

## Dominating the Skies -- and Losing the Wars Air Supremacy Isn't What It Used to Be

Posted by Joan Russow

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By William J. Astore

June 21, 2016

In the era of the long war on terror, Thursday, June 2nd, 2016, was a tough day for the U.S. military. Two modern jet fighters, a Navy F-18 Hornet and an Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon flown by two of America's most capable pilots, went down, with one pilot killed. In a war that has featured total dominance of the skies by America's intrepid aviators and robotic drones, the loss of two finely tuned fighter jets was a remarkable occurrence.

As it happened, though, those planes weren't lost in combat. Enemy ground fire or missiles never touched them nor were they taken out in a dogfight with enemy planes (of which, of course, the Islamic State, the Taliban, and similar U.S. enemies have none). Each was part of an elite aerial demonstration team, the Navy's Blue Angels and the Air Force's Thunderbirds, respectively. Both were lost to the cause of morale-boosting air shows.

Each briefly grabbed the headlines, only to be quickly forgotten. Americans moved on, content in the knowledge that accidents happen in risky pursuits.

But here's a question: What does it say about our overseas air wars when the greatest danger American pilots face involves performing aerial hijinks over the friendly skies of the homeland? In fact, it tells us that U.S. pilots currently have not just air superiority, air supremacy but total mastery of the fabled high ground of war. And yet in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Greater Middle East while the U.S. rules the skies in an uncontested way, America's conflicts rage on with no endgame in sight.

In other words, for all its [promise](#) of devastating power delivered against enemies with remarkable precision and quick victories at low cost (at least to Americans), air power has failed to deliver, not just in the ongoing war on terror but for decades before it. If anything, by providing an illusion of results, it has helped keep the United States in unwinnable wars, while inflicting a heavy toll on [innocent victims](#) on our [distant](#) battlefields. At the same time, the [cult-like infatuation](#) of American leaders, from the president on down, with the supposed ability of the U.S. military

to deliver such results remains remarkably unchallenged in Washington.

### America's Experience with Air Power

Since World War II, even when the U.S. military has enjoyed total mastery of the skies, the end result has repeatedly been stalemate or defeat. Despite this, U.S. leaders continue to send in the warplanes. To understand why, a little look at the history of air power is in order.

In the aftermath of World War I, with its grim trench warfare and horrific killing fields, early aviators like Giulio Douhet of Italy, Hugh Trenchard of Britain, and Billy Mitchell of the United States imagined air power as the missing instrument of decision. It was, they believed, the way that endless ground war and the meat grinder of the trenches that went with it could be avoided in the future. Unfortunately for those they inspired, in World War II the skies simply joined the land and the seas as yet another realm of grim attrition, death, and destruction.

Here's a quick primer on the American experience with air power:

\* In World War II, the [U.S. Army Air Forces](#) joined Britain's Royal Air Force in a "combined bomber offensive" against Nazi Germany. A bitter battle of attrition with Germany's air force, the Luftwaffe, ensued. Allied aircrews suffered crippling losses until air superiority was finally achieved early in 1944 during what would be dubbed the "

#### [Big Week](#)

." A year later, the Allies had achieved air supremacy and were laying waste to Germany's cities (as they would to Japan's), although even then they faced formidable systems of ground fire as well as elite Luftwaffe pilots in the world's first jet fighters. At war's end, Allied losses in aircrews had been staggering, but few doubted that those crews had contributed immeasurably to the defeat of the Nazis (as well as the Japanese).

\* Thanks to air power's successes in World War II (though they were sometimes [exaggerated](#)), in 1947 the Air Force gained its independence from the Army and became a service in its own right. By then, the enemy was communism, and air power advocates like General

#### [Curtis LeMay](#)

were calling for the creation of a strategic air command (SAC) made up of long-range bombers armed with city-busting thermonuclear weapons. The strategy of that moment, nuclear

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“deterrence” via the threat of “massive retaliation,” later morphed into “mutually assured destruction,” better known by its telling acronym, MAD. SAC never dropped a nuclear bomb in anger, though its planes did drop a few

[by accident](#)

. (Fortunately for humanity, none exploded.) Naturally, when the U.S. “won” the Cold War, the Air Force took much of the credit for having contained the Soviet bear behind a thermonuclear-charged fence.

\* Frustration first arrived full-blown in the Korean War (1950-1953). Primitive, rugged terrain and an enemy that went deep underground blunted the effectiveness of bombing. Flak and fighters (Soviet MiGs) inflicted significant losses on Allied aircrews, while U.S. air power [devastated](#) N

North Korea, dropping 635,000 tons of bombs, the equivalent in explosive yield of 40 Hiroshima bombs, as well as 32,557 tons of napalm, leveling its cities and

[hitting its dams](#)

. Yet widespread bombing and near total air superiority did nothing to resolve the stalemate on the ground that led to an unsatisfying truce and a Korea that remains bitterly divided to this day.

\* The next round of frustration came in the country's major conflicts in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and early 1970s. American air power bombed, strafed, and sprayed with defoliants virtually everything that moved (and much that didn't) in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. A staggering [seven million tons](#) of bombs, the equivalent in explosive yield to more than 450 Hiroshimas, were dropped in the name of defeating communism. An area equivalent in size to Massachusetts was poisoned with defoliants meant to strip cover from the dense vegetation and jungle of South Vietnam, poison that to this day brings [death](#)

[and disfigurement](#)

to Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese, with modest ground-fire defenses, limited surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), and a few fighter jets, were hopelessly outclassed in the air. Nonetheless, just as in Korea, widespread American bombing and air superiority, while generating plenty of death and destruction, didn't translate into victory.

\* Fast-forward 20 years to Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm in 1990-1991, and then to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In both cases, U.S. and coalition air forces had not just air superiority but air supremacy as each time the Iraqi air force fled or was otherwise almost instantly neutralized, along with the bulk of that country's air defenses. Yet for all the hype that followed about “precision bombing” and “[shock and awe](#),” no matter how air power was applied, events on the ground proved stubbornly resistant to American designs. Saddam Hussein survived Desert Storm to bedevil U.S. leaders for another dozen years. After the 2003 invasion with its infamous “[mission accomplished](#)” moment, Iraq degenerated into insurgency and civil war, aggravated by the

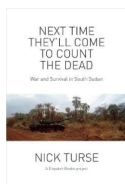
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### [loss of critical infrastructure](#)

like electrical generating plants, which U.S. air power had destroyed in the opening stages of the invasion. Air supremacy over Iraq led not to long-lasting victory but to an ignominious U.S. [withdrawal in 2011](#)



[Buy the book](#)

\* Now, consider the “war on terror,” preemptively announced by George W. Bush in 2001 and still going strong 15 years later. Whether the target’s been al-Qaeda, the Taliban, al-Shabbab, al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, or more recently the Islamic State, from the beginning U.S. air power enjoyed almost historically unprecedented mastery of the skies. Yet despite this “asymmetric” advantage, despite all the bombing, missile strikes, and drone strikes, “progress” proved both “fragile” and endlessly “reversible” (to use words General David Petraeus applied to his “surges” in Iraq and Afghanistan). In fact, [12,000 or so strikes](#) after Washington’s air war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq began in August 2014, we now know that intelligence estimates of its success had to be [deliberately exaggerated](#)

by the military to support a conclusion that bombing and missile strikes were effective ways to do in the Islamic State.

So here we are, in 2016, 25 years after Desert Storm and nearly a decade after the [Petraeus “surge”](#) in

Iraq that purportedly produced that missing mission accomplished moment for Washington -- and U.S. air assets are again in action in Iraqi and now Syrian skies. They are, for instance, flying ground support missions

[for Iraqi forces](#)

as they attempt to retake Falluja, a city in al-Anbar Province that had already been “liberated” in 2004 at a high cost to U.S. ground troops and an even higher one to Iraqi civilians. Thoroughly devastated back then, Falluja has again found itself on the receiving end of American air power.

If and when Iraqi forces do retake the city, they may inherit little more than bodies and rubble, as they did in taking the city of Ramadi [last December](#). About Ramadi, Patrick Cockburn noted [last month](#) that “more than 70% of its buildings are in ruins and the great majority of its 400,000 people are still displaced” (another way of [saying](#)

g , “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it”). American drones, meanwhile, continue to soar over foreign skies, assassinating various terrorist “  
[kingpins](#)” to little permanent effect.

### Tell Me How This Ends

Here's the “[hot wash](#)”: something's gone terribly wrong with Washington's soaring dreams of air power and what it can accomplish. And yet the urge to loose the planes only grows stronger among America's political class.

Given the frustratingly indecisive results of U.S. air campaigns in these years, one might wonder why a self-professed smart guy like Ted Cruz, when still a presidential candidate, would have called for “[carpet](#)” [bombing](#) our way to victory over ISIS, and yet in these years he has been more the norm than the exception in his infatuation with air power. Everyone from Donald Trump to Barack Obama has looked to the air for the master key to victory. In 2014, even Petraeus, home from the wars, declared himself “all in” [on more](#)  
[bombing](#) a  
s critical to victory (whatever that word might now mean) in Iraq.

[Only recently](#)

he also called for the loosing of American air power (yet again) in Afghanistan -- not long after which President Obama

[did just that](#)

Even as air power keeps the U.S. military in the game, even as it shows results (terror leaders killed, weapons destroyed, oil shipments interdicted, and so on), even as it thrills politicians in Washington, that magical victory over the latest terror outfits remains elusive. That is, in part, because air power by definition never occupies ground. It can't dig in. It can't swim like Mao Zedong's proverbial fish in the sea of “the people.” It can't sustain persuasive force. Its force is always staccato and episodic.

Its suasion, such as it is, comes from killing at a distance. But its bombs and missiles, no matter how “smart,” often miss their intended targets. Intelligence and technology regularly prove themselves imperfect or worse, which means that the [deaths of innocents](#) are

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inevitable. This ensures new recruits for the very organizations the planes are intent on defeating and new cycles of revenge and violence amid the increasing vistas of rubble below. Even when the bombs are on target, as happens often enough, and a terrorist leader or "lieutenant" is eliminated, what then? You kill a dozen more? As Petraeus said in a different context: [tell](#)

[me how this ends](#)

### Recalling the Warbirds

From Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, dropping bombs and firing missiles has been the presidentially favored way of "doing something" against an enemy. Air power is, in a sense, the easiest thing for a president to resort to and, in our world, has the added allure of the high-tech. It looks good back home. Not only does the president not risk the lives of American troops, he rarely risks retaliation of any kind.

Whether our presidents know it or not, however, air power always comes with hidden costs, starting with the increasingly commonplace blowback of retaliatory terrorist strikes on "soft" targets (meaning people) in cities like Paris or Madrid or London. Strikes that target senior members of enemy armies or terrorist organizations often [miss](#), simply stoking yet more of the sorts of violent behavior we are trying to eradicate with our own version of violence. When they don't miss and the leadership of terror groups is hit, as Andrew Cockburn has

[shown](#)

, the result is often the emergence of even

[more radical](#)

and brutal leaders and the further spread of such movements. In addition, U.S. air power, especially the

[White House-run](#)

drone assassination program, is leading the way globally when it comes to degrading the

[sovereignty](#)

of national borders. (Witness the latest drone strike against the

[head of the Taliban](#)

in violation of

[Pakistani airspace](#)

.) Right now, Washington couldn't care less about this, but it is pioneering a future that, once taken up by other powers, may look far less palatable to American politicians.

Despite the sorry results delivered by air power over the last 65 years, the U.S. military

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continues to invest heavily in it -- not only in drones but also in ultra-expensive fighters and bombers like the [disappointing F-35](#) (projected total cost: \$1.4 trillion) and the Air Force's latest, already redundant [long-range strike bomber](#) (initial acquisition cost: \$80 billion and rising). Dismissing the frustratingly mixed and often destabilizing results that come from air strikes, disregarding the jaw-dropping prices of the latest fighters and bombers, America's leaders continue to clamor for yet more warplanes and yet more bombing.

And isn't there a paradox, if not a problem, in the very idea of winning a war on terror through what is in essence terror bombing? Though it's not something that, for obvious reasons, is much discussed in this country, given the historical record it's hard to deny that bombing *is* terror. After all, that's why early aviators like Douhet and Mitchell embraced it. They believed it would be so terrifyingly effective that future wars would be radically shortened to the advantage of those willing and able to bomb.

As it turned out, what air power provided was not victory, but carnage, terror, rubble -- and resistance.

Americans should have a visceral understanding of why populations under our bombs and missiles resist. They should know what it means to be attacked from the air, how it pisses you off, how it generates solidarity, how it leads to new resolve and vows of vengeance. Forget Pearl Harbor, where my uncle, then in the Army, dodged Japanese bombs on December 7, 1941. Think about 9/11. On that awful day in 2001, Homeland USA was "bombed" by hijacked jet liners transformed into guided missiles. Our skies became deadly. A technology indelibly associated with American inventiveness and prowess was turned against us. Colossally shocked, America vowed vengeance.

Are our enemies any less resolutely human than we are? Like us, they're not permanently swayed by bombing. They vow vengeance when friends, family members, associates of every sort are targeted. When American "smart" bombs obliterate [wedding parties](#) and other [gatherings](#) overseas, do we think the friends and loved ones of the dead shrug and say, "That's war"? Here's a hint: we didn't.

Having largely overcome the trauma of 9/11, Americans today look to the sky with hope. We watch the Blue Angels and Thunderbirds with a sense of awe, wonder, and pride. Warplanes

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soar over our sports stadiums. The sky is *our* high ground. We see evidence of America's power and ingenuity there. Yet people in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere often pray for clouds and bad weather; for them, clear skies are associated with American-made death from above.

It's time we allow other peoples to look skyward with that same sense of safety and hope as we normally do. It's time to recall the warbirds. They haven't provided solutions. Indeed, the terror, destruction, and resentments they continue to spread are part of the problem.

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