James W.E Smith
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Release

CORBETT OFFERS MORE ON SPACE THAN MITCHELL

When British naval historian Sir Julian Corbett wrote *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*[1] in 1911, the idea of warfare in air and space was little more than a dream in the minds of a few fiction writers and scientists. Soon after World War I, Corbett realized that his work required updating to address what British World War I strategy ought to have been.[2] At the same time, the birth of military aviation during World War I had begun a competition for airpower, a contest that would later lead to commercial air travel, a voyage to the moon, and airpower's acceptance as a component of military power.

Corbett's works were mostly forgotten after World War II as maritime strategy was rejected in favour of airpower arguments and short term military planning. Corbett's legacy was slowly rejuvenated in the 2000s as it became increasingly apparent that the Cold War had skewed theory, understanding, and application of strategy. An example of interest in Corbett's concepts was demonstrated when a limited number of naval thinkers considering space were starting to explore the theoretical framework for joint space doctrine.[3] They highlighted Corbett's works as providing insight, and their research embraced Corbettian values: studying history and past strategic theories to develop a useful framework, realizing that thinking on both seapower and airpower fall short of what is required to understand the complexities of space warfare, and noting that a fulsome space strategy distinctly resembles maritime concepts around sea control and lines of communication. But these naval intellectuals on space failed to adequately energize operational and strategic discussion on the topic and today the relationship between space and the modern U.S. Navy remains publicly unclear.[4] It isn't enough simply to transpose Corbett's theories of sea control to the space domain in entirety. Rather, space strategists should embrace the process by which Corbett developed his ideas to enable them to develop theory to address some of the unique requirements of space.

The Peril of Sentimentalizing Strategy

Corbett, other naval strategists such as American historian Alfred Mahan[5], and the land and air strategists who included Carl von Clausewitz and Antonine-Henri Jomini criticized military thinkers for relying on catchphrases, heroic myths, and sentimentalized interpretations of historic individuals. Instead, they believed that only sustained study of historical experience could develop the enduring insight as the basis for current and future strategy. They would have regarded with chagrin the acting Secretary of the Air Force's recent challenge to the space community to "seek out and empower today's Billy Mitchells."[6] Evoking the memory of American airpower proponent and military officer Billy Mitchell may seem like a sensible

[1] Corbett, Julian. *Some Principals of Maritime Strategy,* London: Longman, 1911.
[2] Lambert, A. (2017). 21st Century Corbett. U.S. Naval Institute Press, Introduction.
[3] Klein, John J. (2004) "Corbett in Orbit," Naval War College Review: Vol. 57 : No. 1 , Article 7.
[4] LaGrone, Sam, and Sam LaGrone. "Navy Takes the 'Space' Out of Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command." USNI News, June 4, 2019. https://news.usni.org/2019/06/03/navy-takes-the-space-out-of-space-and-naval-warfare-systems-command
[5] Mahan, A. T. Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land: Lectures Delivered at U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R.I., between the Years 1887 and 1911. Newport RI.: U.S Naval War College, n.d.
[6] Donovan, Matthew. "Unleashing the Power of Space: The Case for a Separate U.S. Space Force." War on the Rocks, August 1, 2019. https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/unleashing-the-power-of-space-the-case-for-a-separate-u-s-space-force/.

rallying cry, but the controversial figure of nearly a century ago risks renewing old rivalries and arguments.[7] Rather than follow Mitchell's path to forge the future, those building the Space Force and Space Command should look to Corbett for guidance.

The Fractious Birth of the U.S. Air Force

Mitchell's real legacy is a U.S. Air Force independent from the Department of the Army — not a coherent domain theory of air and airpower. Moreover, his divisive tactics, use of politics, false statements, and manipulation of the media in pursuit of that single-minded goal badly inflamed interservice rivalries for one goal alone: to advance the need for an independent air force in the United States. Mitchell manifested the fears of maritime and continental strategists by building a case for organizational change without demonstrating that those changes were either rooted in the wisdom of sustained experience or indeed even reasonable. His bombing trials against obsolete warships in the 1920s were mostly exercises lacking technical capability and often viewed as propaganda stunts rather than genuine investigations into the nature of air as a domain and had the effect of further inflaming interservice rivalries.[8]

Mitchell was no strategist; he was an advocate for a future service that would not take form until the reactionary post-World War II years. That decade was uniquely marked with the unification of the separate military departments into a single Department of Defense. His followers finally achieved bureaucratic victory after World War II, when the establishment of the Department of Defense in 1947 also paved the way for an air force independent from the Army. But, contrary to popular belief, unifying the service departments resulted in limited progress towards resolving disagreements over the shape and scope of American defense, primarily the role and mission of each of the services and how they support national defense policy and strategy. In many cases, it renewed and intensified rivalry far beyond anything seen previously. Post-1947 rivalries within the new Department of Defense were more bitter than during the days when Mitchell was arguing for a separate air force. These rivalries reached a pinnacle in the late 1940s with the incorrectly termed 'Revolt of the Admirals.'[9] Aircraft carrier based naval aviation versus land based aircraft arguments clouded the truth that role and mission of the services were conflicting more than previously with one another and tensions over them had only been enhanced with the creation of the Department of Defense.

This period profoundly shaped the evolution of the American military and its thought processes — arguably, far more than did Mitchell himself, which makes it all the more strange to return to him as the foundation of strategic space theory. Instead strategists should turn to Corbett, who demonstrated that only a substantial body of research can develop coherent national doctrine by utilizing contemporary theoretical models.

The fierce Navy-Air Force arguments of the late 1940s and 1950s benefitted few and arguably made distraction, division, and time an ally for America's adversaries. They demonstrated the risk of Mitchell-style rivalry, in which a singular vision actually leads to

[7] Hipple, Matt. "Against An Air Force Space Corps: Space Belongs to the Navy!" The National Interest. The Center for the National Interest, June 27, 2017. https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/against-air-force-space-corps-space-belongs-the-navy-21350.
[8] "Wadle on Wildenberg, 'Billy Mitchell's War with the Navy: The Interwar Rivalry over Air Power'." H, n.d. https://networks.h-net.org/node/12840/reviews/79382/wadle-wildenberg-billy-mitchells-war-navy-interwar-rivalry-over-air.
[9] Barlow, Jeffrey G. "Naval Aviation's Most Serious Crisis?" U.S. Naval Institute, February 21, 2019. https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2011/december/naval-aviations-most-serious-crisis.

stagnation. Invoking his memory today not only runs the risk of renewing rivalries but demonstrates a disconnect between the study of history and the formulation of policy. As Admirals Ernest King and Arleigh Burke, and the first secretary of defense, James Forrestal, warned in the immediate post-war decade, 'ideology above experience' is one of the greatest threats to sound strategic thinking. Strategically minded thinkers such as Corbett encouraged those facing difficult questions to figure out how to think, not what to think. The reuse of old arguments, themselves often outdated and rooted in rivalry, does little to encourage the new thought that is required for space.

Fortunately, some of today's U.S. military are aware of Mitchell's reputation, and see that his tactics are unsound for the 21st century.[10] But keeping the Mitchell ethos in any form at the core of developing strategic space theory runs the risk of renewing old rivalries and opening space theory up to the same fate as maritime and land theories in the 20th century: dogmatically scarred by dispute and disagreement.

Air forces are not alone in the problem of finding balance between understanding the past and interpreting historic individuals. Strategists created of all stripes often resort to well-known individuals to create connections to past institutional victories, as in the case of the U.S. Navy's perennial quest to find the next Mahan.[11] These long-deceased individuals such as Mitchell and the students, past and present, who study them are products of their own times; and excessively focusing on these questions can detract from investing in the new minds of today.

Some Principles, not The Principles

Corbett preferred broad, encompassing terms such as "maritime" to narrow, singular visions, such as "naval strategy." In this context, "maritime" connotes the broad spectrum and many interrelationships of interests regarding the oceans of the world, such as politics, economics science, technology, exploration, industry, trade, foreign relations, communications, law, and culture.[12] From this description alone, it is easy to extrapolate a common methodological rubric for "space" which is analogous, though not identical, to "maritime." Corbett's concepts of maritime strategy a century ago repeatedly stated the necessity for the closest cooperation of ground- and sea-based forces to further strategy, modified appropriately for a seapower or continental state. By comparison, Mitchell's advocacy for a new service offers little advice on the complex strategic and doctrinal questions that must be faced in the space domain today.

Naval involvement in the intellectual discussion over strategic space theory is vital. The commonality of space and maritime domains is amplified by the fact that both are hostile to humans while also shaping their very existence.[13] Humans have exerted great effort to make the sea a place of work and use it to enhance land-dwelling civilization. Yet we know more

[10] Grosselin, Kenny. "Is This Space's 'Billy Mitchell Moment'? Let's Hope Not." Defense One, August 28, 2019. https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/08/spaces-billy-mitchell-moment-lets-hope-not/159486/.
[11] Colin S. Gray (1996) The influence of space power upon history, Comparative Strategy, 15:4, 293-308, DOI: 10.1080/01495939608403082
[12] Hattendorf, John B. (2003) "The Uses of Maritime History in and for the Navy," Naval War College Review: Vol. 56 : No. 2 , Article 4. Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol56/iss2/4
[13] Ziarnick, Brent, National Security Studies, Air Command and Staff College, Air Force Reserve, US Naval Institute, British Interplanetary Society., Air University, Air Force, and Department of Defense. "Why the Space Corps Needs to Use Naval Rank." The Space Review: Why the Space Corps needs to use naval rank, n.d. https://www.thespacereview.com/article/3761/1.

about near-earth orbit than the bottom of the oceans, which should remind us we have not yet solved all the mysteries of either space or sea, a commonality that should not be ignored. Strategists must inject some much-needed reality into considerations of space theory and space warfare to reinforce that space assets must influence and support what happens on Earth and that any action against those assets is designed to weaken resolve in strategy and operations across all the military domains. This is a striking resemblance to Corbett's strategic concepts of how events on and through the seas influence what happens on land. This underlines that space should be viewed as "maritime" in these still-early developmental stages — at least in the sense of applying Corbett's methodology, rather than ideas specific to naval warfare of the past. Space theory will evolve into a more constructive field, similar to when the great strategists challenged the ideas of their era. To its strength, space theory may retain the best influences from each of the domains. Critically, it is the methodology of developing space theory that will move it past the limited and narrow perspectives often voiced today, many of which are jeopardizing progress in theory and application by instilling memories of individuals such as Mitchell.

The Air Force's responsibility to aid the development of strategic space theory goes far beyond the spiritual ghost of Mitchell as justification for policy arguments. The Air Force can proudly boast the institutional experience of its involvement with space since the 1950s as a well to draw from. This experience provides far better contribution than the hackneyed perspectives of a bygone age. U.S. Space Command also needs to be reminded that it is joint, and therefore should avoid the temptation to become a mouthpiece for any previous closely associated service or way of doing business. It is time to move on from the misconstrued beliefs of Mitchell-style propaganda that space was ever simply an adjunct to airpower or a space version of the Air Force.[14] Space theory presents a new opportunity for the Navy and Air Force to work together, rejecting renewing land-based versus sea-based aviation arguments. The Air Force's experience is a starting point for intellectual debate but coupling it with an updated maritime strategic framework could push American space power beyond limits seemingly self-imposed through the division of resources along old, well-travelled, and comfortable service lines.[15]

Policymakers should also realize that space theory and space warfare remain in their infancy, and attacks on critical infrastructure in any domain are still most likely to come from cyber or hard power. At the same time, escalation of space warfare could have unintended results for both defender and aggressor. The evolution of space theory and warfare is both an intellectual investment and an opportunity for America to deeply reflect on the interface of space to all military interests, including those of the maritime domain. The dividend of this investment is the development of a strategic space theory that streamlines space command and control, supports delivering coherent national policy and strategy, and faces head-on the necessity of securing space for America and its allies.

[14] "A Speech for the Next SECAF to Launch a New Era of Spacepower." War on the Rocks, September 19, 2019. https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/a-speech-for-the-next-secaf-to-launch-a-new-era-of-spacepower/.
[15] "Space Force Is More Important than Space Command." War on the Rocks, July 7, 2019. https://warontherocks.com/2019/07/space-force-is-more-important-than-space-command/.