

BILLY MITCHELL

“Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?” (Acts 7:52 NIV)

These words were spoken by Stephen only a short while before he became the first Christian martyr. His remarks were made after reviewing Jewish history. It seems that every time anyone dared to disturb the “status quo” they were persecuted by their contemporaries. This principle is true, not only in matters of religion, but in secular matters as well.

Consider, for example, the story of Billy Mitchell. He was the handsome and articulate son of a wealthy U. S. Senator from Milwaukee. During W. W. I he was the first American to fly over an enemy in battle. He discovered that planes by “strategic bombing” could target the enemy’s manufacturing plants and choke off their ability to fight. Up to that point in time military battles had been fought on land, or on the sea. Mitchell believed that future wars would involve a third dimension - the air.

Mitchell returned from war convinced that a strong air force was essential for national security. He dared to suggest a department of the Air Force, co-equal with that of the army and navy. The cost of battle ships was many millions of dollars and for a tiny fraction of that cost America could build a strong air force. By making such assertions, he was not only tampering with military tradition but also with big money interests with lucrative military contracts.

It must be remembered that W. W. I airplanes were tiny contraptions made of light wood and fabric. They could be brought down in flight by a slight encounter with a phone wire, or destroyed on the ground by a child with a hatchet. The idea that these “airplanes” could compete with a battle ship would be like believing that sparrows could destroy a castle.

Mitchell therefore sought to prove his point by a well publicized test. The American Navy had captured the German battleship

Ostfriesland. She was said to be a wonderful ship, as nearly unsinkable as possible. She had four steel skins to protect her from mines and torpedoes, and an intricate system of water tight compartments. No matter how much damage she sustained, they believed she would always make it home. In the Battle of Jutland, for example, she had struck a powerful undersea mine and yet made it safely back to port.

On July 21, 1921, some 300 notables were present to witness the test. This august assembly included Cabinet officers, Senators, Representatives, military attaches of foreign powers, aeronautical and naval experts, and 50 newspaper reporters. On the eve of the test the New York Times reported that naval officers insisted that those tiny airplanes would never sink the *Ostfriesland*. General Mitchell was made fun of and ridiculed in the press and in private by Americas most powerful leaders.

The “test” began at 12:19 P.M. and 21 minutes later the *Ostfriesland* vanished beneath the surface. Many seasoned admirals and captains were sobbing audibly while others hid their faces with handkerchiefs. If you think these seasoned military leaders were going to change just because of facts and evidence you need to listen again to Stephen and take another look at history. The leaders of America were not yet ready to build a strong air force.

Mitchell warned that if war broke out “tomorrow” it would take us two years to catch up with Japan. He further charged that both the Congress and our military leaders acted like the army and navy were created for their benefit and that airmen had been “bluffed and bulldozed” so that they dare not tell the truth to non-flying bureaucrats.

At this point President Calvin Coolidge ordered Billy Mitchell to be court-martialed. The trial was a media circus and still stands as the longest in history. The president’s “blue ribbon” commission concluded that “there was no ground for anticipating

the development of aviation to the point where it would constitute a direct menace to the United States.” Mitchell was found guilty of insubordination and was sentenced “to be suspended from rank, command, and duty, with forfeiture of all pay and allowances for five years.” Mitchell, only 57, died a broken man on Feb. 19, 1936. One of his last utterances was to fellow pilot Homer Berry: “The American people will regret the day I was crucified by politics and bureaucracy.”

Adapted from the book *Flyboys*, by James Bradley