

# FALSE GOSPEL FOR AIR POWER STRATEGY? A FRESH LOOK AT GIULIO DOUHET'S "COMMAND OF THE AIR"

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Is Italian General Giulio Douhet's air power theory still relevant after eighty years? Further, did Douhet himself consider his theory relevant beyond Fascist Italy in the post-Great War period? As with most theorists of war, Douhet is far more often cited than studied. Thus, the context of his theory and thoughts may be somewhat surprising for those who invoke the name of Douhet for polemical purposes in an American context utterly foreign to his own assumptions. Indeed, according to his self-imposed limitations, the United States was Douhet's preferred illustration of a nation for whom his theory did not apply. As with any theory, his was hardly isolated from the time and circumstances of its formulation. Douhet's thought was so powerfully and deliberately influenced by the peculiar conditions of interwar Italy that failure to analyze this context cannot but produce a grossly distorted understanding of his airpower theory and legacy.

The complete context of Douhet's thinking was rather complex. In exploring this context, it is first helpful to analyze his philosophical world-view within the theoretical context of the two greatest nineteenth-century theorists of war: General Carl von Clausewitz and General Antoine Henri de Jomini. It then becomes possible to distinguish the various explicit assumptions and implicit

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presuppositions throughout Douhet's works that define, and limit, its applicability. The incommunicable nightmare of the Great War looms as a ubiquitous shadow over his historical context while the spirited polemical atmosphere of interwar Italy illuminates his motivations. One of Douhet's greatest virtues (though certainly his most overlooked virtue) was the intellectual honesty to limit the scope of his claims far more than he is generally given credit for. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Douhet never asserted his theory either to have been universal or comprehensive. Rather, he openly acknowledged his focus upon one particular audience: post-World War I Italians. Finally, this calls for a close look at the importance of Italy's particular geographical context within Douhet's theory.

Along the way, it is enlightening to consider the popular treatment of Douhet's context by some of his interpreters. This is not to deny any relevance beyond interwar Italy, but merely to place the burden of proof where it belongs. It is improper to assume a priori a level of applicability for any theory far in excess of what the author himself asserts. Rather, one ought first to assume the local applicability imputed by Douhet and then seek valid justification for a broader interpretation. In this regard, it is curious that the publishers of a recent edition of Douhet's *Command of the Air* chose to depict an American F-15 Eagle on the cover, perhaps as a thinly-veiled hint of the applicability of the book's contents to twenty-first century US air power.<sup>1</sup> Hopefully this contextual reevaluation of Douhet's strategic airpower theory will offer some new perspectives not just on a dead Italian theorist, but also on contemporary views of airpower as part of a still-lively American polemic.

The most foundational element of Douhet's theoretical context was his philosophical worldview. Douhet's thought was permeated with a pervasive technological rationalism. He viewed war, even its human elements, in purely mechanical terms. Reflective of the slaughter of 1914-1918, he believed that war "makes whole peoples hurl themselves against one another, forgetting for a time that they all wear the aspect of human beings."<sup>2</sup> Douhet's theory matched this

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1. Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans. Dino Ferrari (New York: Coward-McCann, 1942; reprint, Washington D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Programme, 1998), book cover.

2. Douhet, *Ibid.*, p.145.

“inhuman” view of war.<sup>3</sup> For Douhet, human will was swallowed up in war’s totality and man became indistinguishable from machine. Airpower was the ultimate symbol of this new war-image, pitting “populations directly against populations, nations directly against nations,”<sup>4</sup> causing them to “come to blows and seize each other’s throats.”<sup>5</sup> This inhuman conception of war permitted Douhet’s rationalism free reign in his mechanistic theory. Six times in *Command of the Air* he referenced the “mathematical certainty” of his conclusions,<sup>6</sup> four times calling them “axiomatic.”<sup>7</sup> Using “iron-clad logic”<sup>8</sup> as his guide, Douhet asserted that “to come to any other conclusion would be to deny reason itself.”<sup>9</sup> “The problem,” he once insisted, “does not admit of partial solutions. It is right or it is not right.”<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz once warned, “a dry pedantry of figures will forsake you;”<sup>11</sup> Douhet clearly thought otherwise.

Douhet’s rationalism was utterly antithetical to Clausewitz, for whom “in the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards.”<sup>12</sup> In cards, probability is key, not algebra. The dual focus of gambling at cards is uncertainty and psychology. Yet neither of these have a place in Douhet’s theory; as Barry Watts observed, “there is little, if any, room in Douhet’s thinking for the enemy as an active agent whose plans or actions should be taken into account.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, much of Clausewitz’s criticism is aimed against the type of mathematical rationalism Douhet embraced. Clausewitz warned that while theory can be “a guide” and “a frame of reference,” one must never “construct an algebraic formula for use on the battlefield.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, Douhet defiantly attributed to his theory the

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3. Douhet, *Ibid.*, p. 185.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 26, 36, 91, 92, 129.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 96, 103, 104.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 100; for other examples of Douhet’s rigid rationalism, see also pp. 26, 119, 130, and 146.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

11. Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of War*, ed. and trans. Hans W. Gatzke (Harrisburg: Military Service Publishing Company, 1942; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 12.

12. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 97; see also p. 707.

13. Barry D. Watts, *The Foundations of US Air Doctrine: The Problem of Friction in War* (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1984), p. 7.

14. Douhet, n.1, p. 163.

algebraic certainty that “two and two make four... This is not theoretical or extremist; it is arithmetic, pure and simple.”<sup>15</sup> Compared to Clausewitz, however, Douhet’s philosophy was both theoretical and extremist, allowing him to make assertions that were anathema to Clausewitz; e.g., “this is the inflexible principle I advocate, allowing no exceptions.”<sup>16</sup> While Clausewitz viewed war as inconceivably complex, Douhet held that “war is simple, like good sense.”<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, Douhet’s rationalism paralleled, though far exceeded, that of Baron de Jomini. While Clausewitz viewed war as gambling, Douhet and Jomini viewed war as a science; indeed, this is still a quite popular American view of war. Jomini wrote, “it is beyond question that war is a distinct science of itself.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Douhet frequently wrote of “the science of making war.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, Douhet’s radical philosophy left a vast gulf between his and Jomini’s thinking. Jomini, tending more toward practicality, recognized that “war, far from being an exact science, is a terrible and impassioned drama... dependent for its results upon a number of moral and physical complications.”<sup>20</sup> Douhet, however, often demonstrated his ideas using simplistic equations.<sup>21</sup> He even went so far as to directly compare his theory to those of physicists Maxwell, Hertz, and Marconi.<sup>22</sup> Even his modest concession that the “real power of an aerial force depends... on such a large number of coefficients that none of them can be reduced to zero”<sup>23</sup> reveals an algebraic worldview confined by what he described as “the strait jacket of reason.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, was his strait jacket quite as reasonable, or as realistic, as he believed? As Michael Sherry observed, “as historian [Douhet] appreciated the psychological complexity of war, but as prophet he discarded it.”<sup>25</sup>

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15. Douhet, *Ibid.*, p. 243.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 193; see also p. 112, where Douhet asserts that his theory “is fundamental and admits no exceptions, implications, or reservations.”

17. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

18. Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1996), 56. Jomini also made frequent reference to “military science” and “the science of war”. See pp. 17, 57.

19. Douhet, n.1, pp. 62, 196, 205.

20. Jomini, n.18, p. 360.

21. Douhet, n.1, pp. 16-17, 243, 255.

22. Douhet, *Ibid.*, p. 187.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

25. Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 27-28.

With respect to technology and history, however, Douhet radically diverged from Jomini. A central theme of Jomini's theory was the historical consistency of the "immutable principles of strategy"<sup>26</sup> achieved through technological indeterminism. For Jomini, the essential principles of war were contingent upon unchanging laws of logic and geometry while the effects of technological changes were ultimately superficial to his theory. While technology had radically changed tactics and organization across history, strategy "will remain unaltered, with its principles the same as under the Scipios and Caesars, Frederick and Napoleon, since they are independent of the arms and the organization of the troops."<sup>27</sup> For Jomini, theoretical certainty required independence from technology, allowing him to assert that "the immutable principles of war cannot be violated with impunity."<sup>28</sup> In this respect, Jomini's theory contrasted starkly with Clausewitz's emphasis on uncertainty, chance, and friction that caused the Prussian general to proclaim that "talent and genius operate outside the rules."<sup>29</sup>

With Clausewitz and Jomini illustrating opposite ends of the spectrum of certainty in war, Douhet claimed a curiously inconsistent position. He emphasized change and rejected historically based, immutable principles to a greater extent than Clausewitz ever did while still, somehow, asserting even greater rationalistic certainty than Jomini. The same technological determinism that Jomini rejected as antithetical to his theory, Douhet claimed as absolutely essential. Pursuant with a lifelong fascination for science and technology, Douhet began his military career as an artillery officer,<sup>30</sup> graduating first in his class from the Academy for Artillery and Military Engineering and later graduating with distinction from the Polytechnic Institute of Turin.<sup>31</sup> In 1902, prior to any involvement with aviation, Douhet exhibited his progressive views by advocating complete army mechanization.<sup>32</sup> Characteristically, in his 1921

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26. Jomini, n.18, p. 331.

27. Jomini, *Ibid.*, p. 48.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

29. von Clausewitz, n.12, p. 162.

30. Claudio G. Segre, "Douhet in Italy: Prophet Without Honor?" *Aerospace Historian*, vol. 26, no. 2, Summer/June 1979, p. 70.

31. Azar Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War: Fuller, Liddell Hart, Douhet, and Other Modernists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 53.

32. Gat, *Ibid.*, p. 54.

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edition of *Command of the Air*, he viewed technology as the most defining factor in war: “the form of any war... depends upon the technical means of war available.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, as accomplished aeronautical engineer Edward Warner concluded, “although Douhet had been a technician and a scientist, he showed but little knowledge of the problems of aeronautical engineering.”<sup>34</sup> Douhet revered technology with a facile interest that at once extolled and exaggerated its influence and yet failed to grasp its complexities.

Consequently, for Douhet, strategic principles were as mutably volatile as technology itself. As Bernard Brodie summarised, Douhet’s “essential, correct, and enduring contribution lay in his turning upside down the old, trite military axiom, derived from Jomini that ‘methods change but principles are unchanging.’”<sup>35</sup> For Douhet, “such a maxim was plain nonsense.”<sup>36</sup> Sharing Jomini’s rationalism but rejecting his underlying philosophy of historical consistency, Douhet asserted certainty, and consequently denied Clausewitzian friction, to a far greater extent than Jomini himself ever did.<sup>37</sup> Within his own philosophical context of ultimate mutability based on continuous scientific advancement, Douhet paradoxically asserted with complete confidence that future technology “cannot but add weight to the conclusion drawn here.”<sup>38</sup> Such a statement from a man living in a universe of ultimate change reveals a conspicuous lack of theoretical rigor coupled with a radically simplistic view of technology. This contradiction pervaded every aspect of his theory, from his rejection of history to his denial of friction in war.

Though a surprisingly keen and talented historical analyst himself, Douhet

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33. Douhet, n.1, p. 6.

34. Edward Warner, “Douhet, Mitchell, Seversky: Theories of Air Warfare” in Edward Mead Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), p. 492.

35. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 22.

36. Brodie, *Ibid.*, p. 78.

37. Douhet’s neglect of friction is a central tenet of Watts, n.13.

38. Douhet, n.1, p. 113.

nevertheless viewed history as “a chain... to which life is tied and carried backwards.”<sup>39</sup> The history of the art of war, he concluded, “cannot teach us anything.”<sup>40</sup> Douhet’s rationalism, in contradiction to Jomini’s, was essentially ahistorical in nature. In a September 1914 article called “Futurism,” Douhet wrote, “the door of the past is closed while that of the future is wide open in front of us.”<sup>41</sup> His war experience only intensified this philosophy. He described the interwar period, in characteristically mathematical terms, as lying on “a particular point in the curve of the evolution of war” after which “the curve drops off abruptly in a new direction, breaking off all continuity with the past.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, the very bridge that Jomini crossed to achieve rationalistic certainty, Douhet burned. Douhet’s technological determinism destroyed any historical foundation for asserting his claims as anything but idle speculation. This inconsistency characterized Douhet’s thinking through his final work, *The War of 19-*, published shortly after his death in 1930. To the end, he seems never to have viewed his rationalism and technological determinism as mutually destructive. Clausewitz had emphasized mutability and uncertainty in war, Jomini emphasized immutability and certainty, while Douhet, lacking the intellectual rigor of either, saw no contradiction in simultaneously asserting both ultimate mutability and ultimate certainty in war.

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Douhet’s philosophical worldview sheds light on American perspectives on airpower. Indeed, his underlying presuppositions seem to have even greater parallels in American thought than does his theory itself; it is a dubious heritage. The traditional interpretation of Douhet, exemplified by Brodie, is that he erred only in being too progressive for his time: “Douhet’s philosophy, however farsighted, had proved critically deficient... Then the atomic bomb came and

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39. Gat, n.31, p. 58.

40. Douhet, n.1, p. 256; see also pp. 26-27 wherein Douhet asserts that “clinging to the past will teach us nothing useful for the future, for that future will be radically different from anything that has gone before. The future must be approached from a new angle.”

41. Gat, n.31, p. 57.

42. Douhet, n.1, p. 29.

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changed everything.”<sup>43</sup> The common belief that technology has vindicated Douhet camouflages his underlying theoretical flaws and limitations. Yet the belief is widespread, as summarized by one US Air Force officer’s opinion that “each technical advance, from early bombsights to more powerful aircraft to the atomic bomb, brought airpower closer to

the Douhetian ideal.”<sup>44</sup> Such faith in technology as the savior of a “Douhetian ideal” (if one can even speak of such an ideal) follows blindly in his technomechanistic beliefs. Colonel Phillip Meilinger also exhibited a Douhetian historical bias: “Given the newness of their weapon, airmen were not so fortunate in being able to look backward for a rich lode of experience they could mine, and thus they had to invent – largely and literally from thin air – a new theory of warfare that involved new strategies as well as new methods of war.”<sup>45</sup> Though soothing to the collective institutional ego, such historical nihilism springs largely from precarious Douhetian presuppositions.

It seems, then, that Douhet’s primary contribution to US thinking may be deeper and subtler than his actual conclusions on strategic airpower theory. David MacIsaac appropriately lamented that “the effects of technology and the actions of practitioners have from the beginning played greater roles than have ideas... One might conclude, with some distress, that technology itself may be today’s primary air power theorist; that invention may, for the moment, be the mother of application.”<sup>46</sup> With equal distress, Colonel Barry Watts observed the inroads of Douhetian philosophy in “the US Air Force’s tireless pursuit of ever more advanced technology” flowing from “its ahistorical character.” Thus, “the inclination of many in the Air Force officer corps to reject the relevance of

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43. Brodie, n.35, p. 150.

44. Silvanus T. Gilbert III, “What Will Douhet Think of Next? An Analysis of the Impact of Stealth Technology on the Evolution of Strategic Bombing Doctrine” (School of Advanced Airpower Studies thesis, Air University, 1992), p. 43.

45. Phillip S. Meilinger, “Air Targeting Strategies: An Overview” in Richard P. Hallion, ed., *Air Power Confronts an Unstable World* (London: Brassey’s, 1997), p. 53.

46. David MacIsaac, “Voices from the Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists” in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 647.



history goes far to explain the Service's fixation on technology as the key to the future. "If the past is viewed as unworthy of serious study," Watts wondered, "then what else is there for a 'high-tech' institution beyond pursuing technology?"<sup>47</sup> In this light, Brodie's observation that Douhet's "philosophy is less challenged today than ever before"<sup>48</sup> ironically conveys a deep and distressing truth altogether different from his intended meaning. Douhet's philosophy is rarely even discussed, much less analysed or challenged. It has silently replaced the more self-consistent philosophies of Clausewitz and Jomini in American airpower theory.

Douhet's historical context in the wake of World War I also powerfully influenced his thinking. He assumed that land warfare technology could only intensify the static conditions of trench warfare, despite the advent of tanks and in contradiction to his own prewar advocacy of mechanized warfare. "The truth" regarding land combat, he emphasized in *Command of the Air*, "is that every development or improvement in firearms favors the defensive."<sup>49</sup> Even while committed to rejecting the influence of history on military theory, he was himself enslaved to an outdated and stagnant historical perception of land warfare. In light of his philosophical contradiction regarding change and certainty, his absolute confidence in this assumption is, again, utterly astounding. Land warfare was certain, he believed, to retain its "static character" because "the causes of that character still exist and will be more important in the future than they are now."<sup>50</sup> As late as 1929, just as the Germans (under the shadow of von Seeckt) were pioneering *blitzkrieg*, Douhet asserted in *The War of 19-* that "on land the war will present much the same

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47. Barry D. Watts, "Doctrine, Technology, and Air Warfare" in Hallion, ed., n.45, p. 22.

48. Brodie, n.35, p. 106.

49. Douhet, n.1, p. 11. [emphasis in original]

50. Douhet, Ibid., p. 175.

characteristics as the World War, because no substantial changes have taken place in armament or organisation of land forces.”<sup>51</sup> In Douhet’s mind, Clausewitz’s offensive-defensive dialectic was dead. How quickly and completely Hitler’s Wehrmacht would prove him wrong.

Surprisingly, his views on airpower and aviation technology were almost as stagnant as his views of land warfare. Just as he denied technology favoring the offensive on land, he refused to countenance any defensive aeronautical advances. Rather, he viewed the particular technological conditions of his historical context as absolute, concluding that “the airplane is the offensive weapon par excellence.”<sup>52</sup> His insightful critique of the prevailing attitudes of 1914 apply perfectly to his own thinking on airpower: “The idea that the defensive, though never decisive, might be of help in gaining time and mustering strength, was completely disregarded, and the thing was carried so far that some armies did not even mention the word defense in their manuals of tactical instruction.”<sup>53</sup> That emerging technology such as radar and high performance fighters undermined Douhet’s assumptions is, perhaps, understandable.<sup>54</sup> That his ahistorical theory made the same errors of historical stagnancy that he found so repulsive in the French command of 1914 is not. That his fictitious *War of 19-bore* uncanny resemblance to the defensive assumptions that produced the Maginot Line mentality is even less so. Douhet, like the French generals of 1914 and 1940, was fixated upon the last war.

A final aspect of his historical context, in light of the Great War, was his captivation with its suddenness and totality. “What interests us most of all,” he wrote in *The War of 19-*, “is that war broke out suddenly, with no appreciable period of incubation.”<sup>55</sup> In fact, its abrupt start was merely an exaggeration of August 1914. By contrast, World War II approached so gradually and, for some, so predictably that Churchill wanted to call it “The Unnecessary War.”<sup>56</sup> World War II was, as Douhet predicted, largely “total in character and scope” such that

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51. Douhet, *Ibid.*, p. 307.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

54. John Buckley, *Air Power in the Age of Total War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 77.

55. Douhet, n.1, p. 296.

56. Douhet, *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.

“the entire population and all the resources of a nation” were “sucked into the maw of war.” Yet, even this still failed to exhibit the totality of Douhet’s assumptions. As MacIsaac observed, Douhet’s chief assumption of unrestrained poison gas never occurred, thus absolving Douhet of some criticism for the war’s failure to vindicate his conclusions.<sup>57</sup> Yet, it also highlights his failure to accurately predict the war’s character.

The polemical context of interwar Italy’s heady atmosphere also influenced Douhet.<sup>58</sup> His perspective was largely an extension of the “intense modernist fascination” with technology that pervaded the “avant-garde culture” of his formative years.<sup>59</sup> In 1919, attracted in part by their modernist views on technology, Douhet became an ardent Fascist.<sup>60</sup> It was a period of dynamic debate, in Italy as elsewhere, on how to prevent another continental bloodletting. Douhet immersed himself in this “inflamed rhetorical climate... in which facile slogans all too often took the place of deeds.”<sup>61</sup> With his profoundly intelligent and engaging mind, he remained “closely attuned to the dominant themes of his intellectual milieu.”<sup>62</sup> The image of Douhet as prophet is, if accurate at all, certainly incomplete; he was also a poet, painter, playwright, novelist, and satirist.<sup>63</sup> Douhet expert Claudio Segre described him as “more of a polemicist than a systematic and scholarly thinker.”<sup>64</sup> In this climate, there was little room for detached objectivity, and Douhet “seldom hesitated about indulging his imagination and his taste for rhetoric and for ‘guesstimates.’”<sup>65</sup>

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57. MacIsaac, in Paret ed., n.46, p. 630.

58. Segre, n.30, p. 73.

59. Gat, n.31, p. 52.

60. Gat, Ibid., p. 53.

61. Segre, n.30, p. 79.

62. Gat, n.31, p. 53.

63. Gat, Ibid., p. 53; and Segre, n.30, p. 71.

64. Segre, Ibid., p. 71.

65. Ibid., n.31, pp. 73-74.

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While many interpreters have questioned Douhet’s “originality”<sup>66</sup> or the extent to which he was “a pioneering theorist”<sup>67</sup> in a universal sense, the very question obscures the context of Douhet’s theory, original or otherwise, as an integral part of a distinct national conversation. Despite similarities with other countries’ airpower pioneers, Douhet’s ideas were at once an original contribution to and a product of a unique polemic; both reflective of and reactionary to the turbulent discourse on 1920’s Italian military reform. To interpret Douhet in isolation of this polemical context is akin to hearing only one side of a conversation while ignoring the identity or ideas of the other participants. In 1927, for example, Douhet admitted in the preface to his second edition of *Command of the Air* that he had carefully abridged many of the ideas in his 1921 edition in the interest of accomplishing something “practical and useful for my country.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, he overtly tailored his writings to his audience in a way that separates them from the more broadly applicable writings of Clausewitz and Jomini.

Due to these polemical origins, Douhet’s theory was neither comprehensive nor universal, nor did he claim it to be.<sup>69</sup> Of his first edition of *Command of the Air*, he wrote that his “purpose then was simply to break ground for the acceptance and execution of a minimum program which would have constituted a point of departure for further progress.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, many of Douhet’s inconsistencies over time make sense in the light of his circumstances. Of auxiliary aviation, for example, he had previously “admitted its right to

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66. MacIsaac, n.46, p. 631.

67. Buckley, n.54, p. 77.

68. Douhet, n.1, p. xi.

69. In contrast to Brodie’s assertion that it was a “relatively comprehensive philosophy”; Brodie, n.35, p. 72.

70. Douhet, n.1, p. 93.

existence so as not to upset too violently those whose minds found it too great a leap to abolish the auxiliary air force.”<sup>71</sup> These polemics tended to skew the debate in certain directions as evidenced in his *Recapitulation*, originally published in *Rivista Aeronautica* in 1929, in which he summarized his responses to several specific critiques of his opponents.

Douhet’s unequal attention to some issues and notable paucity of rigor in others is largely attributable to the unique features of Italy’s polemical terrain. Many of his sanguine assumptions, for example, on the destructive capability of bombs on urban area targets seem to have gone largely unchallenged while his opposition to aircraft carriers, an issue of more immediate concern to his opponents, generated considerable back-pressure in professional journals.<sup>72</sup> In this respect, Douhet’s arguments curiously paralleled those conservative elements of the Italian Navy’s surface-fleet proponents, such as Naval Minister Admiral Sechi, who opposed aircraft carriers as beyond Italy’s limited financial means.<sup>73</sup> In another revealing instance, carrier proponent Admiral Giuseppe Fioravanzo pointedly attacked Douhet’s neglect of friction in his theory, arguing that “as time goes on, the aerial forces which were so strong and numerous at the beginning of the war might even become weaker little by little from the wear and tear of war, until they reached a state of inferiority.”<sup>74</sup> While in most cases, Douhet responded with cogent rebuttals, in this case Fioravanzo had targeted one of Douhet’s vital theoretical weaknesses. Douhet uncharacteristically dismissed Fioravanzo’s well-placed argument with some

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71. Douhet, *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

72. Marco Rimanelli, “Italy Between Europe and the Mediterranean: Diplomacy and Naval Strategy from Unification to NATO, 1800s-2000,” in Frank J. Coppa, ed., *Publications of the Studies in Modern European History*, vol. 21 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997), pp. 502-503.

73. Rimanelli, *Ibid.*, pp. 505-506.

74. Douhet, n.1, p. 221.

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unconvincing hand waving.<sup>75</sup> As polemical forces were never evenly distributed, then, Douhet was never forced to be uniformly rigorous in his responses.

Another significant player in the polemical arena was General Amedeo Mecozzi. He advocated a combined-arms conception of air warfare in which operational and tactical air doctrine was employed to support land and naval forces.<sup>76</sup> Italo Balbo pragmatically incorporated the most practical aspects of both Douhet's and Mecozzi's conclusions in Italy's young Air Force, the *Regia Aeronautica*.<sup>77</sup>

"Neither of these theories can be altogether discarded," Balbo once told an English newspaper, "I think there is virtue in both."<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, Balbo clearly understood Douhet's theories to be limited in scope and thus "could not be applied in all circumstances," even within the context of Italian airpower: "Naturally, not all of Douhet's affirmations are to be taken literally."<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, the Mecozzi-Douhet debate remained unresolved.<sup>80</sup> The debate over carrier aviation, however, ended in Douhet's favor; yet, it was for reasons of power politics rather than airpower theory that Mussolini amputated the navy's air arm.<sup>81</sup> Possibly the clearest assessment of Douhet's polemical context, then, is simply that Italy shaped Douhet far more than Douhet shaped Italy.

Douhet's most overt contextual limitation was his focus on Italy's "unique geographic situation."<sup>82</sup> Warner observed that "Douhet wrote as an Italian, and he tested his theories by applying them to Italy," noting Italy's protective Alpine barrier and short flying distances from potential enemies.<sup>83</sup> Segre also concluded

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75. Douhet, *Ibid.*, p. 221.

76. Segre, n.30, p. 76.

77. Claudio G. Segre, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 154.

78. Segre, *Ibid.*, p. 154.

79. Segre, *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 155.

80. Segre, n.30, p. 79.

81. Rimanelli, n.72, p. 514.

82. Douhet, n.1, p. 141.

83. Warner, n.34, p. 499.

that Italy “was at the center of Douhet’s thoughts. Its strategic and economic problems, especially during World War I, deeply influenced his thinking.”<sup>84</sup> Accordingly, Douhet’s writings were not “general theories” but “specific solutions to his country’s military problems.”<sup>85</sup> In the end, Douhet had “Italy’s salvation specifically in mind.”<sup>86</sup> This view is buttressed by Douhet’s own “wish” that “people could understand that I am thinking primarily of our own situation. When I say that the aerial field of action will be decisive, I refer to Italy.”<sup>87</sup>

This contextual issue has generated some controversy. Bernard Brodie, heavily referencing Douhet in his theory on thermonuclear warfare, eschewed the “legend that his primary if not exclusive interest in advocating his ideas was the defense of Italy.”<sup>88</sup> Brodie concluded that “Douhet’s mind and ideas were much too big to suffer confinement to a single country’s military problems, particularly those of a second-class power like Italy.”<sup>89</sup> The evidence from Douhet’s own writings, however, indicates that on this point Brodie was grossly mistaken. The assertion that Douhet saw Italy as a “second-class power” represents the wholesale imposition of a postwar American, perhaps even a touch patronizing, perspective that could not have been further from Douhet’s thought process. Quite to the contrary, Douhet the Fascist strongly embraced Mussolini’s view of Italy as a modern reincarnation of ancient Rome.<sup>90</sup> In fact, “Douhet’s mind and ideas” were far too grandiose and patriotic to think of Italy as anything but a burgeoning world power with “an imperial destiny” employing aviation as the tool “with which to carve out her future.”<sup>91</sup>

That Douhet was primarily concerned with Italy’s “peculiar conditions” is clear.<sup>92</sup> For example, his aforementioned view of static, defensive land warfare was not only shaped by the Great War, but also by the most dominant feature in Italian land warfare: that “Alpine barrier” that “gives us the power to bar the door of our

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84. Segre, n.30, p. 70.

85. Segre, *Ibid.*, p. 70.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

87. Douhet, n.1, p. 259.

88. Brodie, n.35, p. 81.

89. Brodie, *Ibid.*, p. 82.

90. Douhet, n.1, p. 81-82.

91. Douhet, *Ibid.*, p. 141.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

**Thus, while Italy's geographic isolation largely resembled that of the British Isles, it was utterly unlike the German or Russian positions.**

house.”<sup>93</sup> From this viewpoint, it was not unreasonable to conclude that “whoever our enemy may be, we will encounter him in the high mountains near the frontier; and in the mountains our army will have to wage a long and bitter fight.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, while Italy's geographic isolation largely resembled that of the British Isles, it was utterly unlike the German or Russian positions. It resembled even

less the geographical context of American global power projection.

Italy's peninsular geography was also significant as a “bridge across the Mediterranean.”<sup>95</sup> For Douhet, the Mediterranean basin, not continental Europe, was Italy's natural growth region, just as it had been for the Roman Empire. Yet, he also realized that Italy was “shut up in the Mediterranean Sea” and thus advised, “as to any aspirations toward making the oceans ours, let us forget them.”<sup>96</sup> Douhet's theory did not apply in the expansive Atlantic context.<sup>97</sup> Due to the Mediterranean's small size, however, all naval vessels would be within striking range of land-based aircraft. Thus, “as long as the enemy Air Force is intact, the fleet operating in the Mediterranean could always be attacked by it... An Independent Air Force can fly in any direction over this great sea, against naval bases, cruising fleets, commercial ports, and lines of communication.”<sup>98</sup> His ideas were overtly limited to “*preventing anyone from sailing in the Mediterranean without our consent.*”<sup>99</sup> Such a limited navy would have no need of aircraft carriers since “if we are in a position to dominate our own sky, we will automatically be in a position to dominate the Mediterranean sky as well.”<sup>100</sup> Keeping “in view our own particular situation, lying athwart the Mediterranean Sea,”<sup>101</sup> Douhet overtly

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93. Ibid., p. 139.

94. Ibid., p. 135.

95. Ibid., p. 207.

96. Ibid., p. 286.

97. Ibid., p. 284.

98. Ibid., p. 219.

99. Ibid., p. 283. [emphasis in original]

100. Ibid., p. 141.

101. Ibid., p. 219.



rejected the applicability of his theory to “an English, American, or Japanese naval force operating in the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean.”<sup>102</sup> A cogent passage from Douhet’s pen shatters Brodie’s argument of a universal theory:

Naturally, my first thought is of our own situation and the eventuality of a possible conflict between Italy and some one of her possible enemies. I admit that the theories I expound have that in the background, and therefore should not be considered applicable to all countries. In all probability, if I were specifically considering a conflict between Japan and the United States, I would not arrive at the same conclusions. To offer a general recipe for victory, applicable to all nations, would be downright presumption of my part. My intention is simply to point out the best and most efficient way for our country to prepare for a probable future war.<sup>103</sup>

Nonetheless, Douhet did occasionally apply his theory to other countries which, at least superficially, seems to contradict his self-imposed geographical limitations. Bernard Brodie supported his universalistic Douhetian interpretation with the observation that the belligerents of *The War of 19-* were France, Belgium, and Germany, “with Italy playing no part at all.”<sup>104</sup> Elsewhere, Douhet applied his theory in speculating on the character of an air war between Paris and London. Upon careful examination, however, these examples actually confirm his distinctly Italian viewpoint. Consciously or otherwise, his foreign examples consistently reflect a notably Italian geo-strategic bias. In the Anglo-French war, the English Channel performed the same function of isolating the belligerents as the Alps did for Italy. Further, his citation of British Prime Minister Baldwin remarking in 1924 that “the history of our insularity has ended, because with the advent of the airplane we are no longer an island”<sup>105</sup> applies as well to Italy as to Britain. In *The War of 19-*, Douhet had the Germans

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102. Ibid., p. 219.

103. Ibid., pp. 252-253. [emphasis added]

104. Brodie, n.35, p. 82.

105. Douhet, n.1, p. 185.

fortify the Rhine region and the narrow Belgian frontier, creating a “static form of war.”<sup>106</sup> Within these static confines, he wrote, the “frontiers of the great powers are not long enough to allow full deployment to the huge modern armies,” thus producing a “continuous front.” This artificial geographic isolation again reflected Italy’s situation. It is significant that these scenarios were inapplicable to a German war of maneuver against Russia or Poland, or in reality against France as the Germans proved in 1940. Further, even in his Franco-German scenario, Douhet conveniently ignored the definitive bane of German strategy: the threat of a two-front war. For this, his theory offered no answers; but then, as his message was intended for Italians and not Germans, French, Russians, or Poles, there was no need to let strategic realities get in the way of his main point. Thus, even his foreign examples illustrate how Italy’s geographic context pervaded his theoretical writings.

Intriguingly, subsequent interpreters have generally paid little attention to Douhet’s complete theoretical, historical, polemical, and geographical contexts. With few exceptions, the general trend has been to assume his theory’s increasing validity over time and universal applicability beyond Italy; the latter being a distortion that Douhet himself would have choked on. Even in 1943, prior to the atomic era, Warner wrote that the case for Douhet’s validity was stronger than it had been a decade or two prior and “it is altogether probable that the passage of another decade will make it stronger still.”<sup>107</sup> “On general principle,” Warner continued, “time works with Douhet.”<sup>108</sup> After 1945, most airpower advocates in the US argued that the atomic bomb had rejuvenated Douhet’s theory.<sup>109</sup> The advent of thermonuclear weapons and ballistic missiles further strengthened this feeling that “Douhet has come into his own.”<sup>110</sup>

Most airpower analysts have ignored Douhet’s biases and presuppositions. The overwhelming majority agree with Brodie that “the framework of strategic thought he created is peculiarly pertinent to any general war in the nuclear

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106. Douhet, *Ibid.*, pp. 307-308.

107. Warner, n.34, p.497.

108. Warner, *Ibid.*, pp. 496-497.

109. Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force: 1907-1960*, vol. 1 (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1989), p. 239.

110. Brodie, n.35, p. 402.

age.”<sup>111</sup> More recently, Air Force General Charles Link indicated that Douhet’s theory was “not in error but merely postponed” and was vindicated by Desert Storm.<sup>112</sup> As Earl Tilford accurately observed, the “general theme” echoed by “senior USAF officials... along with civilian airpower enthusiasts” was that the performance of US airpower in Desert Storm, especially that of the Air Force, “had made a reality of the prophecies of Italian theorist Giulio Douhet.”<sup>113</sup> The shadow of Douhet over Desert Storm became a soapbox for many such as Edward Luttwak who claimed that US airpower had “finally recovered the lost qualities” of Douhet’s airpower theory and restored “the promise of ‘victory through air power’... after a 70-year detour.”<sup>114</sup> Though popular, this understanding of Douhet’s theory is simplistic, inaccurate, and profoundly anachronistic. The burden of proof rests upon those who invoke Douhet’s name thus to demonstrate how his theory and ideas transcended his own context. While this may be possible, very few have recognized the need to do so.<sup>115</sup>

**Douhet’s legacy belongs in the history books rather than in the marketplace of 21st century strategic thought. He was a man of his time: creative, intelligent, literary, innovative, artistic, observant, and most of all, politically active.**

Douhet’s legacy belongs in the history books rather than in the marketplace of twenty-first century strategic thought. He was a man of his time: creative, intelligent, literary, innovative, artistic, observant, and most of all, politically active. It is greatly to his credit that he never made more out of his theory than it warranted. Unfortunately, later generations of over-zealous disciples in a foreign land across the Atlantic have largely failed to live up to this high standard. It is

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111. Brodie, *Ibid.*, p. 106.

112. Charles D. Link, Richard H. Shultz, Jr. and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., eds., “The Role of the US Air Force in the Employment of Air Power” in *The Future of Air Power in the Aftermath of the Gulf War* (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1992), p. 85.

113. Earl H. Tilford Jr., William Head and Earl H. Tilford Jr., eds., *The Eagle in the Desert: Looking Back on U.S. Involvement in the Persian Gulf War* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), p. 107.

114. Edward Luttwak quoted by Caroline F. Ziemke, “A New Covenant?: The Apostles of Douhet and the Persian Gulf War” in Head and Tilford Jr., eds., *Ibid.*, p. 291.

115. Gat, n.31, pp. 52-53.

unfortunate, then, that Douhet has been so often criticized for failing to fulfill prophecies he never made. Touting his universal applicability exchanges Douhet the myth for Douhet the man. If this seems a harsh judgement, perhaps one should heed Douhet's own words: "Hannibal is dead, Napoleon is dead, Moltke is dead; tomorrow we shall be dead too; let us respect the past, but let us create the future."<sup>116</sup> Out of respect, then, it is high time to accept him for who he was: a fertile mind complete with his own thoughts, biases, limitations, and contradictions. We should study, respect, and understand his important place in history, but move out from under his shadow and create our own future.<sup>117</sup> As Douhet said of those that went before him, "Let us leave once and for all those poor dead in peace." A good start would be to refrain from raising his flag upon hills he never knew.

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116. Gat, *Ibid.*, p. 58.

117. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

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