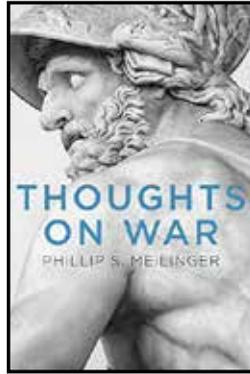


Thoughts on War

By Phillip S. Meilinger



Review by colonel Jean-Patrice Le Saint

Does Colonel Phillip S. Meilinger, author of the famous “*Ten Propositions Regarding Air Power*” and coordinator of the monumental “*The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory*”, need any introduction here?

A 1970 US Air Force Academy (USAFA) graduate, he was awarded an MA at the University of Colorado and a PhD in history at the University of Michigan. He first served as a C-130 pilot. At the end of the 1980s, after being posted to the USAFA as a professor, he joined the Pentagon Air Staff’s Doctrine Division, then the *Instant Thunder* planning cell during the Gulf War. From 1992 to 1996, he was dean of the *School of Advanced Airpower Studies (SAAS)*, the brand new and promising school for US Air Force strategists. He then taught strategy at the US *Naval War College*, before joining Northrop Grumman where he ended his career as an analyst.

The author of 12 books and a hundred articles about military history, airpower theory and military operations, Meilinger is a leading figure in the study of airpower history and strategy. His experience as a practitioner, historian, strategist and educator, gives a unique and almost unclassifiable trait to his work. He is a biographer¹, an organizational historian², an historian of ideas³ but also a theorist. Accurately documented, his writings contribute

1. Biographies of Generals Hubert R. Harmon and Hoyt S. Vandenberg.

2. *Bomber : The Formation and Early Years of Strategic Air Command*. Maxwell, Air University Press, 2012, 372 p. https://media.defense.gov/2017/Mar/31/2001725259/-1/-1/0/B_0127_MEILINGER_BOMBER.pdf.

3. *Airpower and Air Theory. A review of the Sources*. Maxwell, Air University Press, 2001, 164 p. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a398817.pdf>

to the rediscovery of the great figures, the major authors and the history of Airpower, an essential approach to know its principles, the conditions for its successes and the circumstances of its failures.

Published in 2017, his *Limiting Risk in America's Wars*, already took a different standpoint from his prior publications. This book is more political, more Joint-minded, more prescriptive. Noticing the United States' difficulty in achieving strategic successes since 1945 in spite of its military power, Meilinger observes that operations promoting the projection of large land forces often led to a stalemate or even a failure. On the other hand, the combined use of intelligence and airpower capabilities, and Special Forces in support of local combatants, led to quick wins. The concept is even more relevant to the United States: for interventions where its vital interests are seldom at stake, the only way to withhold popular support is to reduce costs. Meilinger consequently advocates a new, more indirect military strategic approach, which consists in moving the combat where it is possible to establish local superiority, at a lower cost and lower risk.

Thoughts on War extends and deepens this theory. It is not a brand-new piece of work, but like *Airwar: Theory and Practice* published in 2003, it is a collection of reviewed essays, already published in various magazines from 2007 to 2017: *Air and Space Power Journal*, *Joint Force Quarterly*, *Parameters*, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*. However, unlike *Airwar*, *Thoughts on War* does offer some original pieces, and the entire work is arranged in three large consistent parts.

A first conceptual part deals with the theories of war. It invites us to take a step back from the Clausewitzian precepts, considered excessively structuring and partially unsuited to contemporary issues. The claim that "war is a political instrument" has led to multiple interpretations, arguably well beyond Clausewitz's initial intent. It shed little light in advising political and military authorities on decisions and actions, and covers only some situations; war is often triggered on cultural grounds, such as pride, honor, fear, desire for revenge, love, hatred or prestige. According to Meilinger, the supposedly immutable nature of war is also questionable, as evidenced by the development of new combat methods that condition war itself. After having underlined the recent changes in conflict, this part ends by proposing principles of war that are better suited to the contemporary era.

A second, more historical part, mentions the use of secondary fronts throughout history, from the Sicilian expedition during the Peloponnesian War to Operation Torch in 1942, and draws lessons learned. One essay emphasizes the importance of mastering time, which physical and psychological effects (surprise, shock) can be considerable, providing a good synchroni-

zation of operations, especially those combining the engagement of multiple components. A separate essay uses an analysis of the 1940 Norwegian campaign to expose the harmful and even counterproductive consequences of an overly segmented conception of joint operations.

A third part eventually focuses on US experiences. It emphasizes the primacy of cultural factors in a strategy's design and implementation. Their divergence of perspectives and ethos explains why soldiers, sailors and airmen understand war and prepare for it differently. This also accounts for why each component has its own analysis of past battles, and the reasons leading to win or defeat. Melinger uses the example of the War in the Pacific between 1941 and 1945 to illustrate this. For sailors, this is the imposition of a submarine embargo that amounted to the United States' eventual victory. Soldiers contend rather MacArthur's campaign, while airmen still have in mind the effects of strategic bombing, which culminated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, as Meilinger reminds, it was the conjunction of each of these efforts that paid off, in spite of the friction generated by the theater's complex organization of command.

In this third part, two essays address air power more specifically. The first explains its essential role in the targeting process development during the Second World War, illustrating airmen's singular view of war and the most effective way to achieve victory. Unfortunately, appropriate intelligence organization, technology and methods used to assess strikes effects did not exist at the time - and they won't until the 1990s. The second essay logically analyzes the effects of Anglo-Saxon strategic bombing campaigns, through the 1944 survey ordered by President Roosevelt (USSBS, US Strategic Bombing Survey). As a conclusion, the final chapter revisits the model recommended in *Limiting Risks in America's Wars*, intended to capitalize on speed and surprise, on each component's specific strengths, and on new technologies and doctrines: limited engagement, indirect approach, preponderance of aerospace capabilities.

What can we retain upon reading this profusion of themes, analyses, examples and concepts, over a period running from Antiquity to contemporary operations in the Levant? *Thoughts on War* is in fact a protean work, suited to both strategists and military historians.

Strategists will appreciate its challenge of the Clausewitzian paradigm, which still fundamentally conditions the Western art of war, especially through the strive towards a decisive battle that is resource-heavy and seems increasingly difficult to stage. This paradigm, which was erected as a dogma by advocates of direct confrontation, essentially the US Army, seems all the more inadequate today as it was elaborated by a Western thinker in the

early 19th century, who concentrated on “grand style” warfare, ignoring the importance of the technical factor, the maritime fact and moreover the air dimension and then the spatial, cybernetical and informational dimensions of modern warfare.

Likewise, and just as stimulating, is the invitation to rethink the principles of air warfare, other than by transposing to the third dimension the precepts elaborated in other times for grounded combat. In this respect, Meilinger’s 10 principles propose an *aggiornamento* that is certainly debatable, but salutary, because it is representative of both contemporary engagements as a whole and of their joint character: air, space, cyberspace and naval supremacy; homeland security; unity of command; integration; jointness; intelligence; netcentricity; mobility; precision; media awareness and initiative. Lastly, strategists will benefit from the insights on the notion of decisive victory, which has become so overused that it has lost all meaning and practical usefulness. For Meilinger, decisive victories are rare, despite the brilliance of some tactical successes, because it is first and foremost by its long-term consequences that the decisive character of a battle or a campaign can be assessed.

Conversely, historians will appreciate the omnipresent references to the past, which are drawn from – but not limited to - Western heritage. They will perhaps object, however, that, just like Liddell Hart, to whom Meilinger is particularly attached, the examples are purposely chosen to build and support a thesis from the outset. This classic objection is partly admissible, as the author’s intellectual rigor is undeniable, owing to his utilitarian approach to lessons of the past.

One could regret *Thoughts on War*’s essentially American prism. The political-military relationship, the context of decision-making, the operational concepts focus on those in force in the United States. Considering the ease with which he manipulates concepts and articulates ideas, the reader would have liked to see Meilinger delve into an even broader perspective, elaborate on the applicability of his ideas to more minor powers, or on the stakes of contemporary coalition operations. This, however, would omit the book’s primary intent: to provoke and nourish an informed thought process among his compatriots. Having received the glowing tribute of eminent figures, including General David D. Deptula and Professor Richard P. Hallion, *Thoughts on War* may not be the most remarkable book of the last 20 years as the latter claims. It is nonetheless a valuable contribution to the renewal of thoughts on Airpower and, for fans of Meilinger’s clear line, a book to have in one’s library. A book to read and reread.

A book on which to meditate.