

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

GAO Launches a Dud

IT IS difficult to imagine worse military advice than was put forth by the General Accounting Office in "Operation Desert Storm: Evaluation of the Air War," published July 2. This report, summarizing a classified GAO study, planted the impression that stealthy aircraft and precision guided munitions (PGMs) did not perform any better than older and cheaper systems in the Persian Gulf War.

The leading conclusions of the report were that "it is inappropriate, given aircraft use, performance, and effectiveness demonstrated in Desert Storm, to characterize higher-cost aircraft as generally more capable than lower-cost aircraft" and that "air campaign data did not validate the purported efficiency or effectiveness of guided munitions, without qualification."

The *New York Times* ("Stealth, Lies, and Videotape") and other newspapers ranging from the *Los Angeles Times* ("Military Pitchmen Took US for Ride on 'Smart' Weapons") to the *Arizona Daily Star* ("'Smart' Weapons Flunked") picked up the theme and piled on.

Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of the Gulf War will sense something askew here. Deep-striking airpower destroyed Iraq's command-and-control system by dawn on the first day. Throughout the war, high-risk missions against Baghdad were left to stealthy F-117As and unmanned cruise missiles. "Smart" weapons struck with astonishing precision. Millions watched on television as a fighter rolled in on the Iraqi Defense Ministry in downtown Baghdad and put a bomb neatly down the airshaft. When Iraq began dumping Kuwaiti oil into the Gulf, the oil-pumping manifold was knocked out by F-111Fs twenty miles away. They steered electro-optical guided bombs in by data link. Before the 100-hour ground phase of the war began, airpower destroyed or neutralized a high percentage of the Iraqi forces.

GAO said that most of the air strikes were by nonstealthy aircraft and nonprecision munitions. True enough, but the precision weapons

available were allocated to the most difficult and critical targets. And while the stealthy F-117s flew only two percent of the combat sorties, they attacked more than forty percent of the strategic targets.

How, then, could GAO have spun up such a tale? The unclassified version of the report contains almost no supporting information, but there were clues. Close reading finds recurring references to "limitations of the data." GAO complained repeatedly about "faulty" bomb-damage

This report spreads the misconception that stealth and precision didn't amount to much in the Gulf War.

assessment, then hung critical conclusions on BDA data.

Paul G. Kaminski, under secretary of defense for Acquisition and Technology, says that GAO lumped strike data together and prorated the results evenly across aircraft and systems. "All of the strikes and all of the events that happened in between available bomb-damage assessment data were averaged," he says. "So it doesn't matter whether strikes were done early, when targets were highly defended and the survivable platforms were very critical to wiping out defenses, or late. Any events that occurred between two bomb-damage assessments were weighted equally and averaged."

GAO made quite a point that "one-target, one-bomb" efficiency was not achieved. On average, 2.2 precision guided munitions were expended per target destroyed. Smart weapons weren't perfect every time in the Gulf. Also, mission planners allocated more than one munition to targets when high probability of success was deemed necessary. The first shot was probably sufficient in many cases, but the backup round was used for insurance. Considering that it took 9,000 bombs

per target in World War II and 176 bombs per target in Vietnam, a success ratio of 2.2 per target in the Gulf War is hardly grounds for complaint.

The bottom-line advice in the GAO report is that "the services' increasing reliance on guided munitions to conduct asymmetrical warfare may not be appropriate." The Air Force provided all of the stealth and ninety percent of the PGMs in the Gulf War. It is the only service with stealthy aircraft today and also the service that advocates an "asymmetrical" strategy, focusing our strengths and unique advantages against the adversary's ability to wage war.

One of the GAO report authors, unnamed, told Tim Weiner of the *New York Times* that "lies were told to help persuade Congress and citizens to buy the next generation of weapons" and that "the better the F-117 looks, the better the B-2 looks." His attitude toward current stealth and precision attack programs is obvious, and the report reflects that attitude.

GAO waded into the Deep Attack Weapons Mix Study, now in progress, saying that we should "temper one of the primary expectations of the DAWMS: that a growing inventory and increasing capabilities of weapons will reduce the sorties required for deep attack missions." That does not mean GAO supports additional force structure or aircraft to fly those sorties, just that advanced aircraft and weapons "require additional justification."

The lethality of air defenses is increasing. Penetration of hostile airspace will become the domain of stealthy aircraft and unmanned systems in future wars. The demand for precision attack is also increasing, not only because the targets themselves are more difficult to destroy but also because precision makes it possible to avoid civilian casualties and collateral damage. The alternative to asymmetrical strategy is traditional force-on-force attrition warfare.

Did stealthy aircraft fail and smart weapons flunk in the Gulf War? Only in the belief of those who misread the history of what happened there and misconstrue the lessons learned. ■