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Chairman:

Air Marshal E.J. McCormack AO (Retd)

Executive Officer

Wing Commander L.J. Halvorson MBE (Retd)



PO Box 5266
KINGSTON ACT 2604

chairman@williamsfoundation.org.au
ABN 25 204 613 891

Strategic Air Power

Alan Stephens

USAF fighter pilot Colonel John Warden was the architect of the most successful air campaign in history. Initially code-named 'Instant Thunder', the campaign was the centre-piece of Operation Desert Storm, the US-led war against Iraq from 17 January to 28 February 1991.

So effective was the air phase of the war that the ground invasion of Iraq lasted only 100 hours before Saddam Hussein's once-powerful army collapsed. Five weeks of precision air strikes had left the Iraqi political apparatus and its army stunned, severely weakened, and unable to coordinate their activities.

Yet despite the magnitude of his achievement, and despite being the most important air power thinker for 50 years, Warden remained something of a prophet without honour in the US military establishment, retiring without promotion four years later.

Like many visionaries, Warden made enemies because of his self-belief and the energetic promotion of his ideas. At the same time, he was (and still is) engaging, unassuming, and professional. Given his unique contribution, it does the USAF little credit that in an organisation of some 300,000 people, room could not be found either to promote him to star-rank or to provide him with the opportunity to fully utilise his rare strategic acumen.

The keys to Instant Thunder were Warden's exploitation of the then-relatively new technologies of stealth and precision weapons; his skilful coordination of information; and his masterful analysis of the enemy's vulnerabilities. The result was that US-led air forces were able to conduct rapid, concurrent strikes against vital targets. Overwhelmed by the tempo and intensity of the campaign, the Iraqi regime was to all intents and purposes strategically paralysed.

Warden's methodology has provided the template for a series of extraordinarily successful air campaigns over the past two decades, in a variety of political and geographic settings. Each of those campaigns has had three key characteristics. They have been crushingly one-sided (always a good thing – war is not a sport); relatively politically successful; and brief (that is, they did not degenerate into quagmires). In today's complex global village, those are very good outcomes. Indeed, given the diminished utility of military power in the 21st century, a fair argument can be made that any planned operation that does not reflect those characteristics should not be attempted.

It remains questionable, however, whether Warden's model is understood by political leaders and, perhaps more to the point, accepted by army commanders (who dominate military affairs). On the contrary, the West's obdurate insistence on meeting various enemies on their own terms through a series of disastrous so-called 'counterinsurgency' campaigns (Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan) indicates that the people who choose our military strategy have, to misquote the 19th century French diplomat Charles de Talleyrand, learnt nothing and forgotten everything.

Whereas Warden's model draws on the inherently strategic nature of air power – that is, on the range, speed, pervasiveness, precision, and *de facto* mass that permits paralysing strikes against the enemy's centres of power, the counterinsurgency (COIN) model plays to the enemy's strengths by reducing the

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West's unmatched technological and personnel advantages to a knife-fight in a phone booth. It's not smart. The sooner our political leaders realise that COIN is a counterfeit concept, the better.

As noted above, the reason the immense comparative military advantage that strategic air power confers on the West has not been fully accepted is partly attributable to uninformed politicians, and partly to generals whose mindset remains entrenched in the 20th century. Air commanders, however, must also be held to account.

For whatever reason – perhaps a lack of interest, careerism, a preference for flying over thinking and leading – far too many senior airmen have taken the easy path by avoiding the rough and tumble of strategic debate. If the West is to make the most of its unique military advantage while it lasts, that must change. John Warden has again provided a lead.

In the latest edition of the USAF's professional quarterly, *Air & Space Power Journal*, Spring 2011, Warden has revisited his strategic model from twenty years ago (www.airpower.au.af.mil). While the fundamentals remain constant, Warden has made important intellectual refinements to critical aspects of his logic, including analysing the enemy as a system, the return on investment for the effort needed to prosecute various target categories, and the time value of action (that is, the time to affect centres of power).

As Warden observes, 'airpower enables us to think about conflict from a future-back, end-game first perspective, as opposed to one based on the battle obsession of Clausewitz and his [land-centric] followers'.

Those interested in promoting a 21st century approach to military strategy could do no better than to read Warden's article. Its conclusion even provides words of encouragement for air force leaders who hitherto may have been reluctant to join the debate: 'Of course, espousing the unlimited concept of airpower exposes the advocate to charges of zealotry [and] a lack of jointness. But we must become confident enough to shrug off these labels'.