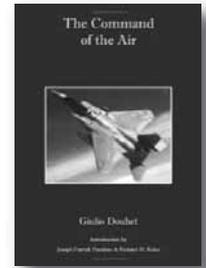


BOOK REVIEW:

The command of the air

by Giulio Douhet

University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa, AL; 2009; 394 pp., ISBN 9780817356088 (paperback);
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General Giulio Douhet's seminal work, *The Command of the Air* (1921), and its sequels, *The Probable Aspects of The War of The Future* (1928), *Recapitulation* (1929), and *The War of 19--* (1930), are foundational lessons for air power students, strategists and enthusiasts. Douhet was one of the earliest and most prolific proponents of powered flight as an implement of war, and was even court-martialled and imprisoned in the Great War for his seemingly radical ideas.

Nearly a century later, his prophetic work provides us with a critical insight into the development of airpower from its early days as a conceptual extension of the human fascination with flight, to the current day where independent and increasingly fifth-generation air forces play a major role in the defence of borders, force projection, joint operations and information, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance, and where we continually look further to the strategic potential of space.

Always attracted to the dream of flight, Douhet observed the introduction of dirigibles and then fixed-wing aircraft into Italy at the beginning of the 20th century, and quickly understood the potential of aircraft within theatres of war. The success of the Wright brothers in 1903 with powered flight provided instant appreciation for both the wonders of engineering and more controversial possibilities of such an invention within future military engagements. He served as commander of one of the first Italian army air units, directed the army's Aviation Section and by the time Italy entered the First World War in 1915, Douhet had developed a substantial catalogue of strategic airpower theory. This included key lessons still relevant today, such as strategic bombing and total war.

For vigorously recommending a strategic bombing plan to break the Italy-Austria stalemate, Douhet was dismissed by his Italian military superiors as fanciful, particularly by voices within the army and navy commands, and for his unrelenting criticism of the Italian army's incompetence and unpreparedness, he was court-martialled and imprisoned for one year. After eventual exoneration and recall to service, he was promoted to general officer and he published *The Command of the Air* in 1921.

This updated English translation edition of *The Command of the Air* builds upon Douhet's original

ideas by incorporating four separate books: *The Command of the Air*, discussing the air as a new theatre of war, the importance of an independent air force, and the particulars of aerial warfare; *The Probable Aspects of The War of the Future* and *Recapitulation*, which examine auxiliary aviation, aerial defence, the aerial battle and the aerial field as 'the decisive field'; and *The War of 19--*, which discusses how a future conflict in Europe might develop, including the causes of the conflict, the moral, intellectual and material preparation for it with reference to France, Belgium and Germany, and the Allied and German plans of operation.

Douhet's determination in having his ideas heard cemented his name in the history of airpower as a concept, and for very good reason. His teachings had a major impact on the subsequent employment of airpower in the 20th century, and remain imperative for today's aviators and theorists in their understanding of achieving victory through airpower. His recommendations and predictions on total war, strategic bombing, targeting vital centres and gaining command of the air underpin basic understanding of the field. Specifically, Douhet's thoughts on strategic bombing of enemy population centres to incite both a psychological (terror) threat as well as a kinetically destructive and potentially decisive strike proved incredibly influential – the idea would be tested in World War II, firstly by the Germans in the Battle of Britain, and later by the Allies in their bombing campaigns in occupied Europe and Germany. It would again be tested by the United States in Vietnam in the 1960s, and during the 1990s in the campaigns in Bosnia and Kosovo, raising the ongoing and critical debate (see, for instance, the work of Robert Pape) – can airpower alone win wars?

Such questions may not be fully answered in theory such as Douhet's, but they provide the reader with an invaluable springboard into the wider debate. This edition of Douhet's truly formative work is straightforward, insightful and essential reading for historians, strategists, members of the Australian Defence Force, and those generally interested in understanding not only the history of airpower, but its future as well.

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