

Airpower appears to be a mass of contradictions. That perception is right—and wrong.

Paradox List

By Phillip S. Meilinger

Airpower long has been a realm of paradoxes. This potent military instrument embodies characteristics that may well appear contradictory but turn out to be compatible. Or not.

Over the years, this situation has caused confusion about use and effects of airpower. Airmen have traditionally had a hard time communicating the realities to the American public. That certainly is true today.

Seeing the paradoxes clearly is the essential first step in better explaining the nature of airpower. Thus....

PARADOX 1: AIR WAR IS SO HORRIBLE THAT IT CAN BE HUMANIZING.

It was in 1909 that Clement Ader, the French aviation pioneer, warned that “the great bombing planes will become veritable terrors!” He saw this as a good thing.

“I am convinced,” Ader went on, “that their awesome power and fear of seeing them appear will provoke salutary reflections among the statesmen and diplomats who are the real dispensers of peace and war.”

From the beginning, people saw both promise and peril in airplanes. Orville Wright once stated that he and his brother thought the flying machine would make war so inadvisable that no government would start one.

The theory was that air warfare would be highly destructive, and leaders, knowing this, would prevent war from breaking out. The corollary was that, if war did occur, airpower would ensure it was over quickly with relatively little loss of life.

This belief was much in vogue after World War I, a conflict in which many millions of soldiers and civilians had died.

Corbis/Bettmann photo



The German city of Dresden was in ruins after Allied bombing raids virtually flattened the city.

After war broke out again in Europe in 1939, the use of airpower was indeed awful. Tens of thousands died in Germany and Japan, as well as in Allied cities. What happened? National leaders certainly knew that the airplane could wreak devastation. So, why was war neither deterred nor limited?

The answer is that some individuals—Adolf Hitler, for instance—are simply undeterrable. Suffering of German citizens counted for little in his lunge for power and national grandeur. His mind was made up.

So the threat of airpower did not deter Hitler. Neither did land power or sea power, for that matter.

Airpower did take far fewer lives, however. Of some 60 million persons who died in World War II, perhaps four million—military and civilian—died from air attacks. How did the other 93 percent perish? The old-fashioned way; they were shot, shelled, starved, executed, and so forth.

Airpower also shortened the war in the Pacific. Strategic bombing, culminating in two atomic strikes on Japan, brought the war to an end without American forces having to undertake what would surely have been a bloody invasion of Japan.

In a sense, the coming of the nuclear weapon finally fulfilled the dark para-

dox of the airplane. The threat of an air attack—a nuclear air attack—was too horrible to accept, and it puts steel in today’s deterrence posture.

PARADOX 2: AIRPOWER IS SO USEFUL YOU DON’T NEED TO USE IT MUCH.

This paradox, put in different words, could be interpreted as meaning that, the better we get at fighting through the air, the less air fighting we will have to do.

The first Gulf War in 1991 and the subsequent 12 years of no-fly-zone enforcement over Iraq convinced Saddam Hussein’s Air Force leaders that they would be better off avoiding a contest for control of the skies. As a result, not a single Iraqi aircraft even took off to challenge US airpower during the next round of warfare in 2003.

Instead, coalition forces found that Iraq buried fighters in the sand in an attempt to protect them from airpower.

Something similar has happened with respect to the Israeli Air Force. In the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War, IAF’s fighters more or less wiped out the Egyptian air arm in the first few hours of the conflict. In the next round of war, in 1973, Egypt and Syria put up a better fight, at least in the early weeks.

However, the 1982 Bekaa Valley War over Lebanon saw the Israelis devastate Syria’s Air Force with highly superior weapons and tactics. Today, no Middle East air arm dares to challenge Israel.

Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, USAF’s first Chief of Staff, once said: “Our problem was, we always made it look too easy.” This could be interpreted to mean that airmen never got sufficient credit for their astounding successes. The statement could be taken another way, though—that the enemy really did think it was easy for the Americans, and, as a consequence, gradually gave up trying to oppose them.

In the Gulf War, airpower levied at least 50 percent attrition on all Iraq’s front-line divisions. This took place before the coalition began major offensive ground operations. In the end, Iraqi troops were surrendering to newsmen and UAVs.

In the air war over Serbia in 1999—NATO’s Operation Allied Force—the West prevailed over Serbia without having to send a single conventional ground troop into action.

In Afghanistan, US airpower teamed up with a few hundred special operations forces and some irregular Afghan militia

USAF photo by MSgt. T. Collins



A military search team retrieves a MiG-25 that had been buried beneath the sands of the Iraqi desert.

units to drive the formerly unbeatable Taliban from power, long before significant numbers of regular US Army and Marine Corps troops even arrived in Afghanistan.

All of these historical events suggest yet another corollary: While you might not have to use much airpower, you won’t have to use much ground power or sea power, either.

PARADOX 3: AIRPOWER LETS YOU SURVIVE BUT MARKS YOU AS A COWARD.

Another name for this one might be the “you’re not fighting fair” paradox. This misguided desire for a *mano a mano* fight is prime foolishness.

Recall that during the air operations over Serbia in 1999, NATO crews, when dropping their precision weapons, often remained above 15,000 feet altitude, above the effective reach of anti-aircraft artillery. Despite the fact that such altitudes made the delivery of precision guided munitions more accurate, some foolishly claimed that such tactics were somehow unsportsmanlike because they made it difficult for the Serbs to strike back at the airmen.

That’s precisely the point—and the paradox. When you’re that good, you don’t have to get into a direct fight with the foe.

The thrust of the critics’ argument seems to be that an American asymmetric advantage is unfair, and that the

Air Force should give the bad guys a chance to draw blood.

Do pilots have to die to make it a just war? According to various pundits, the answer is “yes.” They assume that war is not legitimate at all unless it features a ground force marching shoulder to shoulder to “close with and destroy” the enemy, with airmen putting themselves in an analogous position.

These views can emerge from some unexpected quarters:

Jeffrey Record, a member of the Air War College faculty, wrote an article titled “Gutless Giant.” In it, he advanced this rhetorical question: “Was the life of any lone American pilot ... really more valuable than the fate of more than 1,600,000 Kosovar Albanians?” (The connection between the two was obscure, not to say specious, but you get the point.)

Retired Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, a frequent airpower critic, wrote, “High-tech weaponry permitted pilots to fly high out of harm’s way while visiting destruction below.” He found it “troubling” that USAF, with its “‘immaculate’ air campaign,” demonstrated “the ability to drive an enemy to his knees without shedding a drop of the bomber’s blood.”

Allied Force was real and dangerous combat. One analysis found aircrews were three times more likely to have been targeted and attacked by surface-



AP photo

An F-117 Nighthawk burns after being shot down during Operation Allied Force.

to-air missiles than was the case in Desert Storm.

More to the point: Bloodshed, or the lack thereof, is not the measure of justice in war. It just seems that way to “boots on the ground” devotees.

PARADOX 4: AIRPOWER’S DOMINANCE OF CONVENTIONAL WAR LEADS TO UNCONVENTIONAL WAR.

Put simply, US dominance in air and space power makes it more likely that the US will not have to use that power in a conventional sense, because there won’t be any foe. Adversaries have been conditioned to avoid American strengths, and airpower ranks first among these.

Consequently, just as nuclear weapons deterred war and held conflict to the conventional level after World War II, so too has US air supremacy mostly deterred big, high-intensity war and held it to the unconventional or irregular level.

Paradoxically, USAF has limited its own combat opportunities with its excellence. (On the other hand, defense planners would be wise to remember that conventional war may indeed become an attractive option for future adversaries—as soon as the US stops preparing for it.)

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates thinks the Pentagon can ease off on building conventional power—air-

power foremost. He says, “I firmly believe” US forces are “much more likely” to face irregular foes.

Senior uniformed leaders see what may be described as the “least-likely-war fallacy” at work here. This means a failure to understand that some wars become “least likely” for a reason—the US has made itself so powerful that no one dares to mount a challenge.

Even Gates’ own national defense strategy, published last June, concedes that US conventional dominance is what has forced foes into irregular

war in the first place. That is hardly an argument for soft-pedaling your dominance.

“US dominance in conventional warfare,” it notes, “has given prospective adversaries, particularly nonstate actors and their state sponsors, strong motivation to adopt asymmetric methods to counter our advantages.”

PARADOX 5: AIRPOWER’S IMPORTANCE CAN’T BE PROVED TO BE IMPORTANT.

It has always been an article of faith for airmen that airpower is an inherently offensive weapon that can have direct and immediate effects at the strategic level of war. It is presumed that strategic attacks will have significant effects, but quantifying these effects is difficult.

Effects-based operations (EBO) is the relatively new name that airmen have bestowed on what they have always claimed they were conducting in their strategic operations.

Trying to quantify these effects to the satisfaction of skeptics has been difficult. This was apparent first in World War II and lingered through Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Allied Force, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom.

In essence, analysts can survey the battlefield and count tank carcasses, but determining what effect that destruction had on the enemy’s strategic plans and capabilities was a harder nut to crack.

Determining what impact that destruction had on the mind of enemy leaders was even more difficult.



President Lyndon Johnson, center, and top aides ponder a map of Vietnam in 1968.



Led by a B-66 Destroyer, four F-105s bomb a military target on the southern panhandle of North Vietnam in 1966.

Planners are getting better at this. Analytical tools are now able to accurately model and measure the effect of strikes on complex economic and infrastructural systems.

Naturally, the naysayers remain. Many ground officers reject EBO, preferring instead the Clausewitzian-based attrition model that demands bloody, force-on-force slugfests.

PARADOX 6: AIRPOWER'S GREATEST WEAKNESS IS ITS GREATEST STRENGTH.

The inability to hold ground—often considered airpower's greatest weakness—is actually one of its greatest strengths. The occupation of enemy territory—the alleged sine qua non of ground forces—is often too provocative and too risky to be a useful tool of foreign policy.

In Vietnam, for example, the Army suggested to President Johnson on

several occasions that US ground forces invade and occupy North Vietnam. Johnson rejected this advice because he feared such a move was too dangerous: It might induce Chinese intervention, as had occurred in Korea in late 1950.

Instead, and paradoxically, Johnson chose to rely on airpower—although admittedly in a dismally slipshod, inadequate fashion. He did so precisely because of airpower's alleged greatest weakness, its inability to hold ground.

Similarly, at the outset of Allied Force in Kosovo in 1999, President Clinton and NATO leaders stated flatly that ground troops would not be used. This was partly due to political opposition within the alliance itself

and partly because of warnings from Russia. Airpower again was chosen because of its alleged “weakness.”

Whatever one's view of the morality and usefulness of the war in Iraq, there is no denying the cost—politically, financially, and in blood—of putting ground troops in harm's way. It is not coincidence that our greatest military successes of the past 20 years—those that achieved our political objectives with a minute loss of life—were those that did not require the extensive use of conventional US ground forces.

This isn't always the case, but it is true often enough to support another corollary: If you seek a strong military result, don't try to occupy ground.

PARADOX 7: AIRPOWER'S DECENTRALIZED NATURE INDUCES CENTRALIZED MICROMANAGEMENT.

It is difficult for senior commanders who are not on the scene to intervene significantly in tactical ground operations. With airpower, however, things are different.

Micromanagement of an air campaign reached its apogee in Vietnam. Officials in Washington regularly picked targets half a world away. President Johnson allegedly boasted of his control over airmen: “I won't let those Air Force generals bomb the smallest outhouse ... without checking with me.”

How was Johnson able to carry out micromanagement on such a gargantuan scale?

The answer is that airplanes might well take off and head out in one direction to conduct a particular strike mission, then receive en route orders to change course and go do something else, such as return to base.

The specific targets they strike can be vetted in the Pentagon or the White House, in real time, using airborne and space-based sensor platforms, allowing senior military and civilian leaders to intervene in air operations at the lowest tactical level imaginable.

As one colleague of the author put it when turning an old aphorism on its head: “Flexibility may be the key to airpower, but more importantly, airpower is the key to flexibility.”

Certainly, politicians have found it to be the key to their ability to give flexible orders. ■

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