

Stephen Budiansky. *Air Power: The Men, Machines, and Ideas That Revolutionized War from Kitty Hawk to Gulf War II.* New York: Viking, 2004. x + 518 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-03285-3.



Reviewed by Blair Haworth (U.S. Army Center of Military History)

Published on H-War (June, 2005)

From Wells to Warden

Stephen Budiansky is a journalist, a former national security correspondent and foreign editor for *U.S. News and World Report*. He has also published a number of books on natural history, as well as the 2002 book *Battle of Wits: The Complete Story of Codebreaking in World War II*. In *Air Power*, Budiansky provides the reader with what might be called a survey of narrowing focus. Beginning with a general history of the prehistory and early history of aviation, he quickly emphasizes the prospective and actual military application of the new phenomenon, in particular the direct military application that came to be known as “air power” in its narrowest sense. Budiansky approaches the World Wars and the interwar period comprehensively, discussing the activity of all the major air powers. After 1945, his focus narrows largely to the experience of the United States, and particularly that of the U.S. Air Force.

The overarching theme of *Air Power* is the interplay between power and precision in the development of military aviation. Budiansky, for instance, describes the major difference between the Wright brothers and their rival inventors as the Wrights’ emphasis, based on

their experimental findings, on control rather than locomotion as the key to heavier-than-air flight. Similarly, the revolution in aerodynamics led by Ludwig Prandtl is seen to trump contemporary advances in engines and weapons in late World War I and the interwar period, as Allied achievements in command, control, communications, and intelligence trump Axis advances in jet and rocket propulsion in World War II. Budiansky shows the culmination of this trend in the postwar march of the U.S. Air Force through the heyday of strategic nuclear airpower, through its reorientation in the wake of conventional operations in Vietnam, to its eventual embrace and successful application of precision-guided munitions in the Gulf Wars.

With *Air Power*, Stephen Budiansky has produced a well-written work, informative for the general reader, provocative to the informed layman, and of limited use to the specialist. Budiansky employs a variety of sources; where he resorts to secondary sources, he is occasionally over reliant on single interpretations, as in his uncritical incorporation of Kenneth P. Werrell’s analysis of the relative merits of the F-105 and F-4 fighters in Vietnam. A

refreshing exception is his treatment of the “Military Reform” movement of the post-Vietnam era, where the author does a good and admirably concise job weighing the pros and cons of the reformers’ philosophy. While documented, the book uses the quote-based endnotes charac-

teristic of much contemporary nonfiction, a convention maddening to many scholars—certainly to this one. A few errors, such as the misidentification of a B-17G in a figure as the preceding F model crop up, but they are unexceptional in a work of this length and scope.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Blair Haworth. Review of Budiansky, Stephen, *Air Power: The Men, Machines, and Ideas That Revolutionized War from Kitty Hawk to Gulf War II*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10637>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.