

visions or theories of democracy and its requirements. Perhaps these implicit theories can be reconciled with the traditional American model, but that is a job of intellectual work neither author attempts.

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Clodfelter, Mark. *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*. New York: The Free Press, 1989.

Among American military men, a remarkable resiliency clings to the belief that the United States did possess a way to achieve its objectives in the Vietnam War, to make the war an American success. If only the United States Air Force had been permitted to bomb the Democratic Republic of Vietnam — the North — earlier in the war on the scale and with the intensity of the LINEBACKER I and LINEBACKER II offensives of 10 May-23 October and 18-29 December 1972, then, the belief goes, the North Vietnamese would have been shocked into yielding to American terms. But the excessive gradualness of the development of American bombing of the North permitted the enemy to harden his defenses and, more important, his resolve. The present reviewer has seen Air Force officers whom he generally admires and respects abandon reason for zeal when presented with this proposition.

In the book at hand, Mark Clodfelter begins (p. ix) by citing President Richard M. Nixon's embracing of this very claim, and Clodfelter returns to the idea repeatedly. Near the end he reminds us again of its persistence, and of its continuing influence upon the conduct of the US Air Force: "Because most air chiefs think political limitations prevented air power from gaining a victory in Vietnam, they have not revamped the fundamentals of strategic bombing doctrine." (p. 208)

But while Major Clodfelter is himself an associate professor of history at the United States Air Force Academy, a principal part of his purpose is to refute the proposition that air power could have won the Vietnam War. His larger purpose, furthermore, is the one implied by his main title: to analyze critically the limits of air power, lest erroneous beliefs about what air power might have accomplished in Vietnam should spawn graver errors in the conduct of future policy and war.

The resiliency of optimistic belief about what air power might have done owes much to the depth of its roots in US Air Force doctrine. Before reaching the Vietnam War, Clodfelter explores the whole evolution of American thinking about strategic air power, from World War I through the 1920s and 1930s and especially through World War II and the Korean War. In the process he offers the best concise history of this body of thought and doctrine currently available. He emphasizes its imperviousness to modification by contrary experience, and its severe limitations even in circumstances much more favorable to applying

the American airmen's preference for attacking an enemy's vital industries than were present in Vietnam.

The bulk of the book, however, as the subtitle indicates, is a history of strategic bombing during the Vietnam War. Clodfelter reviews in detail the major bombing campaigns, especially ROLLING THUNDER (2 March 1965 - 31 October 1968) and the two LINEBACKER campaigns. He surveys the shifting targets of the offensives, as frustrations led to experimentation with striking one target system after another. He also explores in detail the debates that grew with the frustrations, as civilian leaders and military men outside the Air Force groped more and more desperately for aerial means to extricate the US from a quagmire, while the Air Force chieftains sought to draw from desperation the authorization to apply to the fullest, and to vindicate, their strategic bombing doctrine. Above all, Clodfelter analyzes why the enemy's material and moral resources proved to be such that the doctrine could not be vindicated. He offers a critique of the limits of air power in an unconventional war and a Third World setting particularly, but also extends his critique to the limits of air power in general.

Along the way, it is Clodfelter's consistent emphasis on the importance of doctrine that especially distinguishes the book and makes it a model for combat histories. Doctrine may play an even larger role in shaping the conduct of the US Air Force than it does in most other military services, because the doctrine of independent air power was the foundation upon which a separate Air Force was created. But in all modern armed forces, preconceived doctrine mightily influences the ways in which the forces wage war, and always therein lies the peril that Clodfelter emphasizes, the capacity of doctrine to resist modification when experience contradicts it. Because Clodfelter points to the deeply unconventional nature of the Vietnam War as a principal part of the experience that undercut the efficacy of Air Force doctrine in Vietnam, one is prompted also to reflect on tendencies in another service, the United States Army, to cling to conventional doctrine in the face of Vietnam. In the Army those tendencies run toward denying the unconventionality of the war and therefore insisting that it was not conventional doctrine that was inappropriate, but a misguided failure to apply conventional doctrine fully enough, because the war was misperceived as more of an unconventional and a guerrilla struggle than it really was.

Military historians should pay more heed than they usually do to the impact of military thought and doctrine upon events. Mark Clodfelter admirably shows the way.

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