

From Above: War, Violence, and Verticality

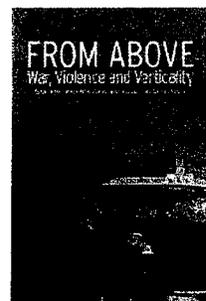
Edited by Peter Adey, Mark Whitehead, and Alison J. Williams

Reviewed by Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., Major General (USAF Retired)

For intellectual plebeians like your reviewer, any book with a made-for-academia word like “verticality” in its title might be a bit off-putting. And, indeed, much or most of *From Above* is written for – and by – academics. The majority of the predominantly British contributors are professors of geography or the liberal arts. They are not specialists in military or strategic matters.

It would be a mistake, however, for military professionals to dismiss this volume because important chunks of it do, in fact, build the reader’s intellectual database in a positive and insightful way. Moreover, it allows those who do have expertise in related military or strategic matters the opportunity to see how other thoughtful thinkers view their craft.

“Verticality,” it seems, is professor-speak to describe the aerial view. According to the editors, this perspective has brought about “seismic shifts” for “life on the ground.” They add that the book “makes significant moves to understand the view from above within the pathos and passions of the societies that have produced and consume[d] it, perspective that art, literature and other forms of expression have been more used to exploring.”



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Perhaps so, but the approach the editors took presents real challenges to creating a coherent narrative as there are, in addition to the triumvirate of editors, thirteen different contributors, each of whom penned separate chapters. Getting a baker's dozen of academics to fit into any sort of logical framework is no small task. In their effort to do so, the editors divided the writings into three sections, respectively entitled "Science, Militarism and Distance;" "Aerial Aesthetics, Distortion and the View from Below;" and "From the Close to the Remote." Along with an energetic - and editorially heroic - organizational effort in the introduction, they sought to provide a context for chapters diverse not just in subject matter, but in style - and verbosity - as well.

The results were mixed, and will likely mean readers will skim or skip some chapters. For sure, a couple may be obtuse to all but the most dedicated specialist. Others - such as one laboriously entitled "Project Transparent Earth and the Autoscopy of Aerial Targeting: The Visual Geopolitics of the Underground" - contain some nuggets but only if one perseveres long enough to discover them.

Still, there are, however, a few gems. The chapter on balloons is fascinating, tracing not just the technical development, but also with the psychological impact the then never-before-experienced aerial perspectives had. The author highlights individuals who grasped the military potential of verticality along with the contribution that ballooning made to "militarized aeromobility."

In his chapter, "Line of Decent," Canadian Professor Derek Gregory grapples not so much with verticality (though he sprinkles such terms as "political technology of vision" and "visuality"), but with the whole notion of aerial attack and the risk to civilians by surveying such operations from World War II bombings through drone operations in contemporary conflicts. He does an able job trying to discern the propriety of an operator striking a target from a distance vis-à-vis the risk to innocents on the ground, ultimately concluding - somewhat reluctantly it seems - that "it is a mistake to turn distance into a moral absolute."

Separate chapters address the idea of establishing and maintaining sovereignty and control via aerial means in the Falklands and also in colonial Iraq. The latter, while interesting, slides into a largely uninformed discussion of drone use in contemporary operations. Another chapter with the attention-grabbing title of "Targeting Affective Life from Above: Morale and Airpower" simply does not deliver much more than a hostile assessment that might have been more effective if it was better informed not just by the law of armed conflict, but also by a better understanding of targeting in general.

Hostility towards the military instrument flavors the entire book. For example, the much-anticipated chapter on drones is disappointing, mainly because the contributor's obvious disapproval of the technology would lead the uninformed reader to think the aircraft were autonomous weapons' systems as opposed to ones under human control.

In fact, in more than one chapter, reference to "verticality" or the "view from above" earns little more than a nod from the contributor who will then write something that may only be tangentially related. Thus, for example, a chapter entitled the "Scopic Regime of Rapid Dominance" is more a critique - and a debatable one at that - of the

Revolution in Military Affairs, the rise of precision weaponry, and effects-based operations – than “verticality” per se.

The book is also burdened by dense and ponderous writing. Consider this virtually unintelligible (to this reader anyway) passage from the chapter on photomosaics (the process of matching individual aerial photos to form a more comprehensive view):

According to this biaxial scheme, the vertical is the axis of order, paradigm, symbolic function, disutility, unimpeded sightlines and disembodied omniscience, whereas to the horizontal belong disorder, syntagm, enunciative function, utility, partial sight lines and exposure to visibility.

Whatever all that means. Sure, such language may be lucid to photomosaic experts, but in a volume which embraces such a broad range of scientific and artistic disciplines, it is unlikely that more than a few readers would.

In the end *From Above* does accomplish its mission in the sense that the reader does come away convinced the “verticality” perspective is fundamentally unique, and impacts perceptions of the ground environment more than one might think. Not for everyone’s bookshelf, but an intriguing addition for the scholarly-inclined servicemember as it is a quintessentially academic take on matters the military professional might see very differently.