

PLEASE, MR. BLAIR, NEVER TAKE SUCH A RISK AGAIN

The Prime Minister is the political hero of this war, says John Keegan, but . . . there must be a new strategic bombing survey, which may take years.

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The Sunday Telegraph

06 Jun 1999

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 turning point to fix on the calendar: June 3, 1999, when the capitulation of President Milosevic proved that a war can be won by airpower alone.

This revolutionary event has been a long time in the making. It is just a few weeks over 81 years since Britain formed the world's first independent air force, on the expectation that aircraft had ceased to be mere auxiliaries to armies and navies and could achieve henceforth decisive results on their own. That became the creed of the new Royal Air Force, as it was to become that of the eventually much more powerful United States Army Air Force. The idea of "victory through airpower" was to be held by both as an article of faith, a true doctrine in that believers clung to it in the face of all contrary material evidence.

The countervailing evidence ultimately came to appear overwhelming. After 1945 both air forces conducted detailed "Strategic Bombing Surveys", dedicated to proving that airpower underlay the defeat of Germany in the Second World War. The facts simply did not support the thesis. The "bomber barons", who had bestridden the strategic world in 1943-45, were first marginalised and then derided. "Bomber" Harris was the only British commander of his prominence not to receive a peerage. Curtis Lemay, the most passionate postwar exponent of airpower in the US eventually came to be known contemptuously as "Old Iron Pants". By the time of the Gulf War, the air forces had ended up where they started, as the junior partners of armies and navies. Their claims to have an independent role were treated with barely concealed disdain by admirals and generals.

Not any longer. The new bomber barons will be heard with the greatest attention when future peace-making operations are discussed. There is still a great deal to do before airpower theory can be fully integrated into the diplomacy and strategy of preserving

world order. We cannot yet say how the air campaign worked, how it forced Milosevic to accept the terms he had rejected ten weeks earlier. There will have to be a new strategic bombing survey and it will perhaps take years to compile before air forces and governments can understand what was achieved and why the effects of bombing yielded

the results it did. Nevertheless, the air forces have won a triumph, are entitled to every plaudit they will receive and can look forward to enjoying a transformed status in the strategic community, one they have earned by their single-handed efforts.

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 airpower.

Nevertheless, without ungraciousness, there are still criticisms of the conduct of the war to be made. The first concerns its tempo. There have really been two air wars, the first lasting a month, the second six weeks. In the first war, Nato—and let it be remembered that "Nato" really means the United States Air Force and the United States Navy's carrier groups, which flew 90 per cent of the missions and launched all the Tomahawk missiles—conducted only about 80 missions a day, not enough to dent Serb bravado and certainly not enough to make Belgrade re-consider its policy of expulsion. It was during that first month that most of the million Albanians who have become refugees were forced to leave their homes. In the second war Nato sharply increased the strike rate, until at the end it was flying 600 missions a day, thereby visiting a true blitz on the Serb homeland. It was the systematic destruction of Serbia's electricity supplies and fuel resources that sent the message. If a high tempo had been sustained from the start, the war might have been over in the first month. There is a lesson for the future management of airpower—half measures don't work.

There are also important lessons to be learnt about the public relations of this sort of war. I continue to regard its "presentation" as lamentable. The Nato spokesman, Jamie Shea, lacked the manner and presence to impress the Nato public, which was sharply divided by the conflict and needed more inspiration than it was given. Perhaps as a result General Wesley Clark, Nato's commander in Europe, whom I see I now unfairly criticised, did not come across as a man who was winning a war, as we now know he was. There should have been much less indulgence of media disbelief, a much stronger display of confidence, a much fuller presentation of the facts. Full and frank disclosure of damage done does not compromise intelligence when the enemy cannot strike back and when one's own side is winning.

Finally, the Prime Minister must learn a lesson. He is the political hero of this war and deserves so to be recognised. Alone among Nato's 19 heads of governments, he

proclaimed from the start that the war was both right and necessary and he never deviated from saying so. His emphasis on the necessity of the war was crucial. He correctly perceived that, unless Nato carried the operation through to a successful

conclusion, the reputation of the alliance, and with it that of the United States itself, would be dangerously compromised. Wrongdoers in Europe would be encouraged to challenge it again. Wrongdoers in the wider world would be encouraged to challenge the whole concept of world order, of which the United States is the standard-bearer and guarantor. Ultimately the authority of the United Nations, the world's best hope for all its flaws, would have been dangerously weakened.

Those dangers have been averted, in large part by the Prime Minister's bold stand. President Clinton now owes him even more than he did before the war began. I am glad to have written, during the war, that the Prime Minister was being brave. I am equally glad to have written that he was taking terrible risks. For this reason: if the community of independent military analysts, to which I belong, doubted almost to the last minute that airpower would work, then the Prime Minister, who does not claim to be a military expert, had no rational grounds for committing himself so wholeheartedly to a contrary belief. No one doubts his moral conviction. Had, however, NATO not won—and it has won despite conventional wisdom, against the historical evidence and by a nail-bitingly narrow margin—Britain and its Prime Minister would be characterised as having let the heart rule the head.

The successful exercise of power is ultimately a cold and calculating business. Moral principle should be staked against the force of reason only in the most exceptional circumstances. Kosovo was, perhaps, such an exceptional circumstance. Please, Prime Minister, never take such a risk again.

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