

Impact of air power theory in ww2

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



Did “ air power theory” do more harm than good before the outbreak of “ and during” the Second World War?

This essay will examine the meaning and impact of “ air power theory”, a theory which took shape after World War One, which predicted that air power would be the single most important factor in the outcome of future wars. We will briefly examine the impact this theory had on the interwar Military planning and strategies of the major powers, as well as the influence of air power theory during the Second World War itself. The first part of our essay looks at what “ air power theory” is, we shall look at the two major air power theorists, Giulio Douhet ^[1] and Billy Mitchell ^[2] and examine the differences and similarities between the two. Secondly we shall examine the negative impact of the “ air power theory”, both in its implementation by the US and Britain and the shortcomings of the theory as demonstrated during the Second World War. The third part is concerned with the successful implementation of air power theory by the US and Britain before and during the Second World War which led to positive military outcomes for the respective nations during the War. Finally we will attempt to conclude on whether the overall impact of “ air power theory” during this time period can be judged positively or negatively.

The most famous of the air power theorists, General Giulio Douhet was a passionate advocate on the fundamental importance and potentially revolutionary application of air power, specifically strategic bombing, as the most important means to win future wars. Douhet served with the Italian armed forces in Libya during the Italy - Turkey war of 1911 and during World

War One, during which time aircraft were being used for the first time in military engagements. In 1921 he published “ The Command of the Air” , arguably one of the most important works in air power theory and a endorsement of the power of precision bombing to win quick, decisive but devastating future wars. “ *I have maintained, and continue to do so, that in the wars to come the decisive field of action will be the aerial field*” [3]

It is not necessary to go into complex detail regarding Douhet’s theories of war, as we may summarise them into five key points. Firstly Douhet stated that modern and future warfare would give no distinction between civilian and combatant, that the previously taboo targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure would be a thing of the past. Secondly, Douhet believed, no doubt influenced by his experiences from the First World War, that a quick, decisive victory using purely ground forces was no longer possible. Thirdly, that there was at the time, and most importantly for Douhet, would never be an effective anti aircraft measure that could prevent heavy strategic bombing from destroying its target. “ *Consequently I say, no aerial defence, because it is practically useless* ” [4] .

Following on from this point, and arguably the most controversial in terms of the suffering it was seen to have led to, Douhet stated that the only way to defend against an enemy strategic bombing and to ultimately win a war was to launch a massive bombing campaign that would devastate the target’s government, industrial infrastructure and ability to make war, as well as so demoralising the enemy population that the shattered civilian population would force their Government to sue for peace or surrender unconditionally.

Finally, and sharing a similar viewpoint with Mitchell, ^[5] there was a need for a nation's air force to be completely independent of both the army and navy, and to constantly maintain a state of readiness in the event of needing to deal the knockout blow to the enemy. ^[6]

Although borrowing many of his ideas from Douhet and others, American General Billy Mitchell did combine many air power theories at the time to create a structured, well thought air power theory which some might argue was more comprehensive and realistic than the ideas of Douhet. ^[7] Like Douhet, Mitchell wanted a centralised, independent air force, but unlike Douhet Mitchell wanted a centralised structure for all types of airpower, each given equal importance, whereas Douhet was concerned primarily with strategic bombers, any other type of aircraft was for him possibly useful but certainly secondary to the importance of the bombers.

Mitchell also did not share Douhet's view of strategic bombing being impossible to defend against. Mitchell wanted equal resources dedicated to both offensive and defensive air capabilities, and envisioned a wider role for ground attack and fighter aircraft that could be used as bomber escorts. ^[8]

What both theories have in common however is their firm belief that air power would be absolutely vital, indeed the most important factor, in any future wars. Both men died before seeing that in the awful carnage of the Second World War, their theories were far from entirely accurate.

When looking at the use of air power in the Second World War, it is clear that air power, in particular strategic bombing, did not make land and navy forces

obsolete, and that both Douhet and Mitchell had both overestimated the destructive and defensive capabilities of strategic bomber aircraft. “

Successful warfare still depended upon the movement of armies to occupy land, and the movement of ships to provide supplies and men ,” ^[9] Although it played an important role throughout the War, the majority of fighting in Europe, in particular on the Eastern front was done with conventional land armies. Douhet had predicted that Britain’s mighty navy would be useless against a co-ordinated air assault, yet the British navy and merchant fleet was the lifeline supported the war effort with supplies from America and beyond. And certainly Douhet’s assertion that land forces were no longer capable of achieving quick, decisive victories does not stand up when looking at the German Blitzkrieg campaigns between 1939-1941.

In the 1930s Britain had slashed military spending, partly as a result of having to support the mass of unemployed during the great depression and partly due to an increasing anti war feeling in some parts of British Society. The exception to this was spending on Bomber Command, the part of the RAF responsible for strategic bombing. Strategic bombing offered a solution to the horrors of the First World War’s trench warfare, a decisive, relatively humane way in which to fight and end a war. Before the beginning of the war the emphasis was fortunately shifted to air defence, investing in innovations such as radar and fighter interceptors to shoot down German bombers. Following through with Douhet’s theories, as Bomber Command wished to, could have been a disaster for the defence of the British Isles, leaving them literally defenceless in the face of the Luftwaffe. ^[10]

Both the USAF and Bomber Command continued throughout the war, as well the interwar period, to seriously miscalculate both the destructive capabilities and accuracy of strategic bombing. Technology had not solved the problems that both Douhet and Mitchell had overlooked in their theories, which failed to seriously take into account weather conditions, inaccurate targeting of enemy targets, as well as being able to ascertain which type of industrial targets would cause the most damage to the enemy's war making capabilities. Air power theory also seriously overestimated the ease to which Bombers could make their targets without being shot down. Even after Bombers were given fighter escorts, the losses to Bomber crews were horrific. " *The night bombing offensive against German cities and transportation targets between 3 September 1943 and 2 September 1944 cost the command 17, 479 flying personnel killed in action or dead of wounds* " [11]

When considering the harm inflicted by air power theories, undoubtedly we cannot ignore the huge loss of civilian life lost in strategic bombing raids, committed by German, British and American Bomber crews against civilian targets during the Second World War. It is estimated that more German civilians were killed by allied bombing, than the combined casualty rate of British servicemen during the war, a staggering 543, 000 dead. [12] At the heart of this bombing campaign against civilians was one of the most important aspects of air power theory. The theory that a targeted bombing campaign designed to kill civilians and spread terror amongst a population that would then force its Government to capitulate. The theory was fatally flawed against a totalitarian regime where citizens knew that talk of

surrender was likely to get one shot. The campaign undoubtedly affected German civilian morale, yet unlike the targeted bombing against industrial infrastructure it did not significantly affect the Nazi war making capabilities nor convince them to consider surrender whilst Hitler was in power. ^[13]

Despite many aspects of air power theory being flawed and causing what many consider a waste of lives and resources; I believe that the broad application of air power theory by both the British and the Americans played a serious impact in their final victory over the axis powers. Both Douhet and Mitchell believed that in order to maximise the potential of air power, a nation's air force must be independent of both the army and navy. Williams in particular promoted the idea of a centralised, independent air command for all types of air power, equal in importance and as independent as the army and navy. Despite the near legendary status of the Luftwaffe, it was primarily meant and used as a support for the army, both in the interwar period and throughout the Second World War. The Germans had a limited air strategy, the Luftwaffe lacked complete independence and was not always given the same amount of resources as the army and navy.

The British and the Americans both before and during the War placed a huge emphasis on a general air power strategy, giving the RAF and the USAF operational independence to formulate an independent strategy and the huge amount of investment, personnel and resources necessary to carry out that strategy successfully. ^[14] The comprehensive general air strategy that Britain possessed during the Battle of Britain, with equal emphasis on offence and defence, allowed it to resist the strategically limited Luftwaffe

which from the beginning lacked the scientific air power knowledge of the better supported, more independent, RAF. When the allies went on the offensive, gaining air superiority over Europe was vital in both protecting allied land forces and speeding up the advance by inflicting serious damage on German forces of any kind. Once Germany lost control of the skies they were forced back onto the defensive, unable to effectively counter attack without sufficient air cover and with inadequate defence against air power. Although we have previously criticised the civilian bombing of German cities, strategic bombing of German industrial targets undoubtedly slowed down their ability to rebuild their forces and severely hampered the Nazi war economy. ^[15] Although enthusiastic advocates of air power, by not following through with the main principles of air power theory, the German war machine found itself at a distinct disadvantage against the Western allies. Once USA and Britain had gained domination of the skies, as Douhet and Mitchell had insisted was vital, it was never in doubt that the defeat of Nazi Germany was inevitable. “ The influence of air power on the ability of one nation to impress its will on another in armed contest will be decisive.” ^[16]

During the final stages of the War in the Pacific, the USAF demonstrated that one of Douhet's most controversial theories, the use of strategic bombing to target not only military and industrial infrastructure but also civilians, could effectively bring a war to an end without the need for military conquest on land. Although the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were credited for ending the war, the conventional heavy bombing of Japan actually inflicted more casualties on Japanese civilians, and played a greater

part in destroying Japan's war making capabilities. ^[17] Undoubtedly the effect of heavy bombing and dropping of the atomic bombs was the single most important factor in forcing political pressure inside Japan to convince the leadership that surrender was the only option, Japan could simply not continue to fight the war. ^[18] The atomic bombs were the only time that the Douhet and Williams theories of the destructive potential of a short, decisive overwhelming bombing raid that could bring an enemy to its knees proved accurate.

For many academics and observers, the strategic bombing of Japan is still considered one of the greatest crimes of the Second World War. Despite the awful suffering it caused however, I would argue that it ultimately did more good than harm, preventing a military land assault on Japan that would have cost potentially the lives of hundreds of thousands of American Soldiers and millions of Japanese citizens. Even without an invasion, conventional heavy bombing would have soon equalled then surpassed the amount killed in Nagasaki and Hiroshima in a relatively short space of time, so devastating was its effectiveness. The unconditional surrender was without doubt the best thing for both Japan and America, and it might never have happened if the atomic bombs had not been dropped.

In conclusion then, I believe that ultimately, for the allies, the adoption of the broader aspects of air power theory was a positive thing. Many of what Douhet and Williams said about air power did not come true in the Second World War. It did not replace armies and navies as the pre-eminent factor in warfare. It did not lead to wars being settled in a matter of days with a short,

destructive bombing campaign and their predictions of the destructive capabilities and accuracy of conventional strategic bombing, with the possible exception of Japan, were to prove ludicrously optimistic.

Undoubtedly however, by adopting Mitchell's theory of creating a centralised, independent air force that was given the necessary resources to achieve its strategic goals, the United States and Britain had a massive advantage over Nazi Germany's more limited air strategy. This advantage allowed them to eventually gain air dominance, put the German forces on the back foot and never allow them to re-gain the initiative. Strategic bombing, although causing huge civilian casualties in both Germany and Japan, played a crucial role in crippling the German war machine, and the most important part in forcing an unconditional Japanese surrender. It is for these reasons that I believe that air power theory was overall, a positive and important body of work.

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Footnotes

[1] Douhet, G – “ (1927)

[2] Mitchell, B – (1989)

[3] Douhet (ibid) p. 199

[4] Douhet (ibid) p. 157

[5] Mitchell, (ibid)

[6] Warner, E - “ (1952) p. 630

[7] MacIsaac, D (1986) p . 631

[8] Collier, B (1974) p. 93

[9] Overy, R. J (1980) p203

[10] MacIsaac, D (ibid) p. 633

[11] Murray, W (1998) p. 99

[12] Overy, R. J. (ibid) p. 207

[13] MacIsaac, D (ibid) p. 637

[14] Overy, R. J. (ibid) p. 204

[15] Overy, R. J. (ibid) p208

[16] Mitchell, B (ibid) p. 7

[17] Overy, R. J (ibid) p. 100

[18] Overy, R. J. (ibid) p. 93