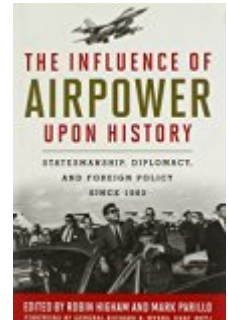


Robin Higham, Mark P. Parillo, eds.. *The Influence of Airpower upon History: Statesmanship, Diplomacy, and Foreign Policy since 1903*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013. 328 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-3674-5.



Reviewed by Robert Ehlers

Published on H-War (March, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In their edited work, *The Influence of Airpower upon History*, Robin Higham and Mark Parillo have brought together ten of the world's preeminent airpower scholars to discuss airpower's role in formulation and execution of policy. The result is a tour de force in which these authors give the reader a variety of useful insights regarding airpower's strengths and limitations as a tool of statecraft during the past century. This work is an indispensable asset for scholars of airpower, aviation history, diplomatic history, grand strategy, and military theory. Policymakers and military personnel will also profit a great deal from the book since it will help them to think deeply about how airpower can best help them as they carry out their obligations to keep the United States safe and prosperous. Airpower buffs will also find many new things to consider as they read the various chapters in this book.

Higham and Parillo, and their contributing authors, have focused their efforts on airpower's role as an instrument of policy (also referred to commonly as grand strategy). While they discuss

in detail how tactical, operational, and military-strategic uses of the air weapon have influenced military campaigns and the outcome of armed conflicts, they go much further. The subject matter in each of the chapters reinforces the fact that airpower, like any other policy instrument, is useful only to the degree that statesmen and senior military officers understand its contextual limitations; the ways in which cultural nuances affect its employment; how their own and their adversaries' rationalities (worldviews) come into play; and how change over time within individual countries and globally has affected, and continues to affect, airpower's aggregate effectiveness as a policy tool.

These four key themes--context, culture, rationality, and change over time--resonate throughout the book and remind us that, taken together, they form the underpinnings of a country's strategic culture, to include the ways in which its leaders employ airpower. In fact, the authors make a compelling case that various statesmen's choices regarding the use of air assets are always in-

formed by these factors and their own experiences with air warfare, consciously or otherwise. Consequently, these policy choices tell us a great deal about what kinds of continuities and discontinuities we may expect to see in the future regarding the employment of airpower and even newer technologies such as space and especially cyber assets.

The authors give us a very clear understanding of “airpower” as a policy instrument and a technology so large and complex that any effort to treat it as the simple sum of aircraft on the ramp cannot possibly bring us any real understanding of its potential to influence other actors on the world stage. As a tool of statecraft, airpower is military and commercial; an instrument of calculated coercion and brute force; a tool for building alliances and security or for creating the opposite effects in the adversary’s camp. Airpower is, in short, so complex and potentially cataclysmic with the advent of nuclear weapons that it requires policymakers to exercise extraordinarily careful judgment in its use lest they bring disaster upon their countries.

Another recurrent theme is the fact that as a technology, airpower transcends the military arena and fact comprises an immense range of attributes, including visionaries, engineers, industry, pilots, ground crew, energy resources to include aviation fuel, airfield infrastructures and access, training regimens for the huge range of airmanship skills required to operate and maintain air fleets, and a host of other assets that together facilitate the development of airpower broadly defined. Despite this reality that airpower is much more than military aviation, even within the latter a range of capabilities allows policymakers to pursue their objectives. The Berlin Airlift and the resupply of Israeli forces during the October (Yom Kippur) War, for instance, are examples of grand-strategic successes achieved entirely with air-transport assets.

While all the essays are useful, several give us deep insights into these larger issues influencing the development of airpower and its employment as a tool of statecraft. John Morrow, for instance, reminds us that while the human imagination is a powerful thing, it cannot take advantage of capabilities that do not yet exist. This was very much in evidence before and during the First World War, when various doomsday predictions about the airplane’s impact not just on warfare, but on humanity’s very survival, proved baseless. As Jeffrey Underwood emphasizes, even during World War II, when the air weapon came of age, Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, William “Billy” Mitchell, Sir Arthur Harris, and the USAAF’s “Bomber Barons” proved wrong in their assertions that heavy bombers could win wars. However, Underwood also reminds us that airpower played a major role in speeding Allied victory, in large part because Churchill and Roosevelt were airpower champions who positioned their countries’ military forces to win in the air and thus speed victory at sea and on land. Richard Muller’s compelling discussion of the Luftwaffe’s role as both bluff and trump card before and during the early years of World War II reminds us that the proper combination of diplomacy, coercion, displays of real air strength, obfuscation of air weaknesses, and adversaries’ misguided responses (often based on bad intelligence and the consequent susceptibility to deception) can come together to give a major power crucial advantages in the diplomatic and military arenas.

Similarly, other authors make clear that while contextual and cultural factors often drive airpower development, employment, and effectiveness as a tool of statecraft, individual leaders may make serious errors in their use of this instrument of power. Patrick Facon’s study of French aviation in the interwar period, to include its stagnation and decline, policymakers’ and air officers’ failures to reverse this dangerous trend, and the resulting policy paralysis that occurred during the rise of Nazi Germany, makes clear the dangers of

ignoring or, even worse, decontextualizing any major facet of state power—in this case military aviation. The remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, the Anschluss and the Sudetenland crisis in 1938, and the German occupation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia in 1939 highlighted the sad state of French aviation and the Gallic leadership's impotence to respond to Nazi aggrandizement. Similarly, David Jones explains how Stalin in particular vacillated between building or forsaking a strategic bomber force—a process which, interestingly, paralleled his uncertainties about whether to establish “Communism in One Country” or export it via the Communist International (Comintern). Stalin ultimately chose the former. Consequently, he supported tactical aviation as a first priority with strategic bombers taking a distinct back seat, especially once the German invasion made clear their limitations in the kind of war the Russians were fighting. In telling this tale, Jones gives us a very useful look at the ways in which strategic culture, and its key elements, influence the development and use of airpower.

As with any edited volume, some essays are less compelling than others. René De La Pejadra's chapter on airpower's influence in Latin American statecraft, for instance, gives the reader a good idea of aviation's varying roles on the continent. However, his anti-American views are so obvious and shrill that they rob his essay of the credibility it would otherwise command. Indeed, one gets the impression that he wrote it to vilify the United States rather than to demonstrate how rivalries among Latin American states (which usually predated and often had little to do with the U.S. Cold War policy), foreign involvement, and strategic culture came together to drive the use of airpower. Douglas Smith's and Kent Coleman's chapter on the role of aircraft carriers in U.S. statecraft, while exceptionally strong in almost every way, elides several crucial limitations under which carriers labor, including very short-range aircraft, limited air-refueling capabilities, limited payload, and an inability to sustain operations for

any length of time without major resupply efforts. During the early phases of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Air Force tankers had to refuel Navy jets several times to get them to the target and back.

This question of jointness during OEF brings us to the book's only other shortcoming. Although Higham and Parillo both emphasize that military aviation often encompasses all services, and that the services are interdependent, the various authors tell us little about this. The broader and deeper interdependence between policymakers, military aviation, civilian aircraft industries, and other topics are front and center and very nicely explicated, but the need to orchestrate the employment of airpower effectively within joint and combined military operations is nearly absent. While this is technically an operational issue, it has had grand-strategic effects on several occasions and therefore deserves greater attention.

Whatever minor shortcomings the reader may find in Higham's and Parillo's edited volume, they have produced a superb and thought-provoking work featuring a number of renowned airpower scholars. The various authors very clearly understand how context, culture, rationality, and change over time influence airpower employment in pursuit of policy objectives. These elements of strategic culture are at the center of this work and exceptionally informative. The authors also see how the human element, especially policymakers' experiences with and preconceptions about airpower employment, has led to varying grand-strategic outcomes. This impressive work will have a prominent place on my bookshelf, as it should on that of every military and diplomatic historian, policymaker, policy advisor, and military officer.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Robert Ehlers. Review of Higham, Robin; Parillo, Mark P., eds. *The Influence of Airpower upon History: Statesmanship, Diplomacy, and Foreign Policy since 1903*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38471>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.