

# Keeper File

## “The Bomber Will Always Get Through”

*Few famous speeches have been more misunderstood than that by Stanley Baldwin, Britain's once and future Prime Minister, on the eve of Armistice Day 1932. The debate concerned disarmament. In his remarks, Baldwin spotlighted airpower, warning, “It is well ... for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed, whatever people may tell him. The bomber will always get through.” He was right: There was as yet no effective defense against air attack. The mix-up concerned Baldwin's motive. Airpower theorists, promoting the bomber as a war-winning weapon, often appropriated Baldwin's words to bolster their own claims. Some misread Baldwin's words as endorsing air war. Nothing could be more untrue, as the text makes clear. He in fact was calling for tight constraints on the air weapon. Indeed, Baldwin fought to block any buildup of airpower throughout the 1930s, which brought him to criticism from, among others, Winston Churchill. Note: Thanks to Brett Holman of [airminded.org](http://airminded.org) for supplying the basic text.*

**W**hat the world suffers from is a sense of fear, a want of confidence; and it is a fear held instinctively and without knowledge, very often. But my own view—and I have slowly and deliberately come to this conclusion—is that there is no one thing that is more responsible for that fear ... than the fear of the air.

Up to the time of the last war, civilians were exempt from the worst perils of war. They suffered sometimes from hunger, sometimes from the loss of sons and relatives serving in the Army. But now, in addition to this, they suffered from the constant fear not only of being killed themselves, but, what is perhaps worse for a man, of seeing his wife and children killed from the air. These feelings exist among the ordinary people throughout the whole of the civilized world, but I doubt if many of those who have that fear realize one or two things with reference to the cause of that fear.

That is the appalling speed which the air has brought into modern warfare, the speed of the attack. The speed of the attack, compared with the attack of an army, is as the speed of a motor-car to that of a four-in-hand. In the next war you will find that any town within reach of an aerodrome can be bombed within the first five minutes of war. ...

I think it is well also for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed, whatever people may tell him. The bomber will always get through, and it is very easy to understand that if you realize the area of space. Take any large town you like on this island or on the Continent within reach of an aerodrome. For the defense of that town and its suburbs, you have to split up the air into sectors for defense. Calculate that the bombing aeroplanes will be at least 20,000 feet high in the air, and perhaps higher, and it is a matter of mathematical calculation that you will have sectors of from tens to hundreds of cubic miles.

Imagine 100 cubic miles covered with cloud and fog, and you can calculate how many aeroplanes you would have to throw into that to have much chance of catching odd aeroplanes as they fly through it. It cannot be done, and there is no expert in Europe who will say that it can. The only defense is in offense, which means that you have got to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves. ...

I will not pretend that we are not taking our precautions in this country. We have done it. We have made our investigations

### “The Air Threat”

Stanley Baldwin  
Lord President of the Council  
Remarks to House of Commons  
London  
Nov. 10, 1932

Find the full text on the  
Air Force Association's Web site  
[www.afa.org](http://www.afa.org)  
Air Force Magazine  
“The Keeper File”

... and hitherto without any publicity, but considering the years that are required to make preparations, any government of this country in the present circumstances of the world would have been guilty of criminal negligence had they neglected to make their preparations. The same is true of other nations. What more potent cause of fear can there be than this kind of thing that is going on on the Continent? And fear is a very dangerous thing. It is quite true that it may act as a deterrent in people's minds against war, but it is much more likely to make them want to increase armaments to protect them against the terrors that they know may be launched against them.

We have to remember that aerial warfare is still in its infancy, and its potentialities are incalculable and inconceivable. How have the nations tried to deal with this terror of the air? I confess that the more I have studied this question the more depressed I have been at the perfectly futile attempts that have been made to deal with this problem. ...

As far as the air is concerned, there is, as has been most truly said, no way of complete disarmament except the abolition of flying. We have never known mankind to go back on a new invention. It might be a good thing for this world, as I heard some of the most distinguished men in the air service say, if men had never learned to fly. There is no more important question before every man, woman, and child in Europe than what we are going to do with this power now that we have got it. ...

If it is possible, the air forces of the world ought to be abolished, but if they are, you have got civil aviation, and in civil aviation you have your potential bombers. ... In my view, it is necessary for the nations of the world concerned to devote the whole of their mind to this question of civil aviation, to see if it is possible so to control civil aviation that such disarmament would be feasible. ...

It has never really been much discussed or thought out, and yet to my mind it is far the most important of all the questions of disarmament, for all disarmament hangs on the air, and as long as the air exists, you cannot get rid of that fear of which I spoke and which I believe to be the parent of many troubles. ■