

Air Power Supremo: A Biography of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir John Slessor

By William Pyke

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Reviewed by Benjamin S. Lambeth

In the pantheon of air power pioneers from the dawn of military aviation to the advent of the jet age nearly four decades later, Marshal of the Royal Air Force (RAF) Sir John Slessor never gained the stature and name recognition of such earlier air warfare icons as General Billy Mitchell of the U.S. Army Air Service. Yet viewed in hindsight, Slessor was uncommonly instrumental in the development of effective air doctrine, concepts of operations, and organizing principles during his 37 years as an airman, combat commander, and senior leader.

In *Air Power Supremo: A Biography of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir John Slessor*, a rich and aptly titled survey of Slessor's life and career, William Pyke has produced by far the most searching and authoritative assessment of the man and his contributions to have appeared in print. Others have written before on

Slessor's import in air warfare, most notably the air power historian Phillip Meilinger, who portrayed Slessor in his prime as perhaps "the most prescient thinker in the RAF" about the most likely nature of future war. Yet thanks to Pyke's close association with Slessor's living grandson and his resultant unfettered access to the entirety of Slessor's personal papers and logbooks, this new appraisal offers a truly magisterial overview of Slessor's insights and influence, depicting him persuasively as "one of the greatest air power thinkers of the twentieth century." That informed characterization should render Slessor and his perspectives of abiding interest to joint warfighters today.

Born and raised in a predominantly military family, Slessor joined the Royal Flying Corps on his 18th birthday and had a storied career that ran from the birth of combat aviation, with the most rudimentary biplanes of World War I, to the fielding of the RAF's four-engine jet bombers not long after the start of the nuclear age. Slessor flew his first combat sorties against German zeppelins over southern England, followed by attacks on Turkish positions in the Sinai Peninsula and, finally, by missions over the Western Front toward the war's end. That hands-on operational exposure gave him the beginnings of a seasoned airman's outlook when he was later assigned as a faculty member at the British Army's staff college in Camberley in 1931.

In his lectures to the students at Camberley, Slessor offered wide-ranging thoughts on the most productive ways of using the RAF in joint operations with the Army. Yet as devoted as he was to advocating for the advantages afforded by air power if employed to its fullest potential, he was anything but a zealot. In marked contrast to the Italian air power theorist General Giulio Douhet's oft-quoted but baseless claim that it was not merely necessary but also sufficient to have control of the air for achieving victory, Slessor admonished his fellow airmen always to remember and honor the foundational fact that "no attitude could be more irritating" than to suggest that success in a future war might be "decided in the air, and in the air alone."

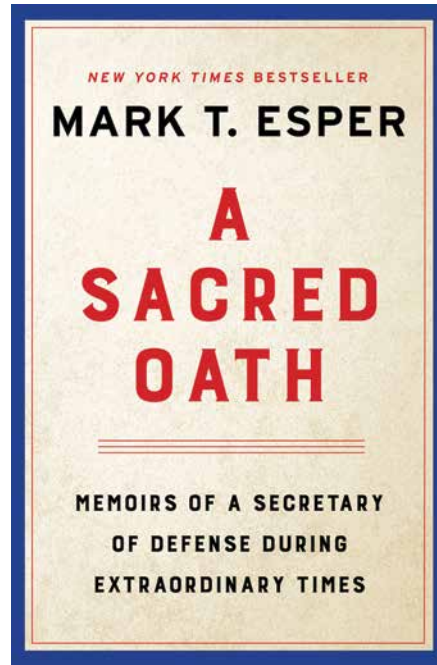
Among his many other contributions, Slessor left an enduring mark in the form of visualizing air warfare across the entire spectrum of conflict, ranging from providing tactical support to friendly ground troops in a land battle to conducting strikes against targets in an enemy's strategic heartland. In the process, he figured prominently in crystallizing the notions of air superiority and air supremacy. He also, quite early on in his writings, introduced a concept that would eventually be called *air interdiction*, with its main stress on disrupting an opponent's capacity for collective action, rather than simply inflicting damage on key enemy equities as the desired end in itself. Because of this construct, he was a founding father as well of what decades later would become known more precisely as *effects-based operations*.

Throughout Britain's involvement in World War II, as Pyke explains in detail, Slessor figured centrally as a senior planner in close cooperation with his American counterparts, displaying an uncommon touch for working harmoniously with Americans and thus attesting to the often pivotal role played by personality in shaping war outcomes. He was well appreciated by the American side for his affability and candor, and he became especially close friends with Generals Ira Eaker and Carl Spaatz, two of the leading commanders of the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) participation in the air war. Through those intimate and trusting interactions, Slessor was vital in helping first to bring the United States into the war against Nazi Germany and then in nurturing the close Anglo-American partnership that ensued and persists to this day.

In all, *Air Power Supremo* offers a most welcome addition to the extant body of scholarship on military aviation and air warfare. Not only does it highlight Slessor's key role in determining the RAF's initial force structure needs on the eve of a war for Britain's national survival, it also describes the no less important part Slessor played during his 3-year tenure as chief of the Air Staff after World War II, when he successfully pressed for the acquisition of the RAF's Victor, Valiant, and Vulcan jet bombers as the centerpiece of

an independent British nuclear deterrent against the Soviet Union. For American readers, perhaps the most instructive portion of Pyke's book may be its treatment of Slessor's role in forging both close and enduring ties between the RAF and the USAAF—and its assessment of what that experience can teach us to this day about adapting to rapid technological change and building an institutional culture that rewards risk and innovation. In that important respect, the book offers insightful reading not just for airmen and others interested primarily in the evolution of air power, but for joint force combatants in all services across the board. JFQ

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A Sacred Oath: Memoirs of a Secretary of Defense During Extraordinary Times

By Mark T. Esper
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752 pp. \$35.00
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Reviewed by Thomas F. Lynch III

A *Sacred Oath: Memoirs of a Secretary of Defense During Extraordinary Times* is the narrative of Mark Esper, former Secretary of Defense for the Trump administration, about his tumultuous 17 months in office, which ended with his November 2020 firing by Trump. *A Sacred Oath* confronts a vital first-order question for all uniformed and civilian military professionals: How do I faithfully adhere to my sworn oath to protect and defend the U.S. Constitution from all enemies, foreign and domestic? This question is especially searing when it comes to upholding the oath as a senior civilian political appointee in the face of a domestic security threat from the White House itself. There is no perfect answer, but contextual factors help inform whether a senior Department of Defense (DOD) official should offer

resignation rather than remain and enable the threat in hopes of moderating it.

A Sacred Oath is Esper's tale of why he chose to stay on as Trump's third of four DOD secretaries despite all the red flags warning that such a choice was bad for the country and bad for Esper personally. Esper's two-part answer is that he swore an oath to the Constitution, and if he had resigned in protest over any of the multitude of dangerous defense and security ideas coming out of the Trump White House, then the next acting Secretary could have been someone truly ready and willing to carry out Trump's impetuous impulses—and that would have been seriously detrimental to the country. The burden to make this narrative stick is high, and Esper struggles to meet it. On the one hand, Esper does not address fully the important related questions about his selection or his power basis as Secretary and, on the other, when compared with the more commonly understood interpretations of holistic selflessness in honoring a sworn oath to the Constitution, Esper seems to rely on a less-demanding standard.

Among the many important questions that *A Sacred Oath* does not fully address is the one about why Esper was Secretary in the first place. He was the Trump administration's Secretary of the Army for a brief 19 months from 2017 to 2019. A West Point graduate, former Active-duty Army infantry officer, and Army Reservist, Esper also had a short stint as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Negotiations Policy, had years on Capitol Hill as a staffer, and then was a midlevel defense industry lobbyist. So Esper seemed a good fit as Army secretary, even though he was the administration's third choice. But what about Esper's qualifications to become Secretary?

Since the position's creation in the late 1940s, congressionally confirmed secretaries have generally held one of three major personal qualifications for their positional power: prior distinguished service in very senior executive or legislative-branch security leadership positions; experience in industry, with relevant defense ideas or acumen; or