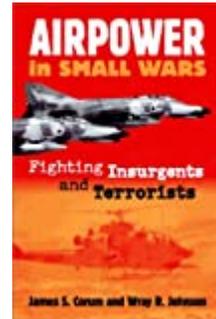


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James Corum, Wray Johnson. *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003. xiv + 507 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7006-1240-6.



Reviewed by Scott Gorman (Air University, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies)

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Air power, despite the promises of technology and the claims of air power theorists, is still an imperfect instrument for gaining the objectives of modern war. Even with perfect bombing accuracy, effective air power requires accurate intelligence about both what to destroy, as well as where and when to find these targets for destruction. More importantly, the successful use of air power demands an understanding of the ultimate political consequences of aerial attack. Given these challenges, what then is the role of air power in increasingly politicized (and increasingly prevalent) “small wars” where intelligence and foreknowledge are especially elusive?

Jim Corum and Wray Johnson’s answer is that while air power can do important things in these types of wars, it also risks much. Small wars—“wars involving non-state entities such as guerillas and terrorists”—are different from conventional operations; air power, therefore, should be used differently (p. 2). Because insurgents and terrorists rarely have strategic assets, centralized organizations, or infrastructures vulnerable to bombing, putting iron on target is not normally the most effective use of air forces in these situations. Instead, it is air power defined more broadly—the indirect applications of air power through reconnaissance, transport, surveillance, and command—that is most useful in small wars. Air power, in both its high- and low-tech forms, can thus

be a vital force multiplier as presence and the psychological effects of air power gain in importance. Bombing may play vital tactical roles, but there is usually a political price to pay when aircraft are sent out against targets on the ground. Air strikes and the unintended, but seemingly inevitable, collateral damage they cause are likely to provoke outcry in both the west and the developing world. Only when small wars take on more conventional forms do the tactical and operational benefits of ground attack outweigh this political price. Debunking the myth of independent air control strategies drawn from the British experience in the Middle East, Corum and Johnson rightly contend that air power is but one variable in the complex problem of small wars, and usually not the most important variable. Political issues, which may or may not be susceptible to positive influence from the air, ultimately decide victory or defeat. What is needed, then, in meeting the test of terrorism and insurgency is a comprehensive strategy where air power is regarded as a partner or colleague, instead of subordinate or superior, to the other instruments of power.

The number of cases included in *Airpower in Small Wars* is impressive. The chapters are roughly chronologically ordered, ranging from American operations in the early twentieth century, nationalist revolts against European rule in Africa and Asia, communist insurgencies in

Greece and Vietnam, to more recent conflicts in the Middle East. The authors' analysis includes air power from both the land and sea services, civilian and military aircraft, the operations of major and minor powers, and successes as well as failures. The only notably excluded cases are anti-partisan operations during World War II and the Russian debacle in Chechnya; evidence from these cases, had they been included in the book, would probably only further support the authors' findings. The book's impressive breadth is at once a strength, as well as a weakness, since such comprehensive coverage in a book-length treatment means a lack of depth in many of the individual cases. Corum and Johnson draw materials for their history primarily from secondary source material in several languages and almost exclusively from the counterinsurgent's perspective. Based on their classroom lectures at the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, the book is occasionally mechanical in its presentation and somewhat repetitious in its "lessons learned." Given the accuracy and importance of the authors' message,

however, this foot-stomping is both understandable and deserved.

With *Airpower in Small Wars*, Corum and Johnson have correctly put air power into its political and operational context, showing the unique circumstances involved with its employment in the small wars of the twentieth century and the unique approaches required in each case. The book is not only a timely look at an institutionally neglected topic, but is also recommended for its broad historical overview of the modern phenomena of insurgency and terrorism. Given the circumstances we currently find ourselves in, perhaps the most pertinent (if obvious) lesson is that successful counterinsurgencies take a long time and require a major effort. There are still no silver bullets. Until other authors give the topic the additional attention it deserves, this laudable first attempt will remain the best summary work on the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of air power against insurgents and terrorists.

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