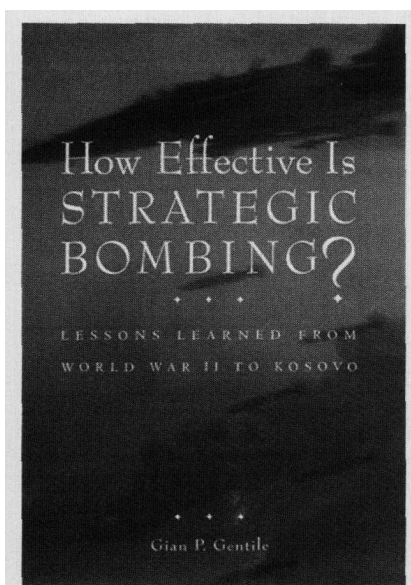


BOOKS

No One Comes Close

reviewed by Nicholas E. Sarantakes

HOW EFFECTIVE IS STRATEGIC BOMBING? Lessons Learned From World War II to Kosovo. By Gian P. Gentile. New York University Press, New York, 2001, 280 pp., \$36.00. (Member \$32.40)



It says something about the American people that the only branch of society that values and uses its history is the military. Personnel in the Services actively use and study history as part of their professional development. Few other professions can say the same. Gian P. Gentile, an Army officer with a Ph.D. in history, shows in this book that learning lessons from the past and making an honest evaluation of historical events are two different things.

In an examination of the Air Force and its use of history, he argues that this Service has always let factors other than an honest examination of what worked and what did not work shape studies of airpower. Evaluating strategic bombing is by far the most controversial example of how the Air Force learns lessons. The effectiveness of this use of force is difficult to prove. In addition, most airmen, and the Service as a whole, take their historical identity from these types of operations. Gentile

focuses most of his text on the most famous study of strategic bombing in American history, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey. He is quick to note that the survey is not a primary source as it is generally treated, but a secondary study.

The United States Strategic Bombing Survey reflected the American conceptual approach to strategic bombing. Two fundamental tenets formed the American conception: strategic air power should be used not to attack ground forces in battle directly but instead to attack the vital elements of the enemy's war making capacity; and the air force must be independent of and coequal with the army and the navy.

The ramifications of this predisposition are clear to Gentile:

Since the Survey accepted the American conceptual approach to strategic bombing and made it a framework for analysis, a truly impartial evaluation was never really a possibility.

Gentile does well supporting his argument. He shows that survey Chairman Franklin D'Olier and Paul Nitze, one of the division directors, clearly favored the Air Force over the Navy in their evaluations of the campaigns against Japan. The book then goes into the early days of the Cold War as those in blue uniforms began to treat the contents of the survey's final report as biblical truths. In repeated in-

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ter-Service disputes, Air Force officers presented the findings of the Survey as facts rather than as interpretations.

Gentile then rapidly jumps 40 years in time in his last chapter to the Gulf War Air Power Survey. There were no strategic bombing surveys after the Korean or Vietnam wars, but the Air Force no doubt learned lessons of some sort from these conflicts. As a result, this chapter has the feel of being tacked on. Gentile shows that the same institutional interests of the Air Force at work in the 1940s were also present 50 years later. The members of the Gulf War survey, however, had much more expertise in military matters than those of the original survey and knew how to minimize the influence of the factors. The coverage of this most recent study, however, suggests that a more indepth examination of the lessons that the Air Force learned in the 1950s and 1970s might have been in order. The failure to conduct surveys of strategic bombing in conflicts where it is difficult to claim that the United States won, much less that airpower played a critical role in the outcome, might be because these examinations would not have supported official Air Force doctrine.

Having made these points, it should be noted that Gentile brings a good blend of military expertise and academic training to bear in this book. He is currently an operations planner in the 24th Infantry Division at Fort Riley, KS. He was an assistant professor of history at West Point and earned a Ph.D. from Stanford University. The fact that his uniform is green rather than blue will be an issue for some people, but his judgments are based on a sound, evenhanded reading of the evidence. Marine Corps officers interested in using history should read this book as it is a testament to the dangers that should be avoided.

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