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The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory

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which to measure performance was an important impetus; an “organization or process to connect the technical branches with their operational counterparts” was essential. It will be interesting to see how well these useful lessons are put into practice in today’s military.

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Meilinger, Phillip S., ed. *The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory*. Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: School of Advanced Airpower Studies, 1997. 650pp. (no price given)

From dirigibles to stealth bombers, the theory and practice of airpower are distilled in this anthology’s fifteen thought-provoking essays by thirteen practitioners and students of military aviation. *The Paths of Heaven* traces the development of airpower doctrine and strategy from before World War I through DESERT STORM and beyond. Of necessity, many of the subjects are familiar to aviation history buffs, but the depth of scholarship evident in each essay will not only educate but entertain most readers.

The editor and author of three articles is Colonel Phillip Meilinger, Ph.D., a former C-130 pilot and previously the dean of the School

of Advanced Airpower Studies. His operational background and academic credentials are matched by those of several other contributors. As a result, the book reflects hands-on knowledge of airpower, in addition to historical and doctrinal perspectives.

The book’s organization is largely chronological. Meilinger looks at Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, and Alexander de Seversky, while Lieutenant Colonel Mark Clodfelter assesses William “Billy” Mitchell—thus the most influential airpower exponents and advocates are assembled in this one volume. Latter-day air strategists John Boyd and John Warden are addressed by Lieutenant Colonel David Fadok.

Beyond the key personalities of airpower doctrine, topical contributions include those of David Mets, with coverage of aviation influence in the U.S. Navy, and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Faber, in a review of the interwar Air Corps Tactical School. Contemporary European views are provided by James Corum. Cold War perspectives are examined by Karl Mueller (airpower and nuclear strategy); Dennis Drew (low-intensity conflict); Harold Winton (joint U.S. Army and Air Force operations following Vietnam); Colonel Buster McCrabb (Nato air doctrine); Lieutenant Colonel Edward Felker (Soviet aviation theory); Major Bruce DeBlois (airpower and space power); and I.

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B. Holley (the continuing search for an airpower theory).

Among the most revealing upshots of these essays is the interdependence of the early theorists. Douhet, who began thinking about airpower in 1908, was not well known outside Europe until the 1920s. (He spent a full year of the Great War in prison for his non-conformist views, but he was fully vindicated afterward and promoted to general, though he declined to return to active duty.) His influence on Mitchell and de Seversky was profound. Meilinger makes a strong case that the two Americans were more effective proselytizers than prophets (though both made uncannily accurate predictions) and that both fell wide of the mark in some ways. A spectacular film by de Seversky, animated by Disney and based on his best-selling *Victory through Airpower*, envisioned a huge bomber force destroying Japan from Alaska. Anyone who has flown in the Aleutians—arguably the worst aviation weather on earth—will marvel at the major's reasoning.

Apart from Mets's chapter on naval aviation, the book's perspective is understandably Air Force oriented. That fact undoubtedly accounts for statements that are accurate only within a land-based framework. For example, Meilinger states that the Battle of Britain remains the only clear-cut defensive air victory; in fact, the fast carrier

task forces' defeat of the kamikazes in 1944–45 was a campaign lasting twice as long as the 1940 battle, covering vastly more territory and fought from bases infinitely more vulnerable than even Fighter Command's grassy fields. Additionally, F-86 counterair operations in Korea scored a defensive success, in that they ended almost entirely Communist air attacks south of the Yalu.

Naval readers will be interested in some of the "prophets" waver- ing attitudes toward aircraft carriers. Mitchell, for instance, supported the Navy's experiments with USS *Langley* (CV 1), but he reversed helm when more effective ships and aircraft emerged. So did de Seversky, who was at least as antagonistic to the Navy as Mitchell—a supreme irony, considering that de Seversky's own czarist navy (de Seversky, a native Russian, had served in the Russian naval air service until 1918) had matched the world in use of seaplane carriers.

The Paths of Heaven offers much more than can be described here. Suffice it to say, this volume will provide hours of compelling reading for any sailor or airman concerned with the use of the sky.

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