

What We Believe



Air Force doctrine has evolved from an informal, largely oral tradition of tenets to the present comprehensive system of doctrine documents. Clearly our service needed more rigor than was contained in

the Cold War versions of Air Force Manual 1-1, but why have air and space power professionals opted for a doctrine structure that contains 37 separate doctrine documents, including such subjects as *Leadership and Force Development* (Air Force Doctrine Document [AFDD] 1-3), *Health Services* (AFDD 2.4-2), *Education and Training* (AFDD 2.4-3), and *Legal Support* (AFDD 2.4-5)?

Institutions publish formal doctrine for at least two audiences. The primary audience of formal Air Force doctrine is internal—airmen. Members of our institution must have access to and be well grounded in our commonly held beliefs. Airmen must also be able to effect change to those beliefs through alteration, deletion, and addition to existing doctrine. The second audience for formal institutional doctrine is external—individuals, groups, and institutions outside the Air Force. They gain knowledge of our values, beliefs, capabilities, and organization through our formal published doctrine. These secondary audiences typically benefit from our institution's capabilities and services but lack the background, training, and infrastructure to provide or accomplish those things themselves. Therefore, published doctrine allows external audiences to smoothly integrate their inherent capabilities with ours, without having to spend the effort, time, and resources necessary to duplicate those capabilities in their own institutions.

Not all doctrine shares the same purposes. Just as warfare may be examined along a spectrum that spans strategic, operational, and tactical activities, doctrine also functions at various levels. *Basic Doctrine* (AFDD 1 series) communicates fundamental institutional beliefs that derive from historical experiences. It is a record of ideas and concepts that worked and those that didn't when airmen employed air and space capabilities; it is also a common frame of reference when discussing the best way to prepare and employ air and space forces, shaping

the manner in which our Air Force organizes, trains, equips, and sustains its forces.

Operational Doctrine (AFDD 2 series) communicates how the Air Force translates basic doctrine's fundamental beliefs into practice through organizations and distinct capabilities. *Tactical Doctrine* (AFDD 3 series) outlines force-employment principles that allow the institution to accomplish specific objectives. When considered as a whole, the three levels of doctrine allow air and space professionals to understand and forge links between strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war.

Without constant attention, doctrine may degenerate into dogma. This observation cuts to the heart of what professionalism means. Practitioners—airmen—have a responsibility to reinvigorate their doctrine with new ideas from two sources. First, and perhaps most importantly, is an understanding of historical and recent experience. Because doctrine is an accumulation of knowledge, each new operational experience should present opportunities for its revitalization. Second is doctrine's characteristic of embracing forward thinking. In other words, doctrine should not be a formula to be applied by rote; rather, it should become a catalyst for developing new concepts, organizations, and capabilities appropriate to future challenges. In this sense, current doctrine becomes a source—an outline, a forecast, or a guide—on which future doctrine can be developed. Basic doctrine is perhaps the fundamental outlet for this second aspect. It is broadly written, and the concepts therein may provide momentum and justification for technological and organizational innovation.

Doctrine represents what is institutionally believed to be the best way for professional airmen to employ air and space power to serve the national interest. One measure of the maturity and the health of professional military institutions is their published formal doctrine. The health of those institutions reflects the importance that their members place on knowing, applying, challenging, and revising the ideas contained in their doctrine. The institution's maturity, then, is the direct result of the scope and rigor of the members' investment in their doctrinal structure. In other words, published doctrine does not relieve airmen of the requirement to think—on the contrary, it provides an institutional mandate and a forum for continuous professional improvement.

To Learn More . . .

Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1. *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, November 17, 2003. <https://www.dctrine.af.mil/Library/Doctrine/afdd1.pdf>.

Boyne, Walter J. *The Influence of Air Power upon History*. Gretna, LA: Pelican, 2003.

Futrell, Robert F. *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force*. 2 vols. 1971. Reprint, Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1989.

Holley, I. B., Jr. *Ideas and Weapons*. 1953. Reprint, Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1997.