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Book Review: The Air War in Vietnam

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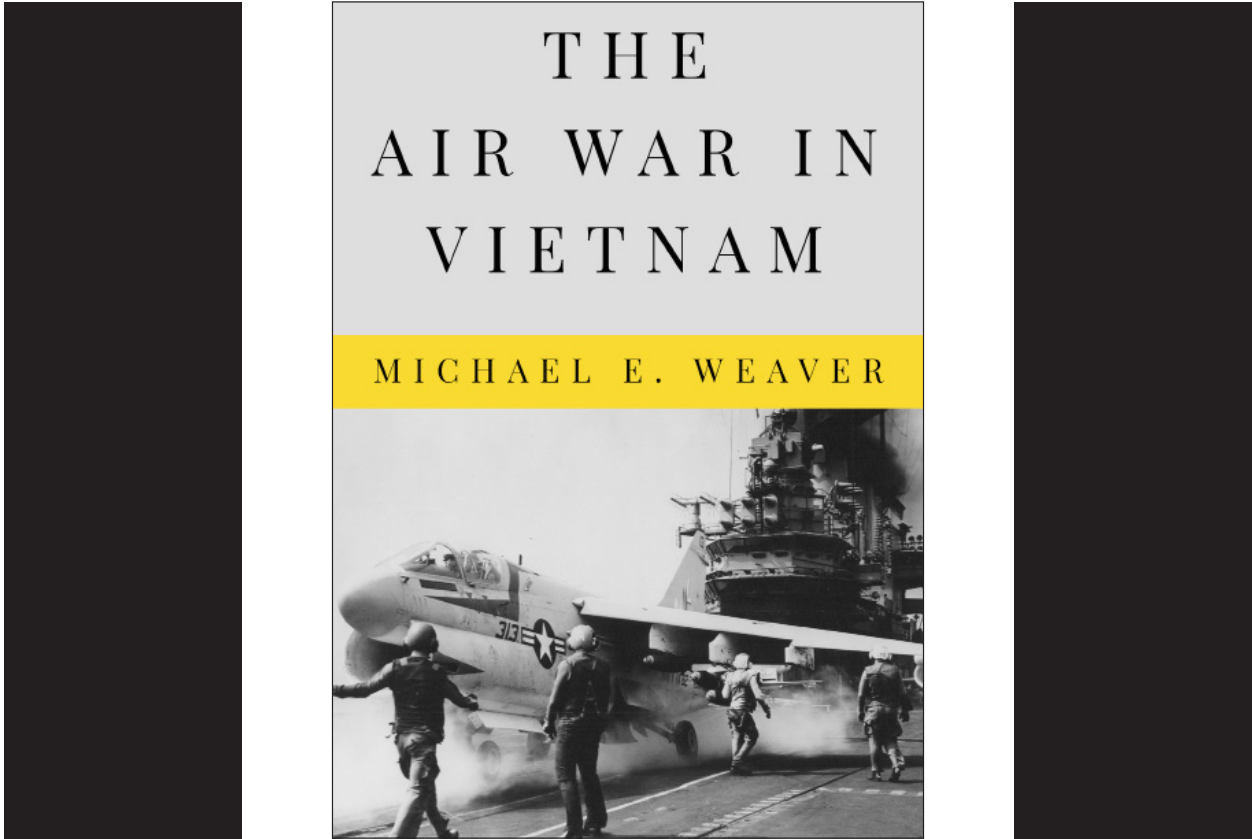


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Reviewed by Vince Alcazar, US Air Force (retired) planner and fighter pilot, Department of Defense

Michael E. Weaver's authoritative text, *The Air War in Vietnam*, presents a range of topics on airpower employment concepts and strategy/operations alignment. Three key inquiries emerge within the text that highlight the book's value regarding the intersection of airpower operations and Joint Force strategy to scholarship and educators.

Weaver's first inquiry has two components. The first touches on a popular postwar narrative within the US military after the war in Southeast Asia that President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration arbitrarily opted not to apply enough airpower. Weaver discredits this narrative when he observes that the Vietnam War "was a clash of two wills, not target sets" (410). He illustrates how the North Vietnamese fought from a strategy of absorbing whatever casualties were required to win, while the United States implemented a strategy of least cost, which culminated in a negotiated exit from Southeast Asia. Weaver explains this strategy mismatch as one side that sustained its use of a successful siege warfare model, while the other side embraced a state-of-the-art (albeit limited) conventional warfare model. He makes the case that US policy produced a strategy misalignment that yielded an ends/ways/means disconnect and hampered airpower performance as American Southeast Asia war strategy objectives shifted across the Johnson and the President Richard M. Nixon administrations.

In the second component of his first inquiry, Weaver observes, "It is as if the institutional memory conflates the failure of the war that included an air campaign with a failure of airpower—the Vietnam War was not airpower's to win or lose" (408). Here, he cites the revisionism of senior theater military leaders who departed Vietnam with a vague account of airpower's failure.

For example, Weaver quotes Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr., a former Pacific combatant commander during the height of the Vietnam War. In Sharp's 1978 critique of Vietnam War strategization, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect*, he alleged Johnson and his advisers disregarded "the counsel of experienced military professional[s] in presuming the day-to-day conduct of military strategy and tactics" (270). Weaver turns the tables on Sharp's views by pointing out that US airpower employment in Southeast Asia was tantamount to "cutting down a tree by starting at the outermost leaves and snipping one's way to the branches but leaving the trunk and roots intact" (282). The mythology that the North Vietnamese would have quickly surrendered if US airpower was fully unleashed is, as Weaver concludes, a dubious proposition.

In his second key inquiry, Weaver assesses why US airpower underperformed and identifies innovations that elevated airpower's technology. Those advancements, however, were incapable of linking local airpower achievements within set-piece battles and sieges to a sustained operational level of war success to yield eventual American strategic success. Weaver writes, "The crux of the problem for making the greatest use of aerial bombardment in support of one's own combat troops is knowing the location of enemy troops and keeping them in place until the bombs destroy them" (251). Of those two challenges, an insufficient number of massed North Vietnamese troop battles thwarted US efforts to defeat enough North Vietnamese Army forces. On the occasions North Vietnamese Army forces massed, US ground and air forces decisively defeated those troops. In these confrontations, US airpower was a vital advantage to American and South Vietnamese land warfare forces. For airpower to attack enemy forces effectively, however, those forces had to mass to be visible to the era's aerial targeting technologies. Regardless of why administration officials believed US bombing impacted the North Vietnamese regime war calculus, US airpower would underdeliver as long as enemy forces avoided massing to frustrate US aerial targeting.

In Weaver's third key inquiry, he describes several airpower innovations that enabled America's preferred ground warfare model in Southeast Asia, which included airlift aircraft performance and cargo delivery tactics that allowed US aircraft to deliver weapons, ammunition, and other supplies within 200 meters of US force positions in the midst of attacking North Vietnamese troops. Elsewhere, he makes clear the substantial contributions of US close-air-support fires, rotary-wing aircraft access, and aerial interdiction. He also devotes attention to an often-overlooked innovation of the war in Southeast Asia—improved aerial reconnaissance.

The Air War in Vietnam, an indispensable volume of airpower scholarship, provides richly developed analysis of airpower in a decade-long war of challenging hybrid characteristics and shifting US strategies. For planners, policymakers, senior leaders, and warfighters seeking insight on how to apply airpower as a strategic instrument and tactical tool, fulsome chronicle insightfully analyzes the suboptimization of America's airpower portfolio in Southeast Asia. Of consolation, the failed US war spawned significant and enduring gains in American airpower technology and improved airpower strategy literacy in support of US political aims.

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