

# **William “Billy” Mitchell’s Air Power**

Compiled from the published and unpublished  
writings and commentaries of William Mitchell by

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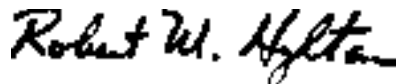
## **Foreword**

In the fall of 1996, the Department of the Air Force published its vision for the twenty-first century Air Force. The vision, entitled *Global Engagement*, presented a new strategy to guide the Air Force in meeting the many challenges of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. It is a vision “of air and space power and covers all aspects of our Air Force—people, capabilities, and support structures.”<sup>1</sup> *Global Engagement* “is the first step in the Air Force’s back-to-the-present approach to long-range planning.”<sup>2</sup>

As the Air Force charts its course into the twenty-first century, valuable insight is gained by examining the beginnings of that course—the initial vector that has steered air power from its birth at the beginning of this century and will now carry air and space power into the next. The United States Air Force is inseparably linked to many aviation pioneers and air power advocates. The wisdom and vision of these early airmen have steered the development of air power throughout this century.

Among those early visionaries, Brig Gen William “Billy” Mitchell was perhaps the most outspoken advocate of air power and an independent air force. Mitchell was not only a pioneer in military aviation, but an air power visionary. He was among the earliest to realize the value of air power and to see not only the profound changes it brought to his times, but its vast potential for the future. His wisdom is as fresh and relevant today as it was at the beginning of the century when he offered it. This collection of Mitchell’s thoughts on air power offered here should illuminate the vision offered by *Global*

Engagement. Even though Mitchell set forth his thoughts nearly 80 years ago, the lineage can be seen between his vision and those principles that have guided our Air Force in the past, that guide our Air Force today, and that will guide the Air Force vision for the next century.



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## **About the Author**

Lt Col Johnny R. Jones entered the Air Force in 1974 through the Reserve Officer Training Program. Assigned to the 50<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, Hahn Air Base, West Germany, he flew the F-4D and F-4E. Upon his selection to the German-US Exchange Officer Program, he flew the F-4F with the 35<sup>th</sup> Jagdbombgeschwader, Pferdsfeld Air Base, West Germany.

In operational assignments, he has served as an instructor weapon systems officer (WSO), standardization and evaluation flight examiner, functional check flight WSO, and chief of Weapons and Tactics. Assigned to Headquarters United States Air Forces Europe (USAFE), he served on the USAFE and European Operations (EUROPS) staff as a combat strike and employment officer.

As a distinguished graduate of the Air Command and Staff College, he was selected to the ACSC faculty. Lieutenant Colonel Jones commanded the 7362 Munitions Support Squadron, Volkel Air Base, the Netherlands. Upon returning to Headquarters USAFE as the chief of Doctrine and Joint Matters, he led theater-wide force restructuring and employment programs. He is currently serving as the chief of Doctrine Education in the Airpower Research Institute at the College of Aerospace Doctrine, Research, and Education (CADRE), Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.





## **Preface**

This is a book, not about William “Billy” Mitchell, but by Billy Mitchell—for printed here are his thoughts and ideas as collected from his writings and papers. Mitchell’s vision of aeronautics, aviation, and air power surpassed any other of his time. Less than a decade after the delivery of the first military airplane to the Signal Corps, and within a few years of the first aerial combat, Mitchell was speaking and writing of air power in terms that would take many decades to realize. His vision of the potential of air power was so complete that he saw beyond aerial flight and into space itself. Mitchell’s book *Skyways* published in 1930 contained the following dedication:

I dedicate this book to my two little children, Lucy Trumbull and William, Junior, who in their lifetime will see aeronautics become the greatest and principle means of national defense and rapid transportation all over the world, and possibly beyond our world into interstellar space.<sup>3</sup>

The words collected in this book were written and spoken by Mitchell between 1919 and 1930. The first successful powered flight by Orville Wright took place on 17 December 1903, and the first military aircraft was delivered to the Signal Corps in August 1909. Air power was in its infancy, and the observations of Mitchell are dated by his era. If the reader can put the words of Mitchell within the context of the time and weigh them against contemporary air power, the observations of Mitchell become even more remarkable, for they are as relevant now as they were at the beginning of the century.



## **Introduction**

William “Billy” Mitchell was an aviation pioneer, an air power visionary theorist and prophet, and an outspoken proponent of air power. His abrasive and caustic character, coupled with his public criticisms of the army and naval services, however, made him not only a controversial figure, but cost him his military career. Many of Mitchell’s air power beliefs are disputed as not having been his, but borrowed from others such as Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, and Gianni Caproni.

Whatever the genesis of Mitchell’s thoughts, the fact remains that it was Mitchell himself that spoke and wrote passionately about the employment and potential of air power. Whatever the criticisms that surrounded him, it was Mitchell who openly fought for the independence of air power as a step toward realizing its potentials in national defense. Despite the controversies surrounding Billy Mitchell, he remains a prophet whose theories were launched in the combat of World War I, whose views were validated in World War II, and whose beliefs mirrored those that have formed the foundation of modern air power doctrine.

Despite any criticisms that may be levied against Mitchell, he remains the individual who can most be termed the founding father of the United States Air Force and American air power. Only now are airmen beginning to realize the wisdom of Mitchell’s words and fully understand the air power of which he spoke.

Born 29 December 1879 in Nice, France, Mitchell was raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He attended Racine and Columbian (later known as George

Washington) Universities. He enlisted in the infantry in 1898 at the age of 18, was promptly promoted to lieutenant, and became the youngest officer to serve during the Spanish-American War. Serving in the Signal Corps he was assigned to the aviation section in 1915. Mitchell privately undertook, and completed, his training as a pilot at Newport News in 1916. In April of 1917, he was sent to Europe as a military aviation observer as America entered the war in Europe. On 22 April 1917, Mitchell was the first American flying officer to cross enemy lines. Mitchell was assigned to the American Expeditionary Force at the rank of lieutenant colonel in June 1917.

In May 1918 Mitchell was assigned to the First Army Corps in the rank of colonel and given command of the Air Service of the First Army Corps and later command of the Air Service of the First Army. Mitchell led his air forces in extraordinary air battles and combats throughout 1918, including the largest bombing mission ever assembled at that time, the nearly 1500-plane Allied bombing mission against the Saint-Mihiel salient in September 1918. Appointed a brigadier general and given command of the Air Service of the Group of Armies (combined air services) for the Meuse-Argonne offensive, he led bomber formations against targets behind enemy lines in October 1918.

Mitchell became the only high-ranking American officer that had led large air forces in combat. With the Armistice of 1918, Mitchell headed the Aviation of the Army of Occupation established in Germany.

Upon returning to the United States, Mitchell was assigned as the assistant chief of the Air Service in March 1919. In this position, Mitchell was charged with the training and operations of the Air Service. It was at this point that Mitchell fervently began his crusade for an independent air force and the unified control of military air power.

Mitchell's beliefs that air power had made the naval battleship obsolete enraged naval and civilian political leadership. At that time, a nation's military might could be measured by its battleships, so Mitchell's claims ran directly counter to prevailing beliefs, both among military leadership and civilian politicians. Although substantiating his claims by sinking the former German warship the *Ostfriesland* in 21 ½ minutes with aerial bombardment in July 1921, and later with successful tests off of the Cape Hatteras in September 1923, Mitchell's criticisms of the Navy and War Departments incensed his superiors, including President Calvin Coolidge.

Mitchell's criticisms of national military policy and especially national aeronautical policies and his unrelenting demands of his superiors to increase the size and improve the equipment of the Air Service led to his demotion in 1925. Mitchell returned to his permanent rank of colonel and was reassigned to San Antonio, Texas, in April 1925. There he commanded the VIII Corps Area. His fight for air power and an independent air force continued, however, despite admonishments by his superiors.

With the crash of the naval airship *Shenandoah* in September 1925, Mitchell spoke out publicly accusing the War and Navy Departments of "incompetency, criminal negligence, and almost treasonable administration of the National Defense."<sup>4</sup> His pronouncement was viewed as an act of insubordination, and in December 1925 he was tried and convicted by an Army court-martial.

Mitchell resigned from the Army on 1 February 1926 and continued his fight for air power and an independent air force as a civilian. With unrelenting vigor, through numerous speaking tours, articles, and books, Mitchell unrelentingly spread his ideas of air power throughout the nation influencing both military and civilian listeners. Many of his views and

observations were proven during World War II, and his ultimate goal of an independent air force was realized in September 1947, over 11 years after Mitchell's death in New York City on 19 February 1936.

Within this book are collected the words of William "Billy" Mitchell. His writings were astonishingly prophetic and remain strikingly relevant to modern air power. Although his words are dated by the context of his time, when stripped of their period context and viewed in the light of contemporary air power, Mitchell's views are as fresh as the day they were proposed. The reader will note the heavy criticisms offered toward naval forces and is asked to reflect on these criticisms in light of Mitchell's disposition toward the battleship navy of his time. There are also many redundancies in Mitchell's words, but this is understandable given the battle Mitchell was engaged in to win the argument for air power. There is much a modern practitioner of air power can gain through the insights of Mitchell, because many of the truths that Mitchell offered remain a subject of debate today.