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## ***Beneficial Bombing: The Progressive Foundations of American Air Power, 1917-1945***

by Mark Clodfelter

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It is a strange title: “beneficial” and “bombing” are not words that seem likely to appear in close proximity to one another. How, a reader might ask, can the concussive, explosive, and incendiary effects of aerial bombing—including the splintering of infrastructure, the destruction of dwellings, and the loss of human life, sometimes on a vast scale—be considered “beneficial”? Author Mark Clodfelter contends that US advocates of aerial bombing, reacting to the great battlefront slaughter of World War I, offered an alternative form of war that would lead to quicker—and thus more humane—resolution to conflict.

Clodfelter argues that the carnage and waste of the Western Front “sparked the beginning of a progressive effort that was unique—an attempt to reform war by relying on its own destructive technology as the instrument of change.” The airplane “offered the means to make wars much less lethal than conflicts waged by armies or navies.” He contends that the American contribution to this general idea was the envisioning of a precision bombing campaign based on sophisticated technology: “The finite destruction would end wars quickly, without crippling manpower losses—maximum results with a minimum of death—and thus, bombing would actually serve as a beneficial instrument of war.”

The author is by no means the first to describe and explain the origins of American faith in “precision” bombing, and the “industrial fabric theory of war”; these have been the subject of extensive work by such authors as Conrad Crane, Richard Davis, Michael Sherry, Donald Miller, and others. But Clodfelter adds a new twist, arguing that the views of American airmen were rooted in the progressive tradition that, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, had influenced American political and social behavior, and driven the reforms advocated by Theodore Roosevelt and others. The author does not, however, offer a robust description of what the progressive movement was, or precisely why or how it would have such a dominant impact on American airmen. Sometimes the author equates “progressive rhetoric” with the idea that bombing would shorten wars; sometimes he links it to the more specific notion of the precision bombing of key industrial targets.

Reviewing the book proved frustrating for this reviewer; while not convinced by the thesis, I nonetheless found the history itself to be informative, engaging, and well-articulated. The author writes well; in particular he has a marvelous ability to sketch characters on the page, bringing them to life with

just a few deft brushstrokes. And the book is based principally on primary source material, making it rich in detail and illuminating. Clodfelter adds texture and insight to our knowledge of an important topic. And, in his final chapter, the author includes an intelligent and perceptive critique of contemporary United States Air Force (USAF) doctrine. Aside from its rather sweeping and shaky theoretical claim, the book is certainly a worthy contribution to the literature.

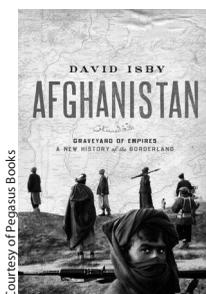
To really test the author's thesis, though, we need to look outside of the United States. Many non-Americans embraced the idea that long-range bombing would create a dramatic change in the nature of warfare and would hold the potential to deter or shorten wars. Giulio Douhet, an Italian modernist and technological determinist, was an early and vocal advocate of the idea that bombing would shorten wars. Air war, he claimed, would be so terrible that it would be, ultimately, more merciful. And Sir Arthur Harris, head of the Royal Air Force's (RAF) Bomber Command from 1942 to 1945, became the strongest and most persistent air advocate of his generation; he insisted to the end of his life that long-range bombing was the preferable alternative to bloody land warfare, and that, indeed, an Anglo-American ground campaign in World War II would have been unnecessary had he been given more latitude to fight the air war as he had seen fit. In May 1940, Winston Churchill's contention that Britain should continue the fight with Hitler rested heavily on the idea that British bombardment would be an invaluable source of leverage over the Third Reich. British bombers, he hoped, would target and destroy the heart of the German war-making machine. (Churchill also hoped that the RAF would develop a long-range escort, and that the bombers would be accurate and highly effective.) Interestingly, Clodfelter says very little about the British effort, early in World War II, to carry out just such an air offensive. Oriented against German transport and oil supplies, the British bombing campaign of 1939 to early 1942 had much in common with the industrial fabric theory, and what the author claims was the American progressive heritage.

In dealing with the realities of warfighting that ultimately drove American airmen to indiscriminate forms of bombing in both the European and Japanese theaters, Clodfelter acknowledges the degree to which the Americans strayed from their interwar aspirations. He argues, "The reality of war . . . generated a momentum of its own that undermined several of the progressive notions that had guided American airmen before the conflict. By 1945, 'progressive air power' meant quickly ending the war to reduce American casualties." But stretching the definition to this degree takes away its explanatory power. If you replace "American" with "British" in that sentence, then you have the driving motivation for British area bombing, implemented formally in 1942 by the RAF's Bomber Command under Sir Arthur Harris.

It seems to this reviewer that, rather than having their roots in the progressive tradition, the ideas of the early 20th century air advocates (of many nationalities) came from a shared reaction to the Western Front—a reaction which then took on slightly different characteristics depending on national proclivities and circumstances. As Clodfelter points out, the earliest articulation

of what would later be called the industrial fabric theory had been penned by the British in 1917. The quest for efficiency that Lord Tiverton sought in his early air plan (written as the British were gearing up to wage a long-range air campaign against the Germans), impressed the Americans. They would later embrace and further his ideas in the context of the Great Depression in the United States and the lessons it seemed to hold about the frangibility of modern industrial societies.

Clodfelter is correct to insist that American airmen based their actions and decisions on a specific body of ideas that were shaped and honed by contextual influences in the United States; the latter, this reviewer would argue, included, in particular, our geographical distance from our enemies and a strong tendency to orient on technological solutions. But many of the foundational ideas—largely reactions to the First World War—were not unique to Americans, and those that were did not necessarily derive from the progressive movement. American airmen were compelled by a driving conviction, held by all US military professionals (and indeed nearly all military professionals who serve in democracies), to win wars as quickly and efficiently as possible, and with the fewest casualties possible among one's own forces. The American airmen of the interwar period felt they had found the perfect means to this end in the combination of the high altitude daylight bomber and a sophisticated bombsight. And the modern day USAF still seeks a means to this same end, using the updated tools of a new millennium.



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## ***Afghanistan—Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderland***

by David Isby

**Reviewed by Colonel Robert M. Cassidy, USA,** Instructor, US Naval War College, and Senior Fellow, Center for Advanced Defense Studies, served as a special assistant to the Operational Commander in Afghanistan

**A**lthough the market for books on Afghanistan has not witnessed any dearth in quantity or in variegation of quality in the last ten years, this history by David Isby offers excellent value to this growing corpus of works.

The author spent considerable time in Pakistan and Afghanistan since the Soviet-Afghan War. Isby has also testified before Congress as an independent expert, and he has appeared on a host of news media, including CNN and C-Span. He has authored three books and hundreds of articles on Afghanistan and national security topics. This book offers a comprehensive, candid, and timely insight on the prospects and costs of success or failure in South Asia. The author understands what is at stake in Afghanistan and he is sanguine about the effort succeeding. He does not, however, relent in his clear and cogent candor regarding the impediments and risks that jeopardize the prospects for