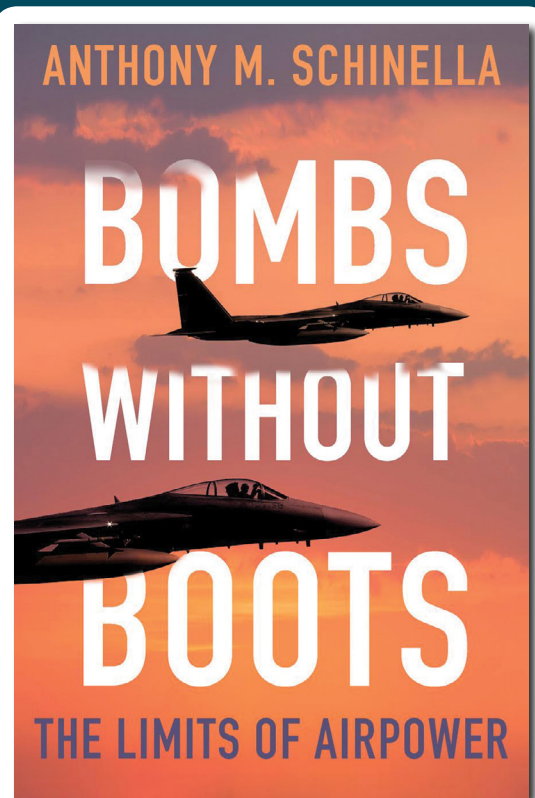


# REVIEW ESSAY

## Bombs without Boots The Limits of Airpower

Anthony M. Schinella, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2019, 391 pages



Kevin Rousseau

In *Bombs without Boots: The Limits of Airpower*, Anthony M. Schinella considers whether airpower can deliver a decisive victory without committing external ground combat forces. This is a question fraught with potential controversy, in part because, as political scientist Colin Gray explains, “Those who would judge the relative contribution of airpower to a campaign, war, or passage of diplomacy in peacetime can make the mistake of underrating the significance of the historically specific situation.”<sup>1</sup> Schinella understands the significance of context and the importance of setting appropriate metrics.<sup>2</sup> He grounds his analysis squarely within a specific historical situation by carefully framing his approach to focus on “a particular kind of airpower employment: those in which an external air force intervenes in a conflict without using its own ground combat forces.”<sup>3</sup> Schinella thus proceeds to critically evaluate “what is becoming a preferred mode of U.S. military intervention—dropping

bombs from the skies without committing boots on the ground,” granting his book a useful relevance to policymakers and military decision-makers.<sup>4</sup>

Schinella analyzes five post-Cold War airpower interventions to provide a sober assessment of the capabilities and limitations of airpower. In each of these cases, ranging from Bosnia in 1995 to Libya in 2011, airpower did indeed win battles and achieve important objectives. However, Schinella explains that the costs of these campaigns also proved higher than expected, and the long-term consequences fell demonstrably short of their strategic goals.

Schinella opens with a discussion of strategy that sets the stage for the analysis to follow. He identifies critical questions for decision-makers to consider before embarking on an intervention. For example, is the objective “to alter the behavior of an adversary regime or to overthrow it”?<sup>5</sup> Is the air campaign focused on targeting national-level infrastructure or deployed

military forces? As he elaborates later with the Kosovo campaign, “when the goals set out are numerous, expansive, and unspecific, it becomes increasingly unlikely that any military operation, no matter how successful, can achieve them all.”<sup>6</sup> Before committing forces, decision-makers must first get the strategy right by setting clear and attainable strategic objectives.

The Balkans provide Schinella his first two case studies. In Bosnia, NATO airpower appeared decisive but “was just one of a convergence of factors that brought about the peace, and it has been international presence and engagement on the ground that has since kept the peace.”<sup>7</sup> The Croat and Bosnian ground proxies proved competent enough to exploit the opportunities created by NATO airpower.<sup>8</sup> While the Bosnia conflict demonstrated the effectiveness of airpower in support of capable local ground forces, Kosovo revealed the limits of airpower when paired with a weak proxy ground force.<sup>9</sup> Despite the greater use of U.S. and NATO airpower in Operation Allied Force, the weak ground proxy in Kosovo “was largely unable to capitalize on the opportunities the NATO air campaign created.”<sup>10</sup> Although Kosovo is sometimes cited as an ideal example of the promise of airpower fulfilled, the outcome was the result of a combination of factors.<sup>11</sup>

One of the great strengths of the book is how Schinella expertly weaves his analysis of the different case studies together to produce insightful conclusions on the overall employment of airpower. For example, he analyzes the use of airpower during the initial operations in Afghanistan by comparing it with the air campaigns in Bosnia and Kosovo. As in the Balkans, planners in Afghanistan faced similar challenges when calibrating their airpower support to an indigenous ground proxy that possessed its own independent and sometimes contradictory objectives.<sup>12</sup> Afghanistan also showed that although indigenous ground proxy forces played a key role, they were effectively augmented by the introduction of designator-equipped special operations forces who supported them by calling in precise, real-time strikes. Schinella also warns that even if airpower alone achieves initial military victory, “if the outside intervener does not put boots on the ground in the aftermath, it largely relinquishes control over what happens on the ground thereafter.”<sup>13</sup>

Israel’s 2006 campaign in Lebanon provides the book’s extreme case of an air intervention with no proxy

ground force, and it exemplifies what can go wrong when strategists misalign ends and means. As Schinella explains, “Airpower was not an effective tool for the mission Israel was trying to accomplish. Standoff fires could not stop Hezbollah rocket fire into Israel, either through coercion of the leadership or destruction of the launchers.”<sup>14</sup> Lacking clear objectives and adopting the wrong measures of progress, it was difficult for Israeli leaders to assess the air campaign’s success.<sup>15</sup>

Libya provides a “useful case study of the relative roles of external airpower and indigenous ground forces.”<sup>16</sup> Relying on an indigenous ground force can be an attractive option, but Schinella warns that doing so the “long-term outcome of a well-intended intervention is thus likely to hinge much less on the capabilities and intentions of the interveners than those of the proxies.”<sup>17</sup> Schinella assesses that strategic stalemate resulted in the long run due to the relative weaknesses of both Libyan adversaries and their respective ground forces.<sup>18</sup> In the aftermath of Libya, unlike Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, there was no stabilization force deployed to preserve the results.<sup>19</sup> Like Israel in Lebanon, it is unclear that the mission was the correct one and the campaign was undertaken without a clear understanding of the objectives.<sup>20</sup> Schinella notes that as in Kosovo, “This was not a victory by airpower, but a victory made possible by airpower.”<sup>21</sup>

Schinella’s overall conclusion is that “airpower interventions can succeed without committing external ground combat forces—but only under the right circumstances.”<sup>22</sup> To help understand whether the circumstances are favorable, Schinella closes with six considerations for policy-makers contemplating a “bombs without boots” model. Is there a clear achievable and desirable end state beyond the military operation itself? What is the operational environment like? Are adequate and appropriate military forces available, along with required basing options? Is there a reliable proxy force? What are the nature and capabilities of the

**Kevin Rousseau** is the distinguished chair for national intelligence studies at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He has a BS from the U.S. Military Academy, an MS in strategic intelligence from the Defense Intelligence College, an MMAS in strategic studies from the School of Advanced Military Studies, and a JD from the George Mason University School of Law.



# Military Review

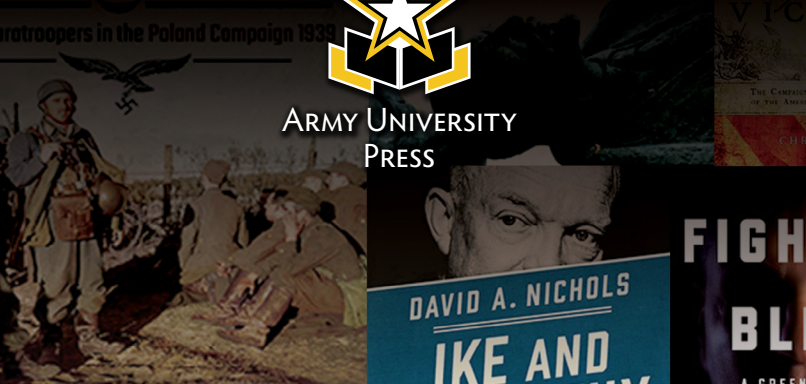
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adversary? Are we prepared to employ boots on the ground after the bombs to secure what has been won, or is the intent to simply leave things in the hands of the proxy forces?

This is more than a book on airpower—it is a study of strategy and the proper alignment of ends, ways, and means. As Gray notes, airpower is often “judged to have ‘failed’ or to have demonstrated serious limitations because too much or the wrong performance was expected of them in specific historical contexts.”<sup>23</sup> Airpower does have its limits, and *Bombs without Boots* sheds light on how not recognizing these limits can lead to costly strategic miscalculations. Airpower can only be as successful as the strategy it is wielded to support, and as Schinella warns, “A military success achieved quickly from the skies followed by a lasting policy failure on the ground will ultimately prove to be no success at all.”<sup>24</sup> ■

## Notes

1. Colin Gray, *Airpower for Strategic Effect* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2012), 13.
2. Anthony Schinella, currently serving as the National Intelligence Officer for Military Issues, has extensive experience assessing the effectiveness of military campaigns. For example, some of his work is highlighted in Steve Coll's *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 297.
3. Anthony Schinella, *Bombs without Boots: The Limits of Airpower* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 2.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 83.
7. *Ibid.*, 37.
8. *Ibid.*, 41.
9. *Ibid.*, 11.
10. *Ibid.*, 94.
11. *Ibid.*, 95.
12. *Ibid.*, 136.
13. *Ibid.*, 159.
14. *Ibid.*, 216.
15. *Ibid.*, 221.
16. *Ibid.*, 225.
17. *Ibid.*, 295.
18. *Ibid.*, 258.
19. *Ibid.*, 273.
20. *Ibid.*, 283.
21. *Ibid.*, 286.
22. *Ibid.*, 287.
23. Gray, *Airpower for Strategic Effect*, 14.
24. Schinella, *Bombs without Boots*, 303.