

Between March 24 and June 9, 1999, NATO, led by the United States, conducted an air war against Yugoslavia in an effort to halt and reverse the continuing human-rights abuses that were being committed against the citizens of its Kosovo province (see the Frontispiece, Map of Kosovo) by Yugoslavia's elected president, Slobodan Milosevic. As it turned out, that 78-day effort, called Operation Allied Force, represented the third time in a row during the 1990s, after Operations Desert Storm and Deliberate Force, in which air power proved pivotal in determining the outcome of a regional conflict. Yet notwithstanding its ultimate success, what began as a hopeful gambit for producing quick compliance on Milosevic's part soon devolved, for a time at least, into a seemingly ineffectual bombing experiment with no clear end in sight. Not only was the operation's execution hampered by uncooperative weather and a surprisingly resilient opponent, it was further afflicted by persistent hesitancy on the part of U.S. and NATO decisionmakers that was prompted by fears of inadvertently killing civilians and losing friendly aircrews, as well as by sharp differences of opinion within the most senior U.S. command element over the best way of applying allied air power against Serb assets to achieve the desired effects. All of that and more, however unavoidable some aspects of it may have been, made NATO's air war for Kosovo a substantial step backward in efficiency when compared to Desert Storm.

This book assesses Operation Allied Force from a strategic and operational perspective, with a view toward spotlighting what was most gratifying about the application of allied air power throughout the effort, as well as identifying and exploring aspects of air power's per-

formance that indicated continued deficiencies in need of attention. The analysis is based entirely on openly accessible information, enriched at various points by inputs gleaned from interviews with selected Allied Force participants at both the command and execution levels. Although the U.S. government has yet to release many of the more recondite statistics associated with the air war's prosecution at the operational and tactical levels, more than enough confirmed information on the broader essentials has now been made public by the Department of Defense and by leading NATO officials to permit a confident reconstruction of what happened during Operation Allied Force. As in the case of the Persian Gulf War a decade ago, the principal distinguishing features of NATO's air war for Kosovo are no longer in dispute. What remains in contention are their meaning and implications.

As more details about the background and conduct of the Kosovo air war have become available, the debate over Allied Force and over the appropriate "lessons" to be drawn from it has tended to fragment into what one observer called "a series of mini-arguments about details and facts and figures," perhaps most notoriously with respect to how many enemy tanks were destroyed by allied air attacks and whether U.S. and NATO officials conspired to cover up the surprisingly poor performance of the air effort in that respect.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, this study seeks to maintain a steady lock on the larger picture. Although it freely ventures into operational and technical detail wherever appropriate, including on the tank issue and on related questions concerning how various items of equipment worked, it focuses more on such broader questions as what U.S. and allied air power accomplished by way of achieving their goals and what the operation's experience revealed about the state of air power's continuing evolution as an instrument of joint and combined warfare.

Toward that end, the book first describes the air war's strategic and operational highlights in chronological order. It then considers the various factors that interacted to induce Milosevic to capitulate when he did. After that, it explores air power's principal accomplishments, as well as the many problems that worked to render Allied Force a

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher Cviic, "A Victory All the Same," *Survival*, Summer 2000, p. 174.

less than uniformly satisfactory performance by allied air power.<sup>2</sup> The final chapter reviews Operation Allied Force in political and strategic context and reflects on the most policy-pertinent conclusions to be drawn from the experience. Because of the study's predominant focus on matters pertaining to planning and execution, it does not consider, other than by way of brief stage-setting, the politics and diplomacy that immediately preceded the air war, let alone the deeper historical roots of the crisis.

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<sup>2</sup>In the latter respect, this assessment consciously seeks to avoid the common syndrome of so-called lessons-learned efforts whereby "losers tend to study what went wrong while winners study what went right." Princeton University political scientist Bernard Lewis, an adviser to the USAF's Gulf War Air Power Survey conducted in 1991–1992, called this cautionary reminder to the attention of the survey team as that effort was getting under way. Quoted in Gian P. Gentile, *How Effective Is Strategic Bombing? Lessons Learned from World War II to Kosovo*, New York, New York University Press, 2001, p. 182.