



## **Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War**

*Robert A. Pape*

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## **Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War** Robert A. Pape

From Iraq to Bosnia to North Korea, the first question in American foreign policy debates is increasingly: Can air power alone do the job? Robert A. Pape provides a systematic answer. Analyzing the results of over thirty air campaigns, including a detailed reconstruction of the Gulf War, he argues that the key to success is attacking the enemy's military strategy, not its economy, people, or leaders. Coercive air power can succeed, but not as cheaply as air enthusiasts would like to believe.

Pape examines the air raids on Germany, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq as well as those of Israel versus Egypt, providing details of bombing and governmental decision making. His detailed narratives of the strategic effectiveness of bombing range from the classical cases of World War II to an extraordinary reconstruction of airpower use in the Gulf War, based on recently declassified documents. In this now-classic work of the theory and practice of airpower and its political effects, Robert A. Pape helps military strategists and policy makers judge the purpose of various air strategies, and helps general readers understand the policy debates.

## **Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War Details**

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# From Reader Review Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War for online ebook

## Roger Burk says

Spoiler alert: Strategic bombing does not work (p. 314). Pape actually makes a useful analysis of the types of strategic bombing, so we can break it down: strategic bombing to terrorize the population (as Douhet proposed) doesn't work because it stiffens resistance, rather than breaking it, or at best produces apathy. Bombing to destroy a few cities and then threaten to destroy more (a "risk" strategy) doesn't work because each pause seems like lack of will. Bombing to bring about a collapse of the economy doesn't work because well-developed economies have great reserve capacity and ability to adjust to losses. Bombing to stop key military industries (like the WWII raids on the Schweinfurt ball bearing plants) fail for the same reason. Bombing to decapitate the enemy regime (as attempted against Iraq in 1991) doesn't work because it requires detailed intelligence that is never really available. And strategic bombing to starve the battlefield of logistical support cannot succeed in reasonable time because of its distance from the fighting.

Pape at time lapses into an illusory mathematical precision, and his attempt to establish a new technical jargon for his subject smells of a PhD dissertation, but his argument and data analysis is pretty convincing. He covers every historical instance of using strategic bombing to force the enemy to give up before he was defeated in the field, and he goes through five major such campaigns in detail:

Vietnam: Rolling Thunder (1960s) failed because it was an attempt at interdiction of supplies, and the war at that time was in a guerrilla stage that required little logistical support from the North. Linebacker(1972) succeeded in forcing the North to accept a truce because they had moved large conventional forces to the South and could not support them under American bombing.

Iraq (1991): The attempt at decapitation totally failed because the necessary intelligence on enemy leader location wasn't available, and their means of communication were too varied and various to cut. However, aerial interdiction (attacks on enemy forces moving about the theater of operations) succeeded beyond expectations and made Allied victory inevitable.

Japan (1945): The Japanese surrendered before the home islands were invaded because their military situation was already hopeless, a fact driven home when their army in Manchuria crumpled like paper when the Russians invaded three days after Hiroshima. Pape does not mention the fact that the utterly new threat of atomic bombing gave the Emperor a face-saving excuse for surrender.

Korea: Widespread bombing in 1951-53 did not force a truce on acceptable terms because the sources of logistical supply were safe in China and Russia, and the intensity of combat did not require more supply than could be maintained despite the bombing. In 1953, a veiled threat to use atomic weapons in the theater did produce the desired concessions. (Pape allows nuclear threats to be a different situation.)

Germany (1942-45): Germany kept fighting long after military defeat was inevitable to allow the maximum number of Germans to escape the Russians and surrender to the western allies. (Their fear was justified--their sometimes genocidal treatment of the Russians led to vicious reprisals.) The German armed forces did not run out of oil, weapons, and so forth until defeat on the ground was inevitable anyway. Pape dismisses the argument that the strategic bombing campaign forced the Luftwaffe into a war of attrition that severely weakened it by the time of the Normandy landings. He says the same attrition would have occurred over the operational theater anyway. I'm not convinced on this one--I think the troops in landing craft wanted the

Luftwaffe to be thoroughly attrited before they hit the beach.

Pape is not an air power sceptic--he is clear that at the operational level air power was often extremely effective, sometimes decisive. It would be interesting to hear his analysis of the Serbian campaign in the later 1990s, when the Serbs ceded control of Bosnia and then of Kosovo solely in the face of air power, before defeat on the ground was imminent, or even threatened. This may have been a special case, when the areas at stake were not really that important to the Serbs, and the political support that the Serbian government had was weak.

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### **William says**

One thing about academics is that they try to quantify in theory what is known intuitively from practice. Robert Pape stays true to political science in "Bombing to Win" by constructing a predictive model that can usually call the outcome of a bombing campaign, depending on how bombing is being used.

Pape sees only two possible goals in bombing: coercion or denial. Coercion is applying force to an enemy nation's populace, using punishment to compel the people to cease support of the war effort. Denial is the use of bombing over the battlefield to limit or destroy an enemy army's ability to fight. We know from practice that air superiority over the battlefield is the equivalent of a "death ray"--anything on the ground will be killed if spotted. We also know from practice that cities are bomb sponges, so bombing a nation to get its people to quit is not always going to work, short of destroying all the cities and with it a nation's industrial capacity to make war. That second strategy requires a lot of effort, and usually yields results if the enemy army is destroyed or defeated.

Pape backs up this thesis with five in-depth case studies: Japan and Germany in WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Iraq War. The author buttresses his contention that bombing works in conjunction with denial, far less so when done to attain coercion. He then applies his model to 40 identified instances in history when bombing was used to attain a strategic objective, mostly validating his model.

The big drawback in the book is the academic writing style. The reader is forced to slog through the text to "gain enlightenment". For the dedicated, interested reader, the hardship is worth it, as Pape does provide a rigorous and methodical examination of the theory and practice of air power. This robs the book of its accessibility, which always counts as a fault no matter how well intentioned the study. The casual reader may want to look elsewhere if he is interested in reading on this topic. Just remember when you read popular histories, you are on your own when "connecting the dots." Pape's model does that, leaving the reader to take it or leave it.

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### **Jake Davidson says**

Considering that US military policy currently centers around the use of coercive airpower to limit casualties and, if possible, avoid a ground invasion entirely, understanding the power and limits of bombing could not be more important.

Pape does an amazing job covering the history of thought surrounding strategic bombing and uses detailed case studies to explain why and when airpower was an effective tool of coercion and when it wasn't. He accompanies these detailed individual cases with aggregate studies that take into account virtually every example of strategic bombing in history. The conclusion gives great analysis about why strategic bombing is not the all-powerful weapon it is often presented as, and why those in power will not listen to reason.

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### **Davis Florick says**

The book was decent. It challenged me to think through a number of my assumptions regarding the employment of airpower. While I do not necessarily agree with the findings, I can appreciate the perspective. The historical information and manner with which the material was presented was also very useful.

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### **Raj Agrawal says**

Pape's Bombing to Win is not an argument for strategic bombing, but is a book that looks at airpower in the context of "denial" – threat to military failure, vs. "punishment" – threat to the civilian population. He recognizes that it is difficult to isolate the denial variable given the many factors in war, especially in the case studies he uses from WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War; however, he gives what I believe to be fair treatment to the cost/benefit analysis of (independent) strategic bombing in each of his cases.

Pape concludes with the finding that first, airpower cannot do it alone, and second, that coercion only works "by denying the opponent the ability to achieve its goals on the battlefield" (314). He also challenges Warden's decapitation theory, where he highlights the failure of anticipating second- and third-order effects – certainly something the US is dealing with today in Iraq and Afghanistan (only to name two).

While I found myself disagreeing with a few of Pape's premises (that the geopolitical interests in the Vietnamese theater did not change over time (5); coercion is harder than deterrence (6); "successful nuclear coercion rests on threats to civilians rather than against military vulnerabilities" (11)), I was still very much persuaded by Pape's conclusions regarding the efficacy of strategic bombing. Strategic bombing only has potential against powerful states, but since powerful states likely possess nuclear weapons, strategic bombing is not viable (325). This conclusion may also compel states to acquire nuclear weapons. I'm also persuaded by Pape's conclusions regarding the impact of PGMs on strategy – that they only serve to make combined arms more effective (theater airpower), rather than enhance the coercive strength of strategic bombing: "Punishment, risk, and decapitation strategies had little merit before PGMs, and they have little merit now. Denial remains the most effective coercive air strategy, and PGMs have further increased the superiority of theater air power over strategic bombing" (326). The enemy gets a vote, and we tend to forget that all too often – despite history telling that story over and over again.

I think Pape misses the mark on attributing the strategic-bombing persuasion solely to Air Force organizational culture. Even going back to WWII, leaders want to show that they "are at least doing something," even if the effect isn't substantial. Strategic bombing, especially in modern warfare, is relatively low-cost – both politically and in terms of human capital. Depending on the circumstances, bombing can occur on a Friday night, with the results being "old news" by the time citizens get around to reading the news on Monday morning. Perhaps it is up to military leaders to package air-based bombing such that it simply cannot be detached from combined arms – much like the Marines tend to approach war. Even further,

perhaps it is time to remove “strategic bombing” from the Air Force lexicon altogether – but this might be blasphemy for many of my colleagues. At the end of the day, Slessor may have had this figured out a long time ago.

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### **Philip Hollenback says**

Ok so this is a really technical book and parts of it are really, really dry. However, the writer does do an excellent job of analyzing how air power works in warfare and more importantly analyzing whether air power can be used to coerce an enemy to do what you want.

Spoiler alert! The answer is no, you can't really use air power for coercion. In fact, strategic air power is basically useless, and it persists for political and bureaucratic reasons, not because dropping bombs on people really works to end wars.

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### **Mike Hankins says**

The idea that "mankind has always yearned to fly" has become axiomatic. It might need to be followed up with the statement that, shortly after that dream, mankind yearned to drop explosives on his enemies while flying. The concept of bombing and its use as a coercive mechanism precedes the invention of powered flight and has become a staple tool of modern militaries around the globe. Robert Pape's study, *Bombing to Win*, takes a look at several of the largest bombing campaigns and attempts to discern the reasons for their failure or success. In addition to being a comprehensive exploration of bombing theory, he also provides a brilliant, insightful narrative of the campaigns in question.

Pape divides bombing campaigns into four main categories: "Punishment" is targeted on cities, civilians, and key economic nodes. This is derived primarily from the writings of Giulio Douhet, and was seen often in World War Two, both in the RAF's approach to European bombing strategy and in the American approach to Japan. The "risk" category is based on Thomas Schelling's work, "Arms and Influence." This idea is similar to Punishment, but because of nuclear threats, seeks to gradually ramp up civilian damage to coerce enemies, similar to the American approach in the Rolling Thunder campaigns of Vietnam. "Denial" is a category that targets the military capability of the enemy, attempting to target both their frontline forces to gain breakthroughs on the ground and their production and transportation facilities to paralyze them operationally. The final, and most recent, category is called "Decapitation," and is based on the ideas of John Warden, which were incorporated into the Gulf War.

Pape analyzes both fronts of World War Two, Korea, Vietnam, and the first Iraq war and eventually concludes that denial, as seen in Tactical air strikes against military forces, is the only consistently effective air strategy. Each conflict is given an in-depth analysis of its air campaign and how leadership decisions were made in response to various issues. He argues convincingly that the only bombing campaigns that successfully coerce enemies are those that render them militarily incapable of continuing. To support this, he analyses primary sources to determine the precise decision points of the leadership of various places. This mathematical approach in some senses might simply or "over-compartmentalize" some very complex issues. The approach is indeed literally mathematical, as Pape reduces the diplomatic decision-making process into

actual equations with variables than can be manipulated. This is the only real weakness of the work, which some might consider to cold, detached, or mathematical to be applied to complex, delicate, and emotional issues raised by bombing.

Navigating the troubled waters of bombing (and especially nuclear) diplomacy is a tall task, and Pape handles it with impressive aplomb. The organization and construction of the work is refreshing and flows well. The book, despite being incredibly dense, still reads very well and serves as a solid example of effective writing. This book should be standard reading, especially for those interested in air power or even 20th century military history in general.

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### **Trav says**

Pape provides some useful insights, but he does so in the process of asking the wrong question. By choosing to focus on the question of "Can air power alone do the job?" (p.314) Pape makes leaps of logic unsupported by the evidence, and misrepresents the employment of air power. Accordingly, his primary thesis that strategic air power campaign will not coerce an adversary is supported by the facts as he presents them. However, the fact is that in the case studies used by Pape, air power was never used as the only strategy, it was part of a multifaceted military approach to the achievement of political goals. Accordingly, the in none of the case studies was the concept of air power's war winning potential truly tested. This would therefore make Pape's primary thesis irrelevant.

However, what Pape does an excellent job of highlighting is the fact that there cannot be a single strategy to meet every situation. As he highlights through his case studies, different adversaries has different motivations, interests, and vulnerabilities. Developing a one-size-fits-all strategy is unwise and counterproductive.

In summ: This book is a victim of its context. Airmen no longer make the claim that air power alone can win wars. There is an awareness that each conflict brings with it different circumstances and requirements, air power's role must be viewed as part of a broader strategy.

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### **Joseph Roger says**

A classic on the use of coercive air power. In rereading it couldn't help but see parallels to current discussions about the strategic use of cyber or cyberwar. A must read for anyone who thinks cyber will fundamentally change grand strategy or the nature of warfare.

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### **Rich says**

Cheers to Pape for starting a very good discussion. But there are lots of problems in this book, in my opinion. The one of note is Pape's very flippant manner in which he narrowly defines everything that isn't denial, and yet, give denial a very slippery definition in itself. In short, that makes it very easy to defend denial as the end-all-be-all of air power strategies (don't get me wrong, I'm no fan of punishment, but risk has a very useful thought in coercive diplomacy).

Additionally, I do not care at all for Pape's redefining of Schelling's forms of coercion into different things. Again, this goes back to my general thrust that Pape almost redefines everything of value in having a good discussion about coercion. To make up for this sloppiness, I'd highly recommend Daniel Byman, Matthew Waxman, and Eric Larson's "Air Power as a Coercive Instrument." This report/book takes all of the brilliance of Pape and places them back into the terms and ideas long accepted in discussions of coercion. Otherwise, good luck sorting out the new universe of coercion by Pape, which I think was pretty unnecessary. If he hadn't done this, I think it would be a 5-star read.

But to his credit, he has some very good things to say about the limits of air power, and for that he's a must-read.

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### **Josh says**

This book contains a good education in several theories of the application of airpower: denial, particularly theater level interdiction; the risk-level display of ratcheting up the effects of bombing based on Thomas Schelling; and civilian or economic punishment attacks as favored by Giulio Douhet. The author, Robert Pape, proposes that coercion in war is tough to do, frequently does not work, when it works it does not come at a significantly cheaper cost to the coercer, and -- if it does work -- it is the result of theater level interdiction on a denial campaign against the enemy's military power and not by strategic bombing in risk level or punishment campaigns.

I recommend skipping directly to the summary chapter in the back of the book, titled *Beyond Strategic Bombing*. There, Pape has done the reader a favor by summarizing the essential arguments of *Bombing to Win* in 25 pages or so instead of 350.

This book is also good for a moderate case of insomnia.

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### **Sonu says**

Excellent illustration of the myopic and single-service/preferred strategy mindset prevalent in the USAF. Case studies do a great job of illustrating the circumstances under which bombing does work.

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### **Claudia says**

Interesting recollection of the U.S.'s past air bombing campaigns.

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