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# SET AND DRIFT

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## Giulio Douhet Vindicated Desert Storm 1991

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Lieutenant Colonel John F. Jones, Jr., U.S. Air Force

**G**ENERAL BILLY MITCHELL HOLDS AN honored place in Air Force history: he took the air power case to the public, sinking the *Ostfriesland* and helping pave the way for an independent Air Force. Sometimes forgotten, however, is the Italian colonel who was also an air power prophet, who was also court-martialed, and was even imprisoned for a year. Giulio Douhet's name does not hold the same mystique for most Air Force blue-suiters as Billy Mitchell's, perhaps because he was not American or perhaps because, like Mitchell, his predictions were not always accurate—but his influence on Mitchell and our air power legends has been profound.

Until Douhet's theories, published in 1921, could be fully tested and proven in war, a lingering doubt remained. But with the success of air power in Desert Storm, his ideas deserve another look. He was right all along. Early in his *Command of the Air*, Douhet states that air power makes it possible to conduct

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high-explosive bombing raids over any part of the enemy's territory and even ravage the whole country by chemical and bacteriological warfare. He proclaims that air power creates an unbounded battlefield, limited only by a nation's border. Consequently, there will be no sanctuaries from the war; indeed, "there will be no distinction any longer between soldiers and civilians" since exposure to bombing makes everyone a combatant. He introduces the concept that there is no defense against aerial attacks—"nothing man can do on the surface of the earth can interfere with a plane in flight, moving freely in the third dimension."

In summarizing "the new possibilities" brought about through air power, Douhet draws a conclusion that is prophetic but startling, given the infancy of the airplane in 1921: "*All of this must inevitably effect a profound change in the form of future wars, because the essential characteristics of those wars will be radically different from those of any previous ones.*"

Giulio Douhet had the vision, looking at the very primitive machines of the day, to see past the less than impressive performance of aircraft in World War I and to realize that the character of warfare had changed. The airplane provided the means to reverse the dictum, reinforced during the war, of the advantage of the defensive over the offensive. But the change was far more than the introduction of a new weapon system to support the ground and naval offensive forces. Douhet believed that the airplane could do it all: it "is the offensive weapon *par excellence*."

Douhet's basic tenet was that control of the air could produce victory, for it allowed the nation to take the offensive, "to be in a position to wield offensive power so great it defies human imagination." Aerial offensive power could be brought to bear on the total range of the enemy's resources: in Douhet's terminology, his industrial and commercial establishments, important public and private buildings, transportation centers and arteries, and designated areas of civilian population. That means, in current terms: industrial capacity to wage war, lines of communication, C<sup>3</sup> (command, control, and communications), and the people. Douhet's bottom line was simple; he believed air power could be decisive in victory, to the point of the air campaign *being* the war, not just a supporting effort.

Throughout the seventy years after *Command of the Air* was published, air power was never considered decisive in war. The U.S. strategic bombing campaign against Germany during World War II was essential and clearly contributed to the Allied victory, but most do not consider it decisive. The 1967 Arab-Israeli War was perhaps the closest an air force came to being decisive. Douhet would have been proud! But the Israeli air strikes only set the stage for a rout of the Egyptian army, and the ceasefire occurred after the Israeli army occupied Arab territory. As effective and overpowering as the air war was, the ultimate victory came on the ground.

Since World War II, no one has questioned the value of air power. But the role of air power has always been open to discussion, in large part because the vast majority of non-U.S. Air Force military officers do not consider air power a force unto itself (i.e., decisive). Air has almost always been subordinate to the ground or sea; consequently the role of air power is primarily supportive. All agree that control of the air is essential, but this control simply allows freedom of action for the other forces. The vision of Douhet has always been obscured by air power's "inherently supportive" nature.

However, the performance of the air forces in Desert Storm gave history an example of the full potency of air power. It provided a solid demonstration of Douhet's vision. After seventy years, Giulio Douhet has been vindicated. Air power was the decisive element, with land and sea forces in largely supportive, though important, roles.

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*"This is the essence of Douhet's concepts: air power so powerful that it alone could defeat an enemy. It happened in Desert Storm."*

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Command of the air was Douhet's sacred concept, and the Desert Storm air campaign could be dedicated to his memory. He believed the "independent air force" must meet two conditions: "(1) possess enough strength to conquer the command of the air and (2) maintain that strength and exploit the command in such a way as to crush the material and moral resistance of the enemy. . . . to achieve victory regardless of what happens on the ground." The first condition has been a fundamental part of U.S. military plans, but interservice doctrine and plans had not allowed air power to venture into the "exploiting" arena until the Gulf War.

The difference in the Gulf had to do with the fact that coalition forces needed time to deploy, get oriented to the theater, integrate operational plans, refine command and control, etc. There was also the desire to keep casualties to a minimum, allow sanctions time to work, and give Saddam an opportunity to back down. Even after the president set a deadline in mid-January, there was still a desire not to commit ground troops immediately. What this did was create an ideal situation for the air component. When General Schwarzkopf asked the air component commander, Lieutenant General Horner, for an offensive air campaign, the Air Force and sister-service air proponents at last had an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of air power. We do not know exactly what Horner said to Schwarzkopf, but he must have spoken for Douhet and all blue-suiters from Mitchell to the present: "You give us thirty days, and we'll destroy or neutralize air defense command and control, destroy nuclear, biological and chemical storage and production capability, knock out C<sup>3</sup> infrastructure, destroy electrical grids and oil storage facilities, deny military resupply, eliminate

long-term offensive capability, and weaken the Republican Guards." These objectives are the same kind that Douhet envisioned when he discussed the air offensive.

However, per Douhet, the first order of business was to gain command of the air, or air superiority. Douhet's definition is still valid: "to have the ability to fly against an enemy so as to injure him, while he has been deprived of the power to do likewise." Douhet notes, correctly, that not all of the enemy's aircraft have to be destroyed, nor do they have to be grounded. The key is that the enemy must be incapable of developing any aerial action of significance.

Douhet did not predict the eventual improvements of defenses against aircraft. He believed that anti-aircraft guns, pursuit planes, and artillery fire were essentially ineffective and concluded that bombers were largely untouchable. Douhet did mention that the only possible threat came from enemy aircraft, so they should be destroyed on the ground. He clearly did not envision the state-of-the-art air defense system the Air Force faced in Desert Storm: radars, missiles, anti-aircraft artillery, and 750 fighter aircraft. Air superiority and follow-on offensive strikes depended on these threats being neutralized, and they were early targets in the air campaign.

Once command of the air is obtained, Douhet said, "no hard and fast rules" for target selection for the air offensive are possible. "The choice of enemy targets will depend upon a number of circumstances, material, moral, and psychological, the importance of which is not easily estimated. It is here, in grasping these imponderables in choosing enemy targets, that future commanders of Independent Air Forces will show their ability." Perhaps Douhet did not realize that target selection can sometimes be in the purview of political leaders rather than military commanders.

Douhet was a proponent of "mass," and the coalition air forces followed that principle, flying almost 110,000 sorties in the forty-three-day war. The air component command targets were incorporated into four phases of operations. Phase I was the strategic campaign, which had air superiority as its first goal. The opening strikes on 17 January, with 668 attacking aircraft, hit radars, command and control facilities, nuclear-biological-chemical weapons facilities, power generation capacity, air defenses, and airfields. These strategic targets were of such importance that it can be argued that by the end of the first day (in fact, the first ten minutes) the war had been won. This level of devastation after the initial attacks was what Douhet had in mind when he thought about breaking the material and moral resistance of the enemy. The four phases did not occur exactly as planned, nor did one end before another began. Phase I targeting strikes continued throughout the campaign; Phase II (suppression of air defenses in the Kuwaiti Theater of Operations) and Phase III (attacking the field army) both started, in effect, on the first day.

By the thirty-ninth day, the beginning of the ground offensive, the air campaign had successfully met the objectives General Horner's plan had promised. The destruction was devastating; the air campaign, with its precision munitions and stealth capabilities, truly did "wield offensive power so great it defies human imagination." The enemy ground forces had been disrupted, their equipment destroyed, and their morale broken. A three-week ground offensive had been planned, but the air campaign had been decisive—only one hundred hours were required before a ceasefire was called. Phase IV, support of the ground operations, was over quickly.

The vindication of Giulio Douhet lies in the fact that air power had finally been decisive in a war. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney proclaimed it, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs proclaimed it on day thirty-six, and so did the Air Force Chief of Staff following the war. What is remarkable about the air effort is that it resulted in victory without having the ground forces occupy large portions of Iraqi territory. This is the essence of Douhet's concepts: air power so powerful that it alone could defeat an enemy. It happened in Desert Storm.

However, it is important to admit that Douhet was not one hundred percent right. There are areas in which he was off track. For example, his concept of the offensive included complete destruction of the objective. He figured total war meant using all weapons available, including poison gas and incendiaries. If he had known about nuclear weapons, he would have undoubtedly included those. His enthusiasm for ugly weapons of (mass) destruction should be forgiven; he was looking at the issue theoretically and from a purely military viewpoint. Just as we do not disregard Sun Tzu for preferring beheading as his punishment of choice, we should not penalize Douhet for endorsing maximum destruction. Douhet also underestimated the amount of bombing required to destroy a target. He stated that an objective must be completely destroyed in one attack and attempted to quantify the process. Unfortunately, bombing involves more factors than he imagined. There are other flaws in Douhet's ideas, including the impact of technology, speed requirements in bombers, and various aspects of structuring the independent air force. But these are minor points when compared to his overall vision.

Wars produce many "what if" debates. Perhaps the key question remaining from Desert Storm is, "Did we need a ground operation at all?" In other words, was Douhet right? Can an air campaign win a war against an army in the field, without any ground operations? Some will argue that another two weeks of continued air strikes could have resulted in meeting all political objectives. Undoubtedly the Army would have had to conduct clean-up and securing operations in Kuwait, but these could have been post-ceasefire.

Douhet's basic tenet that warfare had fundamentally changed can now be fully understood. The airplane is the supreme offensive weapon. It is not an inherently supportive creature—it can win wars all by itself.