Aiming for Strategic Effect: The Evolution of the Army Air Force's Strategic Bombardment Campaigns of World War II

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Abstract:
During the final months of World War II, the Army Air Force launched hundreds of incendiary bombing raids against several Japanese cities. This decision countered long-established strategic strike doctrine. Beginning in World War I, American airmen advanced strategies, developed new technologies, and waged several policy battles based upon the perceived value of precision strategic attack. Bomber crews employed this strike method against targets throughout Europe in World War II. Initial air raids flown against Japan during the conflict also employed precision strategic bombing tactics. This changed in March 1945, when air commanders ordered their crews to attack broad urban regions using incendiary munitions. These bombing raids ultimately precipitated the end of the conflict.

This thesis explores the development of strategic bombing from its conception in World War I to its implementation in World War II, with particular emphasis upon why air commanders altered their bombing strategy from precision strike to mass attack in the air war against Japan. Chapter one affords a broad overview of strategic bombing. Chapter two details the genesis of the mission in World War I. Chapter three focuses on strategic bombardment doctrine development during the 1920s and 1930s. Chapter four describes the precision strike campaign waged against targets in occupied Europe between 1942 and 1945. Chapter five analyzes the switch from precision methods to mass area bombing in the latter stages of the war. Chapter six assesses the effectiveness of the bombing campaigns in both Europe and Japan.

The thesis concludes that air commanders in World War II sought to degrade Germany and Japan's capacity to sustain their respective war efforts. Airmen believed precision bombing was the most effective and efficient means of attaining this goal. A unique set of circumstances in the air campaign against Japan compromised the utility of these established tactics. Still seeking to undermine the Japanese war-enterprise, airmen initiated mass incendiary raids against urban centers as an alternate method of target destruction. Overarching combat results, not a rigid adherence to a specific doctrine governed the decision to switch from precision strategic strike tactics to mass area methods in March 1945.

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Strategic bombing is a military strategy used in total war with the goal of defeating the enemy by destroying its morale or its economic ability to produce and transport materiel to the theatres of military operations, or both. It is a systematically organized and executed attack from the air which can utilize strategic bombers, long- or medium-range missiles, or nuclear-armed fighter-bomber aircraft to attack targets deemed vital to the enemy’s war-making capability.