

The American Cult of Bombing

William J. Astore analyzes the fallacies behind the U.S. drive to wage war from the air.

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From Syria to Yemen in the Middle East, Libya to Somalia in Africa, Afghanistan to Pakistan in South Asia, an American aerial curtain has descended across a huge swath of the planet. Its stated purpose: combatting terrorism. Its primary method: constant surveillance and bombing – and yet more bombing. Its political benefit: minimizing the number of U.S. “boots on the ground” and so American casualties in the never-ending war on terror, as well as any [public outcry](#) about Washington’s many conflicts. Its economic benefit: plenty of high-profit business for [weapons makers](#) for whom the president can now [declare](#) a national security emergency whenever he likes and so sell their warplanes and munitions to preferred dictatorships in the Middle East (no congressional approval required). Its reality for various foreign peoples: a steady diet of [“Made in USA”](#) bombs and missiles bursting here, there, and everywhere.

Think of all this as a [cult of bombing](#) on a global scale. America’s wars are increasingly waged from the air, not on the ground, a reality that makes the prospect of ending them ever more daunting. The question is: What’s driving this process?

For many of America’s decision-makers, air power has clearly

become something of an abstraction. After all, except for the 9/11 attacks by those four hijacked commercial airliners, Americans haven't been the target of such strikes since World War II. On Washington's battlefields across the Greater Middle East and northern Africa, air power is always almost literally a one-way affair. There are no enemy air forces or significant air defenses. The skies are the exclusive property of the U.S. Air Force (and allied air forces), which means that we're no longer talking about "war" in the normal sense. No wonder Washington policymakers and military officials see it as our strong suit, our asymmetrical advantage, our way of settling scores with evildoers, real and imagined.

Bombs away!

Replacing the Body Count

In a bizarre fashion, you might even say that, in the 21st century, the bomb and missile count replaced the Vietnam-era body count as a metric of (false) progress. Using data supplied by the U.S. military, the Council on Foreign Relations estimated that the U.S. dropped at least 26,172 bombs in seven countries in 2016, the bulk of them in Iraq and Syria. Against Raqqa alone, ISIS's "capital," the U.S. and its allies dropped more than 20,000 bombs in 2017, reducing that provincial Syrian city to literal rubble. Combined with artillery fire, the bombing of Raqqa killed more than 1,600 civilians, according to Amnesty International.

Meanwhile, since Donald Trump has become president, after claiming that he would get us out of our various never-

ending wars, U.S. bombing has surged, not only against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq but in Afghanistan as well. It has driven up the civilian death toll there even as “friendly” Afghan forces are sometimes mistaken for the enemy and killed, too. Air strikes from Somalia to Yemen have also been on the rise under Trump, while civilian casualties due to U.S. bombing continue to be underreported in the American media and downplayed by the Trump administration.

U.S. air campaigns today, deadly as they are, pale in comparison to past ones such as the Tokyo firebombing of 1945, which killed more than 100,000 civilians; the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki later that year (roughly 250,000); the death toll against German civilians in World War II (at least 600,000); or civilians in the Vietnam War. (Estimates vary, but when napalm and the long-term effects of cluster munitions and defoliants like Agent Orange are added to conventional high-explosive bombs, the death toll in Southeast Asia may well have exceeded one million.) Today’s air strikes are more limited than in those past campaigns and may be more accurate, but never confuse a 500-pound bomb with a surgeon’s scalpel, even rhetorically. When “surgical” is applied to bombing in today’s age of lasers, GPS, and other precision-guidance technologies, it only obscures the very real human carnage being produced by all these American-made bombs and missiles.

This country’s propensity for believing that its ability to rain hellfire from the sky provides a winning methodology for its wars has proven to be a fantasy of our age. Whether in Korea in the early 1950s, Vietnam in the 1960s, or more

recently in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, the U.S. may control the air, but that dominance simply hasn't led to ultimate success. In the case of Afghanistan, weapons like the Mother of All Bombs, or MOAB (the most powerful non-nuclear bomb in the U.S. military's arsenal), have been celebrated as game changers even when they change nothing. (Indeed, the Taliban only continues to grow stronger, as does the branch of the Islamic State in Afghanistan.) As is often the case when it comes to U.S. air power, such destruction leads neither to victory, nor closure of any sort; only to yet more destruction.

Such results are contrary to the rationale for air power that I absorbed in a career spent in the U.S. Air Force. (I retired in 2005.) The fundamental tenets of air power that I learned, which are still taught today, speak of decisiveness. They promise that air power, defined as "flexible and versatile," will have "synergistic effects" with other military operations. When bombing is "concentrated," "persistent," and "executed" properly (meaning not micro-managed by know-nothing politicians), air power should be fundamental to ultimate victory. As we used to insist, putting bombs on target is really what it's all about. End of story -- and of thought.

Given the banality and vacuity of those official Air Force tenets, given the 21st century history of air power gone to hell and back, and based on my own experience teaching such history and strategy in and outside the military, I'd like to offer some air power tenets of my own. These are the ones the Air Force didn't teach me, but that our leaders might consider before launching their next "decisive" air

campaign.

10 Cautionary Tenets About Air Power

No. 1: Just because U.S. warplanes and drones can strike almost anywhere on the globe with relative impunity doesn't mean that they should. Given the history of air power since World War II, ease of access should never be mistaken for efficacious results.

No. 2: Bombing alone will never be the key to victory. If that were true, the U.S. would have easily won in Korea and Vietnam, as well as in Afghanistan and Iraq. American air power pulverized both North Korea and Vietnam (not to speak of neighboring Laos and Cambodia), yet the Korean War ended in a stalemate and the Vietnam War in defeat. (It tells you the world about such thinking that air power enthusiasts, reconsidering the Vietnam debacle, tend to argue the U.S. should have bombed even more – lots more.) Despite total air supremacy, the recent Iraq War was a disaster even as the Afghan War staggers on into its 18th catastrophic year.

No. 3: No matter how much it's advertised as "precise," "discriminate," and "measured," bombing (or using missiles like the Tomahawk) rarely is. The deaths of innocents are guaranteed. Air power and those deaths are joined at the hip, while such killings only generate anger and blowback, thereby prolonging the wars they are meant to end.

Consider, for instance, the "decapitation" strikes launched against Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein and his top officials in the opening moments of the George W. Bush administration's invasion of 2003. Despite the hype about that being the beginning of the most precise air campaign in

all of history, 50 of those attacks, supposedly based on the best intelligence around, failed to take out Saddam or a single one of his targeted officials. They did, however, cause “dozens” of civilian deaths. Think of it as a monstrous repeat of the precision air attacks launched on Belgrade in 1999 against [Slobodan Milosevic](#) and his regime that hit the [Chinese embassy](#) instead, killing three journalists.

Here, then, is the question of the day: Why is it that, despite all the “precision” talk about it, air power so regularly proves at best a blunt instrument of destruction? As a start, intelligence is often faulty. Then bombs and missiles, even “smart” ones, do go astray. And even when U.S. forces actually kill [high-value targets](#) (HVTs), there are always more HVTs out there. A paradox emerges from almost 18 years of the war on terror: the imprecision of air power only leads to repetitious cycles of violence and, even when air strikes prove precise, there always turn out to be fresh targets, fresh terrorists, fresh insurgents to strike.

No. 4: Using air power to send political messages about resolve or seriousness rarely works. If it did, the U.S. would have swept to victory in Vietnam. In Lyndon Johnson’s presidency, for instance, Operation [Rolling Thunder](#) (1965-1968), a graduated campaign of bombing, was meant to, but didn’t, convince the North Vietnamese to give up their goal of expelling the foreign invaders – us – from South Vietnam. Fast-forward to our era and consider recent signals sent to [North Korea](#) and [Iran](#) by the Trump administration via B-52 bomber deployments, among other military “messages.” There’s no evidence that either country modified its

behavior significantly in the face of the menace of those Baby-Boomer-era airplanes.

No. 5: Air power is enormously expensive. Spending on aircraft, helicopters, and their munitions accounted for roughly half the cost of the Vietnam War. Similarly, in the present moment, making operational and then maintaining Lockheed Martin's boondoggle of a jet fighter, the F-35, is expected to cost at least \$1.45 trillion over its lifetime. The new B-21 stealth bomber will cost more than \$100 billion simply to buy. Naval air wings on aircraft carriers cost billions each year to maintain and operate. These days, when the sky's the limit for the Pentagon budget, such costs may be (barely) tolerable. When the money finally begins to run out, however, the military will likely suffer a serious hangover from its wildly extravagant spending on air power.

No. 6: Aerial surveillance (as with drones), while useful, can also be misleading. Command of the high ground is not synonymous with god-like "total situational awareness." It can instead prove to be a kind of delusion, while war practiced in its spirit often becomes little more than an exercise in destruction. You simply can't negotiate a truce or take prisoners or foster other options when you're high above a potential battlefield and your main recourse is blowing up people and things.

No. 7: Air power is inherently offensive. That means it's more consistent with imperial power projection than with national defense. As such, it fuels imperial ventures, while fostering the kind of "global reach, global power" thinking that has in these years had Air Force generals in its grip.

No. 8: Despite the fantasies of those sending out the planes, air power often lengthens wars rather than shortening them. Consider Vietnam again. In the early 1960s, the Air Force argued that it alone could resolve that conflict at the lowest cost (mainly in American bodies). With enough bombs, napalm, and defoliants, victory was a sure thing and U.S. ground troops a kind of afterthought. (Initially, they were sent in mainly to protect the airfields from which those planes took off.) But bombing solved nothing and then the Army and the Marines decided that, if the Air Force couldn't win, they sure as hell could. The result was escalation and disaster that left in the dust the original vision of a war won quickly and on the cheap due to American air supremacy.

No. 9: Air power, even of the shock-and-awe variety, loses its impact over time. The enemy, lacking it, nonetheless learns to adapt by developing countermeasures – both active (like missiles) and passive (like camouflage and dispersion), even as those being bombed become more resilient and resolute.

No. 10: Pounding peasants from two miles up is not exactly an ideal way to occupy the moral high ground in war.

The Road to Perdition

If I had to reduce these tenets to a single maxim, it would be this: all the happy talk about the techno-wonders of modern air power obscures its darker facets, especially its ability to lock America into what are effectively one-way wars with dead-end results.

For this reason, precision warfare is truly an oxymoron. War

isn't precise. It's nasty, bloody, and murderous. War's inherent nature – its unpredictability, horrors, and tendency to outlast its original causes and goals –isn't changed when the bombs and missiles are guided by GPS. Washington's enemies in its war on terror, moreover, have learned to adapt to air power in a grimly Darwinian fashion and have the advantage of fighting on their own turf.

Who doesn't know the old riddle: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Here's a twenty-first-century air power variant on it: If foreign children die from American bombs but no U.S. media outlets report their deaths, will anyone grieve? Far too often, the answer here in the U.S. is no and so our wars go on into an endless future of global destruction.

In reality, this country might do better to simply ground its many fighter planes, bombers, and drones. Paradoxically, instead of gaining the high ground, they are keeping us on a low road to perdition.

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