

## Theorist, Prophet, or Ideologue?

Review of “False Gospel for Airpower Strategy?  
A Fresh Look at Giulio Douhet's *Command of the Air*”

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The influence of World War I Italian general Giulio Douhet on the US Air Force has fascinated many for years. Why Douhet? Where and when did this influence begin to exert its force? What are its effects, and why are they persistent? Tami Biddle opines that Douhet earned his niche as an airpower fixture only from his composition of “futurist drama” and not from any “analytical rigor of his ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

John Andreas Olsen’s *History of Air Warfare* asserts that Douhet’s ideas lack universal validity, yet, perplexingly, hails him as a “great prophet.”<sup>2</sup> What is the reason for this inconsistent perspective? Michael Pixley’s important 2005 article, “False Gospel for Airpower Strategy? A Fresh Look at Giulio Douhet’s *Command of the Air*” is one of the few works that calls for a deeper examination of the benefits of Douhet’s influence.<sup>3</sup> Pixley maintained that Douhet is far more often cited than understood. In other words, most authors *assume* the value of his influence and extrapolate from its mention and his ideas but rarely evaluate the underlying basis or desirability of his influence.

If Pixley is right, an implication surfaces: while Douhet may fill a psychological need, he may be inadequate as an exemplar of clear thinking on airpower, and his legacy requires reconsideration. Pixley’s fundamental claim is that Douhet’s status as an airpower theorist or farsighted prophet of modern airpower’s utility

is undeserved due to the locality versus universality of his ideas and his lack of philosophical rigor.

This commentary seeks to extend Pixley's thesis, first arguing if he is neither theorist nor prophet, he is primarily an *ideologue* whose skewed perception of the relationship between the human person and the larger community derives from a fascist orientation. Second, his true influence derives from the mythos that still accumulates around his name and imparts a permissiveness to a particular set of ideas on airpower, including the conception of airpower as a talisman to solve political problems. Third, this conception may interact strongly with certain features in the landscape of US thinking on power and the military, thus requiring vigilance on the part of those in such circles and the assertion of an intellectual turn to a better—and contrasting—airpower legacy.

In 2021, the US Air Force is, in the eyes of many, at a crossroads of sorts regarding the role and value of airpower. In some ways, this moment may resemble the crossroads the service encountered in 1991. The question has become important enough, in fact, that the Air Command and Staff College dean recently asked students and faculty to reconsider the past 30 years of the use of airpower—what have we learned, and what have we forgotten?

Somehow in the circles of strategic thinking and discourse on the uses of the military, Douhet has retained a significant stature in airpower literature. He is read at professional military education institutions, his books are discussed, and his prescriptions are considered. What roads regarding the use of airpower would Douhet lead us down today, and are these the most helpful journeys in responding well to the above demanding questions? In sum, Pixley's 2005 call for a reexamination of Douhet's influence is still relevant, and in light of recent history and the implications of this commentary, perhaps even more urgently needed today.

Pixley began by asking if Douhet's theory of airpower was still relevant at the turn of the twenty-first century. The answer to that question, Pixley maintained, must lie within the context of Douhet's time, place, and circumstance. Of particular importance was the peculiarity of interwar Italy, which led to the first constraint of Douhet's relevance, in Pixley's view.<sup>4</sup> He asserted that Douhet's thoughts were limited by an extreme version of local applicability.

Reality as proposed by Douhet begged the caution of airpower theorists in their efforts to extrapolate a universalism of thought and practice. Pixley repeatedly urged his readers to return to Douhet's acknowledged primacy of thought, which sought an Italian return to glory as shaped by the suffering of the Great War. Douhet yearned for a future that technology and airpower could be used to seize. His zeal for such grand endeavors influenced his formation as a man and as a fascist, which left arguably little room for scholarly objectivity.<sup>5</sup>

Douhet's suffering in World War I and his zeal for a glorious future drove his philosophical worldview. Pixley provided ample evidence that Douhet viewed war in a strictly mechanistic way, devoid of the human element. His thoughts could not be separated from what Pixley labels as technological rationalism.<sup>6</sup> To illustrate Douhet's commitment to rationalism, Pixley positioned the Italian's approach with that of Carl von Clausewitz and Baron de Jomini.

Where Clausewitz viewed war as complex and full of uncertainty, Douhet argued for a puritanical science of simple algebraic certainty. While Jomini also viewed war as a science, Douhet veered toward a greater extremism that denied the immutable human factors of war and historical principles of strategy. Pixley notes that while Clausewitz and Jomini occupied opposite ends of the spectrum, Douhet maintained an inconsistency not tethered to anything certain.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, he lacked theoretical and philosophical rigor, which riddled his thoughts and actions with contradiction.

Despite the significance of Douhet's flaws and limitations, Pixley lamented the deleterious effects of his thought on the development of American airpower. Pixley noted particular elements of Douhet's thoughts had historically infected the US Air Force, resulting in an unrestrained pursuit of technology, an aversion (at best) and rejection (at worst) of history, and a stagnant view of the various other elements of warfare such as defensive maneuvers and combined-arms operations.<sup>8</sup>

For Pixley, such disordered thought continued to influence Air Force strategy, doctrine, and policy, where Douhet's theories were used to bolster an erroneous belief in a new age of technological primacy as indicated by the advent of ballistic missiles and nuclear warfare. Pixley concluded Douhet must be placed in his proper context, namely, his time, place, and circumstance. To do otherwise was to betray Douhet himself and cast a shadow on the ordered development of twenty-first-century airpower strategy. Douhet was neither a sound theorist nor a prophet.

So Pixley's first major contribution to clarity on Douhet's legacy is his warning that—regarding the uses of all thinkers—we must first strive to ascertain the applicability of their ideas, and in this case to understand Douhet's ideas as local, time-bound, and potentially dangerous. His ideas are dangerous most of all because Douhet's true focus was a fascistic solution to a uniquely Italian problem.

Douhet's own words, along with the views of serious scholars such as Biddle, Michael Sherry, and Robert Pape, remove him from the ranks of first-rate airpower theorists whose ideas extend at least to some universal applicability. In contrast to the clairvoyance and versatility of the ideas of a Clausewitz or Jomini, the "grandiose" Douhet, devoutly concerned with the destiny of Italy and caught up in the Italian brand of fascism, was much more likely proposing a fascistic

solution to an Italian problem—a fascistic demeanor recognizable in its emphasis on *total society* and *total war*.

Douhet's solution was fascistic because a careful reading of his writing shows that, ahead of his time in this respect given Adolph Hitler's Germany and Lenin and Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, Douhet appears to have conceived of Italian culture as becoming, and needing to become, what may be called a total society, with every resource and every person reduced to a benefit or harm to the State and treated thus—benefits permitted to exist and receive sustenance and harms eliminated.

This brutal and bland unity was Douhet's prescription for achieving a future dominant Italy, described by Pixley as a vision in Douhet's mind of Italy as a "burgeoning world power with 'an imperial destiny' employing aviation as a tool 'with which to carve out her future.'"<sup>9</sup> In this vision of a dominant Italy and as a total society, Douhet merely shared the views of his intellectual companion, Benito Mussolini, famous for many statements about politics including these two: "All within the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State" and "We have buried the putrid corpse of liberty."<sup>10</sup>

The total society, utterly antithetical to anything the United States purports to stand for, was the particular object of Aldous Huxley's scorn in his 1931 *Brave New World*: "The completely organized society. . . . The abolition of free will by methodical conditioning, the servitude made acceptable."<sup>11</sup>

Closely linked to Douhet's total society view is his adoption of a total war mindset, in which one sees war not as defined by its political end but as serving itself and further sees that once decision makers select recourse to war, the only legitimate restraint on war making is what fails to serve war's destructive force. The possible effects of such a total war mindset on a culture—any culture—constitute a warning that should have our full attention.

No State is a priori immune from such a mindset, as we see in Andrew Bacevich's review of Tommy Frank's *American Soldier*, where Bacevich claims a generation of past US military leaders had sought to "purge war of politics, reconstituting the conception of war as the exclusive province of military professionals."<sup>12</sup> More than merely acknowledging war's destructive dimension, this dangerous mindset cultivates a permissive quality in which the maelstrom of war must be given its way and the tabulation of costs delayed.

Clearly, one of these costs is the loss of the conception of war as merely one among other tools of the State, as a decidedly human endeavor and as indelibly tied to higher dimensions of human living, such as political objectives, the public's culture and common good, and the demands of justice given the human race's common nature. This bounded conception of war is precisely the point of Clause-

witz's timeless caveat that war has its own grammar but not its own logic! In place of this reasoned conception, once it corrodes, a total war mindset can arise that proposes war as rightly inhuman, qualifies attempts to channel or bound war making as weakness, and deems the preservation of any societal element from the war machine as traitorous.

The above characterization, with its emphasis on a total society and total war mindset, helps us arrive at the danger of Douhet's ideas, caught up as they are in the curious affinity we see between certain fascist leaders and the potentiality of airpower—the thesis of works such as Von Hardesty's essay "Despots Aloft" and Scott Palmer's *Dictatorship of the Air*, on Soviet views of airpower.

The endgame of this manner of thinking is the threat to humanity posed by the total state. In his examination of Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin on the subject of airpower, Hardesty suggests all three men harbored a fascination with airpower as a kind of talisman, a symbol of power and progress, and more specifically as a harbinger of the total state—a third key concept critical to a more careful reading of Douhet. Walter MacDougall's *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* describes with verve the contours of the total state through the use of the term *technocracy*—"the management of society by technical experts" to the exclusion of all nontechnical and especially higher ends.<sup>13</sup>

Palmer's thesis reveals the close connection between the forces of total society, total war, the total state, and airpower when he argues the Bolshevik demand for total uniformity required all state elements to find and destroy all rivals to its ruling ideology. Party ideologues saw airpower with its lethal and seemingly magical properties as a useful reinforcing tool. Under such a view of the State as total, and never as representative or guardian of the freedoms of human persons, all impediments to the state's furtherance qua state—qua apparatus are to be ground into dust, especially human "impediments."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the total state serves itself at the expense of its human cogs and serves as the principal mechanism by which to achieve the total society. Total war as a mindset is a natural consequence of the thinking behind the first two concepts, and that is why thinking along the lines of any one of the three concepts tends to the admission of all three as legitimate sources of theory and practice. It is the degree to which Douhet accepted on faith and, guided more by passion than reason, preached these ideas about the State and airpower that should concern us.

Pixley made abundantly clear Douhet's problem set was uniquely Italian both in terms of geography and 1920s Italian political-military development. His further charge—that Douhet was a polemicist far more than an able theorist—is also relevant to this claim of the locality of his ideas. This is so, despite the opening words of the foreword to the Air Force History and Museum Program's 1998

edition of Douhet's *The Command of the Air*: "In the pantheon of air power spokesmen, Giulio Douhet holds center stage."<sup>15</sup>

One of Pixley's constant themes was his characterization of Douhet as a polemicist, as in a controversial arguer, and not a theorist. Pixley used this charge to explain how Douhet could so blithely and perhaps irresponsibly appear to extrapolate from Italy's context to a universal one—he was striving for effect and drama not accuracy. Douhet's frame of reference for envisioning the uses and effects of airpower was "Italy's protective Alpine barrier and short flying distances from potential enemies."<sup>16</sup>

Regarding Italian political-military development, Douhet was responding to "a distinct national conversation" and even more precisely addressing questions of military reform dominant in Italian strategic circles of the time.<sup>17</sup> Even Douhet himself often explicitly bound his ideas within Italian circumstances.<sup>18</sup> To summarize this point, as seen in Pixley's narrative, one cannot justifiably excise Douhet's words from the years-long forum he shared with his fellow Italian debaters on military reform, simply extrapolating universal applications from these words devoid of the intellectual context that produced them.

As to Douhet the polemicist, Pixley saw the source of this characterization in Douhet's penchant for dreaming. Even more, as a fascist, Douhet strongly embraced Mussolini's view of Italy as a modern push toward a symbolic ancient Rome.<sup>19</sup> Given Italy's fate since Douhet's time, astute observers have even more reason for refraining from making too much of the utility of Douhet's ideas. His desire for achieving a certain narrative effect may render his corpus even more local and historical and even less relevant to the world powers of today.

This same impediment that led Douhet toward passion and away from reason curtailed his record as airpower prophet. In fact, Pixley explicitly assessed Douhet a failure as a prophet, although if Douhet never truly intended any of us to universalize his ideas, we may decide not to judge him quite so harshly—perhaps he was just being polemical.

Able scholars such as Biddle and Pape have decimated Douhet's assumptions about the trail of airpower's destruction and its independent effects on popular will and the anticipated governmental collapse, and the historical record is clear. What is astonishing, regarding Douhet's record of prophecy, is the revolving door of scholars who claim "time works with Douhet," and that given the development of nuclear weapons and missile technology in recent decades, "Douhet has come into his own."<sup>20</sup>

The mixed record of scholarship on Douhet reveals its own story, especially given that it appears Douhet was neither a credible theorist nor an accurate airpower prophet. The question remains: if he was neither, what, in fact, was he? Not

only were his ideas too local to be useful, whether he consistently caveated this or not, but he suffered from a spate of internal contradictions within his thinking, another drawback Pixley makes apparent.

In contrast to Clausewitz or Jomini, Douhet insisted reality has no “ground,” no givens, and despite this insistence on a kind of early postmodern perspective, in which there is no reality but what is socially constructed moment by moment, he defends a rationalism far more stringent than Jomini’s. He repeatedly insisted his ideas were somehow “algebraically” proven and his logic was undeniable, when in the same breath he invalidated the very basis for consistent laws in his rejection of the lessons of history and embrace of oddities such as his overreliance on technology and denial of friction in war.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps, if he is neither a credible theorist with universal reach nor an able prophet, we may best understand him as primarily an ideologue, that special personality whose first love is the savor of their own ideas, and who fills a psychological need for self and others absent academic rigor, and with potentially dangerous ramifications.

## **Conclusion**

Douhet’s true influence may derive from the mythos that still accumulates around his name and imparts a permissiveness to a particular set of ideas on airpower, including the conception of airpower as a talisman to solve political problems. Douhet may still be a fixture in airpower thought because he is wanted, not because he is needed, nor because he helps clarify airpower theory.

Douhet’s dream was the application of massive airpower against an enemy’s civilian base to speed up its governmental collapse and capitulation. This vision is alluring to some, but what is its true nature and service to higher aims? It may be true that he had a radical faith in technology. It may also be true that he wished to see certain things come about that, in fact, never occurred. This devotion marks him and reveals him as a believer, an ideologue, and possibly an idealist, not as a desirable mentor to guide the development of future US airpower.

To extend Pixley’s treatment of Douhet, one of the Italian’s biggest accomplishments may be that he proposed a path by which one can escape the bonds of traditional morality when they no longer serve the war cause or national ambitions. A second may be that he wanted to take the age-old ideal of protecting the innocent from the harms of war and throw it into the dustbin of history along with history itself, which he saw as “a chain . . . to which life is tied and carried backwards.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, to follow Douhet’s ideas to their logical ends, despite his sense that massive airpower projection would “speed up the war and thereby save life and property,” we find his legacy one of moral corrosion, loss of purpose, and a nihilistic

creed that elevates will above any notion of the Good. MacDougall sees this kind of faith that he calls “technocratic” in the USSR’s strategic culture from 1917 through the 1980s and—disturbingly—he finds the same aroma making inroads into US strategic culture following the fateful address of outgoing President Eisenhower known as the “Military-Industrial Complex Speech” of 1961. MacDougall’s scholarship here is best summed up in the phrase *worship of means*, and if Douhet was susceptible to this, as was the Bolshevik apparatus, is this not something against which we should maintain a constant vigilance?<sup>23</sup>

At least, we should understand its costs, and if a fondness for Douhet or his ideas is present in certain circles, it may be because this same conception, a troubling worship of means, may interact strongly with certain features in the landscape of US thinking on power and the military. Why not consider an intellectual turn to a better—and contrasting—airpower legacy, that of Benjamin Foulois flying over terrain in New Mexico who, quoted by Corum and Johnson, modeled the “Airman’s point of view”? “It is this third-dimensional point of view of ground events that sets the Airman apart.”<sup>24</sup> ✪

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#### **Notes**

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