

Gentile, Gian P. *How Effective is Strategic Bombing? Lessons Learned from World War II to Kosovo*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2001.

Strategic bombing is not considered a subset of low-intensity conflict. But US policy-makers and the American public wish it were. Indeed, the high-altitude bombing of Serbia in 1999 as well as periodic attacks with cruise missiles on targets in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia may already have made the American wish a reality. Just as the Nuclear Age revealed itself to be not an era of total war, but a New Age of limited war, so the Missile Age has lent itself to low-intensity conflict.

Strategic bombing seems to have adapted itself nicely to the exigencies of democratic government; providing a way of waging limited war at arm's length, minimizing casualties on both sides of the conflict and satisfying both domestic population and politician. Thus, from Vietnam where targets were often hand-picked by White House politicians and advisors, to Kosovo and Serbia where the use of ground troops was ruled out *a priori* in order to sooth a nervous American public, strategic bombing has become at *fin de siecle* the American way of war. It is left to Gian Gentile, an active duty US army officer with a PhD in history from Stanford, to pose the question US policy-makers should be asking: How effective is strategic bombing?

Gentile's answers are fresh because he intends to show the reader that the question has rarely been answered honestly or even, in some cases, competently. As Gentile points out the US Air Force among others has frequently, and sometimes purposely, failed to distinguish between the effects of strategic bombing and its effectiveness. The effects, physically observed and measured, are relatively easy to see and to report - and impress the public with. The effectiveness of same is wide open for debate. The difficulty in proving its effectiveness is precisely why strategic bombing remains controversial.

The only disappointment in this marvelous book is the misleading subtitle. The book is less about "lessons learned from World War II to Kosovo" than it is an engaging treatment of the vicissitudes of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) following World War II: Gentile does not treat equally all episodes "from World War II to Kosovo." Instead, his study is essentially of "the interpretive framework USSBS analysts brought to their work" after World War II. Six of his seven chapters take us through a fascinating tale of scientific, bureaucratic, analytic, inter-service and political difficulties. Only in the last chapter are more recent cases treated. But Korea and Vietnam are given scant attention, as is Kosovo. Only the Gulf War and its corresponding Gulf War Air Power Survey (GWAPS) receives detailed analysis.

Of course, for these other interventions no such grandiose surveys were carried out by the United States government. Gentile does not treat the other cases in depth because, of course, neither did the US Air Force. Nor did the USAF study cases of intervention in which no strategic air power was employed. The absence of these null cases is a serious methodological problem for those, like Gentile, who truly want to know the effectiveness, rather than the effects of strategic bombing.

How does the UASF explain, defend, treat or ignore the numerous instances in which the end-all-and-be-all instrument of force was not used? Do these null cases by implication support the critics of strategic bombing doctrine? Do such null cases suggest, as critics have said from the first, that strategic bombing is a single dimension of US force, not to be over-rated or over-emphasized, especially at the expense of other services?

While no strategic bombing survey on the order of the USSBS or GWAPS was carried out for the Korean or Vietnam conflicts, specialists have examined the use of air power and strategic bombing in both those wars. Vietnam has been extensively and even-handedly treated by Mark Clodfelter in *The Limits of Air Power* (New York: Free Press, 1989) and more recently by Wayne Thomson in *To Hanoi and Back* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2000). Korea has been looked at carefully by Robert Futrell in *The United States Air Force in Korea* (Office of Air Force History, 1983), and more recently by Conrad C. Crane in *American Air Power Strategy in Korea* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000). Gentile's book complements those very well.

And in the end, the lessons learned from World War II to Kosovo and from the USSBS and GWAPS essentially amount to the unsettling conclusion that we know little about the effectiveness of strategic bombing. For this very reason the book will be valuable for any library as well as for any number of undergraduate or graduate courses in public policy analysis, national security, air power, war strategy, history of World War II and, of course, bureaucratic politics.

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