USAF Relevance in the 21st Century:
A First-Quarter Team in a Four-Quarter Game

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THE RISE IN TERRORISM perpetrated by non-state actors is a primary threat to U.S. national security. It also challenges the relevance of air and space power. Although the United States has repeatedly demonstrated the ability to achieve decisive effects using air and space power in conventional war, it has not mastered the use of these tools against terrorists and guerrillas.[1] Without the ability to perform decisively in all areas of the conflict spectrum, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) is like a football team that comes out scoring touchdowns in the first quarter only to lose its tremendous lead by the fourth. To become a four-quarter team, the USAF must address some fundamental challenges to the way it prefers to fight.[2]

When Americans think of war, they envision great battles and campaigns such as Gettysburg, Normandy, and Desert Storm. "Yet," as retired General Anthony Zinni puts it, "the purpose of war is not battle at all. It is a more perfect *peace*."[3] Destroying the enemy's army in battle is only a means to an end.[4] In some cases, the phase following major combat operations is decisive, not the combat itself. According to the *Washington Post's* reporter Dana Priest, in Iraq and Afghanistan "[w]e are now seeing that the hardest, longest, and most important work comes after the bombing stops, when rebuilding replaces destroying and consensus-building replaces precision strikes."[5]

This is not a revelation. The majority of conflicts the United States has fought in its 200-plus-year history required more years of peaceful engagement post-hostilities than years of force application during hostilities. But because low-level conflicts or reconstruction operations are often characterized by a low threat to national survival and/or a smaller force commitment, military institutions often dismiss them as second-rate activities.

The current culture throughout the Department of Defense is still overly focused on "big war." As military analyst Carl Builder has argued, "The dominant concepts of war held by military institutions have a significant effect upon the kinds of forces they acquire and train and, therefore, upon the kinds of wars they are prepared to fight."[6] Today's U.S. military has been designed for, and prefers to focus on, fighting big interstate conflicts. From World War II through Operation Desert Storm, America built and refined a force to counter a peer or near-peer competitor. In the 1990s, despite being involved in numerous non-combat operations, U.S. Armed Forces continued to improve their warfighting capability by focusing on destroying the forces and/or leadership of enemy nation-states. This mindset meshed with the Caspar Weinberger/Colin Powell doctrine, which held that wars should be fought only for vital national interests, and then only with overwhelming

force and clearly articulated objectives and exit strategies. Thus, the armed forces have tended to resist operations not related to combat.[7]

The Icarus Syndrome

The USAF has been at least as culpable as the other services, perhaps even more so, in resisting the change from pure combat operations to nation-building operations.

Traditionally, the USAF holds "flying and fighting" as its reason for being, and its "identity is based largely on its organizational and conceptual history and the primacy of the technology over warfighting theory. These lead to a culture in which small, often technology-based, subcultures flourish."[8] In this environment, bomber pilots (and later fighter pilots) became the senior leaders of the USAF. Under their control, Builder notes, the USAF has "identified itself with the air weapon, and rooted itself in a commitment to technological superiority. The dark side of this commitment is that it becomes transformed into an end in itself when aircraft or systems, rather than missions, become the primary focus. In fact, one's identity in the Air Force is usually associated with a specific airplane rather than the institution or military art, with a resulting weaker sense of community than the other services."[9]

Further, the USAF sees "war as science, not art, and is disposed to treat it as such. Despite using terminology stressing strategic effects, the service still tends to focus on outputs (keeping score on targets) instead of on outcomes (the effects it seeks to achieve)."[10]

A transformed Air Force where by necessity air-lifters, special ops pilots, or even non-rated officers could ascend to leadership of the service would also require a significant cultural change. Furthermore, while senior leaders may recognize the necessity to champion all capabilities where the service excels, they will find it difficult to see the USAF's primary contribution being different from "flying and fighting." Donald Mrozek's description of gunship development during the Vietnam War illustrates the USAF's parochial mindset: "Slower aircraft implied subordination to the ground effort and ground commanders; faster aircraft implied more autonomous air operations…. The challenge was to improve performance today without damaging doctrine and the service's interests tomorrow."[11]

Effects of Icarus

The USAF's preferred way of war has resulted in doctrine that limits the way its personnel view the contributions of their service. "Airpower doctrine has lagged behind fast-moving developments in the U.S. OOTW [Operations Other Than War] experience," John Hillen writes.[12] Builder adds that although "we're accustomed to seeing doctrine grow, evolve and mature, particularly where doctrine applies to what we care about—our traditional

A B-2 Spirit bomber is followed by two F-117 Nighthawks during a mission. The B-2 is a multi-role bomber capable of delivering both conventional and nuclear munitions.

roles and missions in the mainstream of the Air Force—we seem to have more difficulty…with nurturing doctrine off the mainstream roles and missions."[13]

This is not a new problem for the USAF. In 1986, William Olsen described a problem with Air Force low-intensity conflict doctrine that still holds true today: "Tactical air doctrine and the attending force structure are designed for conventional wars against conventional enemies.… The use of high-speed, high-performance aircraft and heavy ordnance, like the indiscriminate use of long-range artillery, is counterproductive.… What are [sic] needed are slow planes that can be directed discriminatingly by ground observers who have an

Airmen from the 36th Airlift Squadron and Combat Mobility Element unload supplies and equipment at Paya Lebar Air Base, Singapore, 1 June 2006. The C-130 Hercules mission brought humanitarian relief aid to Indonesia after an earthquake killed more than 6,200 people and injured thousands more.

understanding of the situation. The air platform needs to be stable, tough, inexpensive, and easily maintained and operated in an austere environment."[14] Olsen clearly points to the bias toward hi-tech combat forces at the expense of capabilities needed in other parts of the conflict spectrum.

If most USAF efforts are geared toward conventional war doctrine, what is the result on doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW)? Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine,* mentions MOOTW only in the context of the service's ability to operate across the spectrum of conflict.[15] Further, the document focuses on battle or supporting battle. A clear indication of this battle focus is that the document includes the principles of war but excludes MOOTW principles.[16] The current AFDD 2, *Organization and Employment of Aerospace Power,* does a better job describing how air and space power contribute to MOOTW missions; however, only 9 pages of AFDD 2 address conflict termination, peacetime engagement/crisis response, and deterrence/contingency actions.[17]

The only USAF doctrine document specifically focused on a MOOTW mission is AFDD 2-3.1, *Foreign Internal Defense* (FID).[18] AFDD 2-3.1 provides more detailed guidance for conducting FID operations and identifies the air and space

power functions needed for FID. Chapters on planning and employment offer detail on the conduct of operations. Unfortunately, the detail included in AFDD 2-3.1 for FID has not been duplicated for any of the other MOOTW missions. Moreover, there is no USAF document that focuses on mindset creation and change, like the Marine Corps's *Small Wars Manual*.[19]

The USAF does not do any better when it comes to educating its personnel about MOOTW. James Corum, former instructor at the USAF School for Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS), indicts all the services, the USAF among them: "U.S. military schools are mired in curricula better suited for conventional war than the types of unconventional wars likely to be fought in the next decades. There is very little history, theory, or doctrine on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism taught in the U.S. military staff colleges today."[20] The Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) currently provides a solid foundation in national security and strategy; however, that's only part of the skill set USAF officers require to meet today's challenges. In academic year 2004-2005 at the ACSC, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom examples were used primarily for their combat lessons learned. In many cases, these operations were discussed in the past tense and not as ongoing operations. The

"Strategy and War" and "Airpower" courses spent only one lesson each on small wars. The national security course used Bosnia as an example of coercive airpower rather than as a historical example of effective U.S. peacekeeping operations.

The SAASS appears to be doing better in educating MOOTW. Its students receive a 15-day course on low-intensity conflict as part of their year-long program. Unfortunately, SAASS only educates about 40 officers a year, and so has a limited effect on the MOOTW education of the force.

Pulling Icarus from the Sea

During the cold war, the USAF maintained numerous bomber and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) bases in preparation to fight a nuclear war. When the Soviet threat evaporated, U.S. leaders chose to retain a limited nuclear capability as a hedge against a nuclear-armed opponent while the vast majority of the armed forces' technology and organizational structure focused on conventional warfare. As a result, the USAF retained only three nuclear bomber bases and three ICBM bases. Just as the USAF realigned its nuclear and conventional force structure in favor of conventional forces, the service must now tailor its conventional forces for both major combat operations and MOOTW.

For the USAF to stay relevant in the 21st century, it must embrace both the flying and non-flying, the combat and non-combat contributions of air and space power. "[A]ir power," Builder has argued, "must somehow be defined as more than force, airplanes, or pilots.…air power will require the projection of infrastructures such as security, medical care, communication, and transportation."[21]

Fortunately, the Air Force will be able to meet the requirements of both missions, but only if it will allow much needed innovation to occur. Airlift, special operations, unmanned aerial vehicles, intelligence capabilities, and space systems have been fielded; the challenge now is to leverage these capabilities to contribute to the overall fight. The USAF should also focus on the history of MOOTW with an eye toward creating new doctrine and educating the force. As Antulio Echevarria notes, "Military leaders must habituate themselves to thinking more thoroughly about how to turn combat successes into favorable strategic outcomes."[22] Education and training will enable that process.

Recommendations

In the 21st century, the contingency operation has become the USAF's primary means of protecting and projecting U.S. national interests.[23] The service must drop its fixation on major combat operations and begin to take MOOTW seriously. It must identify needed changes in concepts, education, organizations, and capabilities, and then implement them expeditiously.

What the USAF needs most today is a theory of air and space power that includes all USAF disciplines and embraces a range of military operations. Based on strategic bombing, the current theory gives the service no room to grow as it transitions from conducting mostly air combat operations to doing mostly MOOTW. Robert Pape diagnoses the problem as follows: "The most important institutional interest of air forces is the maintenance of institutional independence and autonomy. Of the three main air combat missions—air superiority, tactical bombing, and strategic bombing—strategic

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After supporting the Global War on Terror for 3 years, Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicle number three (UAV-3) received its official homecoming when its wheels touched down at Edwards Air Force Base, CA, on 20 February 2006.

bombing serves this interest best because it is an inherently independent mission, requiring little coordination with other services."[24] The challenge for the USAF, then, is to remake itself into a service that provides robust, joint-oriented capabilities across the range of military operations.

The latest USAF mission statement attempts to provide some needed new direction by declaring that "the mission of the USAF is to deliver sovereign options for the defense of the United States of America

An A-10 Thunderbolt II takes off on a combat mission as A-10 crew chiefs, weapons loaders, and an avionics specialist ready others for another mission. The A-10 was the first Air Force aircraft designed for close air support of ground forces.

and its global interests—to fly and fight in Air, Space, and Cyberspace."[25] But while this new mission statement attempts to capture the full-spectrum requirements of the USAF, it still focuses the service on combat flying and a technological approach to warfare.

A better approach should include Robert Poyner's view of a future USAF that "provides service to the Nation: *the application of long-range, short notice, strategic influence*" [emphasis in original]. For Poyner, "[m]any of the non-traditional taskings the Air Force has been involved in recently (humanitarian relief, peacekeeping and peacemaking, counter-narcotics, and so forth) nestle quite well under the framework of projecting influence."[26]

Poyner suggests that the USAF "can apply many sophisticated tools of influence and utility—not just bombs and bullets—and can do so not just for the Air Force, but for all the military services and indeed, the Nation."[27] The literature suggests that airlift; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets; and close air support are the most appropriate for projecting influence and contributing to the Global War on Terrorism. Yet the USAF still emphasizes major-combat capabilities. To make a stronger contribution to the Nation, the service must shift its focus to capabilities that can support special operations, military police forces, and civil affairs teams. There is no doubt the USAF has the technology to accomplish these new missions. Its challenge, rather, is to acknowledge that airlift, special operations, unmanned vehicles, space

platforms, and information operations capabilities have become more critical to fighting terrorism than fighters or bombers.

Another step in the march to relevance would be to realign large conventional combat forces. Swapping combat air forces with air mobility assets from the National Guard or reserve units might be a viable course of action. Combat air forces will still be needed to provide a hedge, alongside nuclear forces, against a future peer competitor, and just as nuclear forces can increase their capability in a crisis, conventional forces will have to be flexible enough to surge for large conventional conflicts. Overall, though, the USAF should focus more on the war we are fighting today and less on nonexistent peer competitors and hypothetical future wars.

The USAF must also retool its professional military education (PME). PME should be aimed at teaching officers how to make intelligent decisions across the spectrum of conflict. USAF schools need to do a better job examining and teaching the history of U.S. experiences with constabulary, nation-building, and counterinsurgency operations. Educating USAF officers in MOOTW will one day provide a force that is organized, trained, and equipped to be as decisive in those operations as it is in major combat.

In the end, the effectiveness of the USAF in combating non-state terrorists will be tied to its ability to leverage the capabilities of the entire institution as it reorients to the current security reality. Only by

thinking in broader terms than fighter and bomber capabilities will the Air Force remain relevant.[28] Put another way, the Air Force fields a team that can win the first quarter of a game handily, but the Nation—and the USAF itself—need a service that can be decisive in all four quarters.[29] **MR**

NOTES

1. Thomas R. Searle, "Making Airpower Effective Against Guerillas," *Air and Space Power Journal* (Fall 2004): 13.

2. GEN Zinni offers a similar sport analogy. See Anthony Zinni, "Understanding What Victory Is," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (October 2003): 32.

3. Bevin Alexander, *How Great Generals Win* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), 30.

4. Ibid., 30.

5. Dana Priest, *The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America's Military* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 19.

6. Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 127.

7. See Hans Binnendijk and Stuart E. Johnson, *Transforming for Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations* (Washington D.C.: Center for Technology and National Security Policy, 2004), 87. Binnendijk and Johnson claim that "the U.S. military has resisted prolonged involvement in S&R operations for reasons ranging from concern for the degradation of combat readiness and diversion of limited resources to a belief that these operations are not the role of the military."

8. William C. Thomas, "The Cultural Identity of the United States Air Force," *Chronicles Online Journal* (January 2004). Available from <www.airpower.maxwell. af.mil/airchron- icles/cc/Thomas.html>.

9. Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome: The Role of Air Power Theory in the Evolution and Fate of the U.S. Air Force* (New Brunswick (USA) and London: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 6.

10. Grant T. Hammond, *The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2001), 207.

11. Donald J. Mrozek, "The Limits of Innovation: Aspects of Air Power in Vietnam," *Air University Review* (January-February 1985): 61.

12. John Hillen, "Peacekeeping at the Speed of Sound: The Relevancy of Airpower Doctrine in Operations other than War," *Aerospace Power Journal* (Winter 1998): 13.

13. Builder, "Doctrinal Frontiers," *Airpower Journal* (Winter 1995)：7.

14. William J. Olsen, "Air Power in Low-Intensity Conflict in The Middle East," *Air University Review* (March-April 1986): 17.
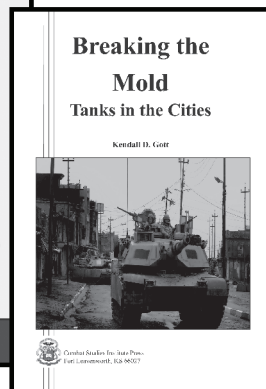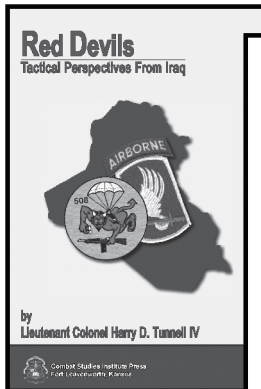
15. Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Headquarters, Air Force Doctrine Center, 2003).

16. The MOOTW principles include objective, unity of effort, security, restraint, perseverance, and legitimacy.

17. AFDD 2, *Organization and Employment of Aerospace Power* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Headquarters, Air Force Doctrine Center, 2000). MOOTW information is being spread throughout USAF doctrine documents, but, there is no single USAF doctrine document that focuses on mindset creation/change.

18. AFDD 2-3.1, *Foreign Internal Defense* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Head-quarters, Air Force Doctrine Center, 2004).

19. United States Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2004).

20. James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 439.

21. Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome*, 262.

22. Antulio Echevarria, "Toward An American Way of War" (Strategic Studies Institute Paper, 2004), 17.

23. A. Timothy Warnock, *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), xxix.

24. Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 327.

25. U.S Air Force website, <www.af.mil/main/welcome.asp>.

26. D. Robert Poyner, "Childhood's End: A Personal View of the Future of Airpower and the Air Force," *Air Power Journal* (Summer 1996), 116.

27. Ibid.

28. See, for example, Arthur K. Cebrowski, Director, Force Transformation, brief-ing, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 22 September 2004. According to Cebrowski, "National security is more than war and war is more than combat and combat is more than shooting."

29. For a discussion of big versus small war primacy, see Thomas Donnelly and Vance Serchuk, "Fighting a Global Counterinsurgency," *American Enterprise for Public Policy Research, National Security Outlook* (December 2003).