grading:

Two components will comprise your final grade: an essay due close of course, 60%; seminar participation and contribution, 40%. Details of both components will be provided by your instructor.

Faculty:

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SAASS 628/1: Making the Cold War Cold
Cherny, *The Candy Bombers*

The Cold War defined much of the post-World War II period, and its force and effect extends to this day. In the five years following World War II, the East and West moved from the Grand Alliance to the brink of another global conflict. This transformation, quick in pace and perhaps preordained in some form, was nevertheless uneven. Its final outcome was not inevitable, and along the way events helped shape the basic relationship between the U.S., the U.S.S.R., and their respective allies and adversaries. The Berlin blockade and subsequent airlift was one such signal incident. The Cold War's first major military contest between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Berlin crisis helped set important trends, among them the limited nature of direct East-West confrontations; the non-lethal, or at least non-nuclear, means of competition; and the migration of Cold War struggles to peripheral areas of the world. In other words, the Berlin airlift helped make the Cold War cold. As such, this non-lethal use of military aviation stands as a sentinel example of air power's strategic employment and remains an important reminder that aviation—in varied forms—can yield strategic and political success.

SAASS 628/2: Strategic Contours of the Korean War
Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*

The Korean War surprised the United States, where strategists were busy developing theories and plans for total war along an East-West axis with a European, not Asian, fulcrum. The invasion reintroduced many nations, including the U.S., to the specter of limited war after two world conflagrations. In America, successive generations of military officers and policy makers had confronted total war from 1914 to 1945, and now both groups had difficulty adapting to what is the more normative form of conflict, the limited war. Compounding that challenge, the Korean War's Cold War peculiarities imbued it with global consequence. The Cold War, old enough in 1950 to be recognized but too young to see with any clarity, complicated both national and international response to the fighting, and placed a high premium on the careful calibration of military action to political and diplomatic goals. Translating military power to broader purpose is often a delicate task; in Korea it was especially so—as wide swings in political objective and military action indicate. The Korean War marks a watershed for the U.S. as an incipient superpower because it was an early indication of two central characteristics of the contemporary American military experience: the prosecution of wars of choice rather than necessity; and the desire to situate diplomacy and military operations inside international collective security arrangements.

SAASS 628/3: Air Power and Straitjackets
Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea*

Measured military action for measured political gain was an exercise in statecraft for which few Americans had any personal familiarity in 1950. The Air Force—born of, nurtured within, and bolstered to preeminence by total war—also lacked any corporate experience with such endeavors. American airmen entered the Korean War with established theories of military

aviation, a proud record from World War II, and an ever-clearer vision of their particular place in the pursuit of national security. But in Korea the Air Force ran into a political and diplomatic topography not ideally suited to its brand of air power. Fighting in Korea presented distinct challenges to every American combat arm, but for the newly independent Air Force it was truly a baptism of fire. In the end, the war challenged established beliefs about the efficacy of military aviation, the nature and condition of strategic air attack, the precepts of aviation doctrine, and the administrative and force structure of the Air Force. These challenges never rose past low ebb, however, partly because aviation did enjoy general tactical success in the war, and partly because airmen could claim some credit for the negotiated settlement. As a result, in Korea the strangeness of limited war bred discontent but not significant change. Still, how best to apply a military instrument, conceived in total war, in conflicts of limited means for limited ends, was a question that long survived the Korean War.

SAASS 628/4: Air Power, Chinese Style
Zhang, *Red Wings Over the Yalu*

Many of the operational limits placed on the U.S. Air Force in Korea sprang from American political concerns of wider war with the Soviet Union and/or China. Communist perspectives of the air war can help inform judgment about the validity of such sensitivities, as well as help illuminate certain operational and strategic aspects of the aerial fighting over Korea. Like their counterparts in the United States, Soviet and Chinese airmen entered the war in Korea with particular theories, attitudes, and objectives—and like American flyers, these airmen found limits to the employment of aviation in Korea. For the Soviet Union, the air war offered a way to engage the West short of direct confrontation and to assist North Korea and China in a manner consistent with Russian policy objectives. For China's new communist regime, the air war offered an opportunity to acquire an air force and to stake out a place among the established nations of the world. For the Chinese air arm, the Korean War was a formative event, and other nations may use the Korean air war to help understand China's contemporary attitudes toward the employment of military aviation in the pursuit of national objectives.

SAASS 628/5: Strategy and Change
Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*

The advent of nuclear weapons challenged long-held assumptions and conceptions of warfare. Paradoxically, these awesome weapons promised a break from established patterns *and* a return to some of war's oldest stratagems. In an age of great change and emergent turmoil, distinguishing which developments mattered, and how, from which did not, and why, became a paramount responsibility for strategists. This task required them to identify what of modern war remained constant, and what constituted revolution—judgments which would then offer a foundation upon which to synthesize a view of war consonant with the times. In doing so, Cold War defense intellectuals grasped war's changing grammar while seeing its unyielding logic, offering to subsequent strategists an example of judicious thought.

SAASS 628/6: Relating Policy, Strategy, & Operations

Kaplan, *To Kill Nations* & Craig, *Destroying the Village* (1-10, 24-118, 152-162, skim rest)

The Cold War and the U.S. Air Force were well suited to each other: the Cold War presented to the United States a known enemy with an industrial economy suitable to strategic air attack; the total nature of the struggle translated into few constraints in either the theoretical or practical application of force; and World War II had bequeathed to military aviation a reputation for strategic efficacy and—for a time—a monopoly on the capacity for nuclear delivery. For both policy makers and air power practitioners, these factors suggested a force posture that stressed military aviation as a response to Cold War security threats—and the fit between national policy, strategy, and air power was especially tight in the early Cold War.

Nonetheless, operationalizing concepts like nuclear deterrence and massive retaliation posed challenges. For the defense community, contentious matters of apportionment among the services bedeviled efforts to harmonize national policy, military strategy, and force structure. For military aviation, translating deterrence and massive retaliation into a plan at the operational level of war required choices in doctrine, procurement, and targeting. And for the Air Force, new developments in intercontinental ballistic missiles and a growing civilian interest in military strategy foreshadowed future frustrations and growing pains. Through it all—as East and West developed capacities to destroy the world in an instant—sheer destruction threatened to overwhelm more discerning matters of strategy. Although the early Cold War is long past, the imperative to relate military posture to national policy and strategy remains timeless.

SAASS 628/7: Space: Science, Technology, and the Frontier

McDougall, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*

Military strategy drew from a small pool of authoritative sources up through World War II, at least in the United States. Until that time, marrying military means to political ends generally encompassed the competing interests and close coordination of two institutional actors—the military and the state—and relating them to the interests of a third body politic: the people. In the Cold War those sources expanded as other institutions, with other prerogatives and other perspectives, bore on this strategic equation with novel vigor. These institutions, which included the university, the think tank, and the defense industry, exerted ever more influence at each point in the strategy making process: they participated in the development of military means; they helped formulate political policy; and they came to dominate the theoretical ground that sought to link military operations to political goals. This dramatic change in the strategic landscape alternately enriched or corrupted the strategic process; in every instance it complicated it. The Cold War space race was one development that reflected this new strategic age. This shift, consequential then, remains important because the new demands it placed on individuals in a complex strategic environment continue to challenge military officers and civil officials as they relate military means and political ends.

SAASS 628/8: Vietnam Era Decision Making in Retrospect

SAIS Decision-Making Exercise Handouts

Hindsight is not 20/20 vision. Its view is refracted through the passage of time, intervening events, and shifts in perspective. Historical judgment requires a balance, evaluating past places and people in their own time with the knowledge of what would come—this is how the discipline of history translates the past into meaning for today. But this is a slippery task. Exercises that strive to strip hindsight bias of past events can help hone historical judgment, and in the process increase the value of experience, whether it be personal or corporate, in the events and decisions and strategies yet to come.

SAASS 628/9: Air Power in Vietnam I
Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*

SAASS 628/10: Air Power in Vietnam II
Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*

The Vietnam War presented a rich, if frustrating, strategic environment for American policy makers and military leaders. A product of Cold War containment and domestic political calculations—which together prohibited inaction yet proscribed action—the war bedeviled efforts to link the efficient use of military force to the effective pursuit of political goals. For the U.S., the war’s policy objective of an independent government in South Vietnam presented difficult challenges, and even a broad range of military operations may not have offered a clear path to the goal. As it was, American leaders looked increasingly to air campaigns to meet their strategic aims. These campaigns took different names, from Rolling Thunder in 1965 to Linebacker II in 1972; had different goals, from attempts to coerce Hanoi to cease its sponsorship of the war to efforts to reassure Saigon of American commitment; and met with different degrees of success. Overall, though, for the U.S., the Vietnam War produced at best an uneven record of influence through air power, and at worst an abject failure. American frustration with the war in general and the air war in particular helped shape attitudes toward air power efficacy and helped shape civil-military relations for decades following the war.

SAASS 628/11: Strategic Contours of the Vietnam War
Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam*

Effective strategy requires empathy for the other, if only to aim better. This is difficult in warfare, which occurs when clash of will and understanding are great enough to yield the public sanction of oftentimes widespread violence. Even when enemies are relatively familiar, as was the case in Twentieth Century European warfare, misjudgments regarding enemy values and goals made for less effective military strategies and operations. This perennial challenge is amplified when foes are relatively unfamiliar, as was the case with American strategy against North Vietnam. A close look at the Vietnam War through the lens of the victor offers practice seeing warfare as others see it, and helps inform judgment about what U.S. strategies there did work, which did not, and why.

SAASS 628/12: Air War, Renewed
Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers*

The drawdown following the Vietnam War proved fertile ground for three essential and related tasks which confront every generation of military officers: to assess recent experience, to situate present circumstance, and to imagine future conflict. In the years after the Vietnam War, the United States military adopted a number of changes, only some of which were of its own choosing. At the political level, Total Force policy and the Weinberger-Powell doctrine aimed to restrict the use of force to circumstances involving threats to vital U.S. interests, with attendant public and Congressional support, and with clear odds for overwhelming victory. At the strategic level, the Goldwater-Nichols Act changed the interaction among military commands and between military and civilian authority—the loci of military strategy making. And at the operational level, the Army developed and the Air Force adopted AirLand Battle doctrine, reflecting a reorientation of strategic posture toward favored battlefields in Europe—and in the process making the U.S. war machine highly tuned to a particular kind of battle that harnessed the modern lethality of weapons to an integrated approach to fighting. In many ways these developments remain, and the experiences of this earlier generation of officers illuminate one path for officers today facing the same essential and related tasks which confronted this earlier generation of uniformed servants.

SAASS 628/13: Strategic Contours of the Gulf War
Freedman & Karsh. *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991*

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait came at a time of strategic fluidity. The Cold War was ending, and existing strategic and security relationships sat at the precipice of the unknown, not only for the East and the West but also for their respective allies throughout the world. The Mid-East, home of Israel and large oil reserves, had always been an important ‘middle’ ground in the established Cold War landscape; now it became a place where, in President George H.W. Bush’s words, “a new world order might foster peace and prosperity.” Thus the invasion of a tiny country by a small nation came to have layers of strategic and geo-political implications beyond their borders. At one level the Gulf War was a boundary dispute between two countries; at another level the war affected stability in a region of oil wealth and Israel; at yet another level the war tested both traditional and emerging strategic relationships among a wider community of nations. For the United States and her allies, each layer of analysis suggested something different about potential threats, possible responses, likely coalitions, and particular objectives. How to navigate this analytic puzzle constituted the war’s strategic challenge for America. In essence, the U.S. hoped to internationalize the crisis so as to frame the matter in terms of world order, while keeping the question of Israeli-Arab relations autonomous from the problem at hand. In almost any analysis, the war did not immediately threaten U.S. security. As a result, deterrence, diplomacy, and coercion all played critical roles alongside the actual use of force. This interplay of politics and war, always present but especially explicit in limited war, became a hallmark of the more limited military operations which followed the Gulf War.

SAASS 628/14: Gulf War: Strategic Air Attack
Olsen, *Strategic Air Power in Desert Storm*

The war's timing also coincided with a period of change within the U.S. Air Force, as AirLand Battle doctrine mixed with notions of strategic attack. As a result, the Air Force conducted its part in the conflict with doctrine that suggested one thing about aviation's place in war, and aspirations that, in part, envisioned a somewhat wider role for air power. Desert Storm encapsulated these new ambitions, which in many respects recalled the claims of the very earliest air power thinkers. Strikes deep within Iraq certainly played an important part in the war's conduct and conclusion. Just as importantly, memory of the Gulf War strategic air war came to dominate perceptions about combat's cost and risk that continue to shape political considerations about war and peace to this day.

SAASS 628/15: Operation Allied Force in Kosovo: Revival or Retreat
Henriksen, *NATO's Gamble: Combining Diplomacy and Air Power in the Kosovo Crisis*

In 1998 ongoing civil war in the former Yugoslavia created a crisis born of political and humanitarian concerns. In the air war that followed, a variety of political, diplomatic, and strategic factors served to limit both ends and means. Coalition imperatives meant there was no purely American national or military strategy in the struggle for Kosovo, and the war underscored the challenges of combined warfare. Although these matters complicated the prosecution of the war, the result was still a victory. Many factors contributed to this success. As it related to air power, some observers saw this result as a confirmation of aviation's historic promise to win wars. Other observers saw not a revival of air power's basic aspiration but a retreat from the operational conduct of the Gulf War, where military forces had had a relatively free hand in the conduct of combat. Revival or retreat, the USAF experience in Kosovo served to initiate and accelerate numerous organizational and intellectual reforms, shaping the Air Force into the service it was at the turn of the century and beyond.

SAASS 628/16: Contemporary Experiences in Air War
Olsen, *History of Warfare. Part III (Skim), Parts IV & V*
Instructor Handout

If hindsight is refracted vision, it nonetheless offers a clarity hard to come by when events are closer at hand. The turn of a new century witnessed a pivot from carefully calibrated operations and a return to more substantial combat operations. How well Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom met their goals helps inform how well strategists made this transition. Conversely, the continuing call for air power in small wars, the Second Lebanon War, and Operation Odyssey Dawn all represent somewhat more limited operational outlays—and Odyssey Dawn carried with it modest aspirations for success, cost, and involvement, for US forces anyway. Together, contemporary experiences of air warfare are varied, and challenge strategists to delineate the strength of whatever patterns might have emerged across the last two decades in order to aid contemporary judgments about such patterns into the future. Which

tendencies for both large and small scale air operations are most likely to carry forward into the near and mid-term future is a central question for today's air strategists.

SAASS 628/17: Limited Nuclear War
Larsen & Kartchner, *On Limited Nuclear War*

Nuclear weapons solidified the U.S. Air Force's strategic, independent *raison d'être* through much of the Cold War. For many years, the service's culture, organization, and doctrine were shaped by the intense study of, and persistent preparation for, nuclear warfare as much as they were by any other concern. With the rise of AirLand Battle doctrine and the end of the Cold War, however, the Air Force lost interest in things nuclear: these matters remained important and ever present, certainly, but not thought much about. In the 21st century, the return to near-peer competition, the kinetic and latent use of nuclear weapons once again requires careful and sustained study.

SAASS 628/18: From the Past, the Future
Courtwright, *Sky as Frontier*

Human flight existed in the minds of men long before the Wright Brothers traveled to Kitty Hawk. Once they took to the air, the sky represented a frontier; and its exploration, settlement, and civilizing serve as metaphor for aviation's Twentieth Century development. Airmen were pioneers in spirit and adventurers in temperament. In their exploring, settling, and civilizing the sky, they invented far more than they discovered the air age. This legacy of invention offers a rich tableau against which to observe the past and reconnoiter the future of air (space?) power, and bequeaths to Air (Space?) men today a tradition of imagination and creativity and, always, a longing for the distant horizon.