



## A MODEST PROPOSAL

### MAKING DOCTRINE MORE MEMORABLE

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**O**N THE SUBJECT of doctrine, there are two problems to be solved. The first is to perfect the means for devising sound doctrine. The second is to perfect the means for insuring that the doctrine we devise is communicated effectively and internalized by the people who must apply it.

I have spent the better part of my career in the Air Force trying to improve the process by which we for-

mulate doctrine. In this I must confess I have been far from successful. But in recent months, I have come to realize that the way we go about instilling doctrine in the minds of Air Force decision makers is no less important than the way we devise doctrine out of experience.

My thesis addresses the proposition that the way we articulate doctrine is flawed. My simple conten-

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\*This article is based on remarks made at the USAF Air and Space Doctrine Conference held at Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, on 19 April 1995. Hosted by CADRE's Airpower Research Institute, the symposium is held annually.

tion is that our doctrinal manuals consist largely of generalizations. They offer page after page of abstractions. Unfortunately, abstractions don't stick in the mind as well as real-life illustrations or historical examples. I contend that paying more attention to the format in which doctrine is presented will work toward a wider familiarity with doctrine by Air Force decision makers at all echelons.

Over the years, various strategies have been employed to insure that Air Force officers become familiar with official doctrine. I suspect that few people recollect that 40 years ago we had a regulation requiring that each officer in the Air Force receive a personal copy of the current Air Force Manual (AFM) 1-1. This approach didn't work. It resulted in a lot of unread pamphlets and a mass of wastepaper.

Some years later, the doctrine shop staff tried another approach. They sought to lighten up the text with illustrations of Air Force thinkers to accompany quotations from their pronouncements. This effort was quickly dismissed and consigned to oblivion when critics contemptuously called it the "comic strip" manual.

Then just last year at our doctrine symposium at Air University, Gen Michael Dugan tried another tack. He held up a 16-page pamphlet that constituted an early version of basic doctrine and admonished us to get back to that brief statement of the essentials. General Dugan's plea was further evidence that Air Force doctrine is not getting across as effectively as it should. Far too many officers still are not really familiar with the essence of our basic doctrine.

General Dugan made a good try, but will brevity—going back to a 16-page document—do the trick? It didn't seem to work when we issued a personal copy of such a short pamphlet to every officer in the Air Force. Do we have any reason to think it will work any better today? I don't think so. This leads me to suggest my "modest proposal."

Why don't we experiment with a radical change in format and adopt a form of presentation that takes account of how the human mind works. Much experience has shown that we find it easier to recall specific examples—historical instances—than purely abstract generalizations. Accepting this reality, why don't we accompany every doctrinal idea with an illustrative example?

To demonstrate an appropriate format to accomplish this suggestion, consider an architectural analogy (table 1). At the top is the frieze—the band at the top of the wall. The wall itself is the wainscoting, and down at the bottom is the baseboard. Now let's apply these divisions to the format I propose (table 2). The frieze will be a statement of doctrine. The wainscot-

ing will provide an example—a historical illustration of the doctrinal idea. And down at the baseboard, we have a citation showing the archival or published source of the historical illustration.

In addition to the source citation for the illustrative example, there should be other citations leading to other similar examples and instances. Additional citations provide several advantages. Their mere presence indicates that the people who formulated the doctrinal statement at the top of the page didn't generalize from a single example but rested the doctrine on a broad range of experience. Further, the additional citations offer leads to instructors in our staff and war colleges for easy access to persuasive illustrations in support of the doctrines they are teaching.

Now, let me illustrate the format proposed here with an actual example (table 3). The doctrinal statement is a generalization—an abstraction. It goes back to Clausewitz's famous dictum that "*war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means*" (emphasis in original).<sup>1</sup> But standing alone, how much of an impression does it make? However, when we go to

**Table 1**  
**Architectural Analogy**

Frieze
Wainscoting
Baseboard

**Table 2**  
**Proposed Format**

Doctrine
Historical Illustration
Footnote to Sources

**Table 3**  
**Illustrative Example**

<p>“War is an instrument of political policy.” AFM 1-1, <i>Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force</i>, vol. 1, March 1992, 1.</p>
<p>“US military planners seriously underestimated the impact that Scud attacks would have on the overall political situation. They recognized that militarily Scuds were insignificant; they were inaccurate, had a small payload, etc. The military planners’ failure was in not foreseeing the political impact. The political need to keep the Coalition together and seriousness of the Israeli threat to retaliate unilaterally quickly resulted in a military impact on the air campaign in that a significant amount of the most capable elements of USAF forces had to be diverted to ‘Scud Hunting’ missions. The political need to react to the Scuds overrode the military desire to keep the tactical plan on track.”</p>
<p><i>Gulf War Air Power Survey</i>, vol. 1, <i>Planning and Command and Control</i> (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993), part 1, 102–4.</p>

the historical example, we meet a real-life event—an application of doctrinal notion. Here, it is easy to see that there are times when the demands of the political situation override well-established doctrinal verities such as the top priority of the need to gain air superiority.

I should point out that in order to keep the figure simple and easy to read, I omitted the first sentence, which put the paragraph in the context of the Gulf War. For the same reason, I limited the footnote to the source actually used. Other examples come readily to mind.

For instance, one might use the sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German U-boat in World War I as a negative illustration. The *Lusitania* was carrying munitions, and she was in a war zone, so she was technically a legitimate target. But if German policy was to avoid bringing the United States into the war on the Allied side, then sinking the *Lusitania* was a strategic mistake.

Let’s look at another example. During the Gulf War, our strategic planners followed sound doctrine in attacking the command structure of the Iraqi forces. Decapitating enemy command and control pays high dividends. To this end, our air strikes hit the Al Firdos bunker. As it turned out, large numbers of civilians were killed in the process. Saddam charged us with wantonly attacking a civilian bomb shelter. The photograph in the *New York Times* showing iron-barred gates on the bunker certainly gave the lie to his claim. Apparently, the officers assigned to the command bunker had invited their families to join them there, believing that the hardened bunker was one of the safest places in Baghdad. They were mistaken.

The high loss of civilian lives, however, had its impact in the United States. Fighting a war with Cable News Network looking over your shoulder has its difficulties. Ever sensitive to public opinion and the need to sustain popular support for the war, high-level deci-

**Table 4**  
**Illustrative Example**

<p>“Strategic attacks are defined by the objective—not by the weapon system employed, munition used, or target location.” AFM 1-1, <i>Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force</i>, vol. 1, March 1992, 11.</p>
<p>“For many years the Air Force has painted itself into a strategic-tactical paradigm that was artificially based on platforms and weapons instead of objectives. Desert Storm demonstrated that this paradigm was flawed. Single seat ‘fighters’ (F-117) carried out textbook strategic attacks in the enemy capital; single-seat close air support aircraft (A-10s) carried out anti-Scud operations with grave strategic and political implications, while the world’s premier ‘strategic’ bomber (B-52) bombed mine fields protecting the enemy’s front-line trenches. The growing realization of the ‘indivisibility of air power’ was part and parcel of the unification of the Air Force’s two combat organizations, SAC and TAC in the Air Combat Command.”</p>
<p><i>Gulf War Air Power Survey</i>, vol. 5, <i>A Statistical Compendium and Chronology</i> (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993), part 1, tables 177 and 185 (pages 418 and 517).</p>

sion makers, probably Gen Colin Powell or Gen Norman Schwarzkopf, promptly intruded on the target-selection process and withheld most targets in the Baghdad area thereafter—another example of political concern overriding purely military considerations.<sup>2</sup>

In my first example, the suggested innovative format goes all the way back to Clausewitz. Another illustration reflects a much more recent instance of a doctrinal notion (table 4).<sup>3</sup> Once again, I have deliberately shortened the historical statement for simplicity.

My proposal for a radical revision of format—the way we present doctrine—is offered as an experiment. It may well fail to accomplish a greater understanding and familiarity with doctrine throughout the Air Force. But, given the perception that we have not been very successful in communicating doctrine in our various previous publications since World War II, it would appear that a change in format may well be worth a try. One of the side effects of the change in format I'm advocating is the impact it should have on credibility. If doctrine writers are required to document each doctrinal statement with several citations to specific historical experience, then surely their generalizations will be more believable and more readily acceptable to the reader. Anyone who wishes to dispute the validity of the doctrinal generalization must assume the burden of proof by digging up contrary examples.

In the past, when proposed or draft manuals were circulated to the major commands for comment, the responses were of two types. Either the commands returned a perfunctory approval, which suggests that little or no really serious thought had been given to the details, or they raised violent objections to one or more features of the proposed doctrinal text.

Disagreement can lead to a healthy dialectic and exchange of ideas on the merits of the case, but not infrequently these objections have been raised without accompanying historical evidence to justify the objection. So it is my contention that requiring doctrine writers at all echelons to support their formulations with citations to actual experience will not only improve credibility but will impose a higher level of objectivity on people who wish to dispute any given doctrinal statement.

Now I want to circle back to the place where I began. I suggested that we have two basic problems with doctrine: (1) to perfect the means for devising sound doctrine and (2) to perfect the means for insuring that the doctrine we devise is communicated effectively and is successfully internalized by those who must apply it.

Let's turn now to the task of devising sound doctrine. Little wonder that we are still groping in our efforts to improve the way we formulate doctrine. Al-

though informal doctrinal writings have existed since remote antiquity, the phenomenon of formal, officially sanctioned, and periodically revised or updated doctrines is of comparatively recent date. The famous British military historian, G. F. R. Henderson, writing in 1905, put it this way: "In the British Army no means existed for collecting, much less analyzing, the facts and phenomena of the battlefield and the range. Experience was regarded as the private property of individuals, not as a public asset to be applied to the benefit of the army as a whole. . . . The suggestion that a branch should be established for that purpose . . . was howled down."<sup>4</sup>

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***If doctrine ever becomes mandatory, it will curb initiative and lead to lockstep performance—if it is not ignored entirely.***

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We have come a long way since Henderson wrote those words, but we are still far from having perfected the means by which we formulate doctrine. We talk about jointness, yet to this day the way the Navy defines and describes doctrine is quite different from the way the Air Force and the Army define it. To my utter dismay, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff appears to have a different conception of doctrine from the prevailing Air Force view. After the tragic shutdown of the friendly helicopters in Iraq, the chairman, in an effort to avoid a repetition of this unfortunate episode, proposed to *mandate* certain doctrinal procedures.<sup>5</sup> He did this in spite of the fact that much effort over many years has been expended in trying to make absolutely clear that officially promulgated doctrine is *never* prescriptive, *never* mandatory, and *never* rigidly binding on the commander in the field. It is only suggestive. Doctrine is only what has usually worked best in the past. It never curtails a commander's freedom of action. If doctrine ever becomes mandatory, it will curb initiative and lead to lockstep performance—if it is not ignored entirely.

Not only do wide differences exist in the way we interpret the term *doctrine*—indeed the very concept of doctrine—but today we have no clearly defined and established procedures for compiling doctrinal manuals. Although none of us doubts that the USAF is the best air force in the world, that fact should not deter us from learning whatever we can from the air arms of other nations. Some weeks ago, some of our friends in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) sent me the published proceedings of what they termed a Regional Air Power Workshop held in Darwin in August 1993. It includes a chapter devoted to the development of doctrine. What immediately caught my eye were two brief lists.

The first was captioned “We want doctrine to”

- reveal capabilities of air forces yet offer guidance on how best to use those capabilities;
- be enduring yet flexible (i.e., be valid over time yet responsive to change);
- provide guidance to personnel yet remain open to interpretation;
- provide direction yet not be too restrictive;
- guide research and development yet adjust to technological innovations; and
- set out maxims and imperatives.

I’m not suggesting that we ought to copy these verbatim, but it strikes me that such a presentation as an introduction to our manual might be helpful. The second list followed the heading “Doctrine offers”

- a conceptual framework;
- general guidance in specific situations;
- a foundation for the air force (including force structure, strategy, tactics, training, and procedures);
- guidance for establishing employment priorities;
- a sounding board for testing, evaluating, and employing new technologies and new policies; and
- a rationale for the organization and employment of air forces.<sup>6</sup>

One may argue that there’s little that is new here, but the point I’m trying to make is that it is useful to spell these ideas out in our doctrinal manuals by way of introduction to the newcomers.

If we are going to spell out the procedures for devising doctrine, we have to start with the three well-known potential sources:

1. Theory: the visionary speculations of individuals of unusual imagination. Theories and visions can be helpful in virtually forcing us to appreciate possibilities that most of us have overlooked. But theories are hypothetical, and they lack the substance of reality—the test of actual trial.

2. Technological advance: the significant breakthrough that opens up a whole new range of tactical possibilities. Sometimes doctrine *pushes* the creation of a technological advance, and sometimes an unexpected technological breakthrough *pulls* doctrine into a new and unanticipated arena. A good example is the case of US power plant production in World War II. As world leaders in the development of piston engines, our designers kept pushing the envelope with bigger and bigger piston engines. This effort culminated in a gargantuan, multirow radial by Lycoming, now on dis-

play at the Silver Hill facility of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. It was an obsolete dinosaur the day it was finished because a visionary designer named Whittle developed on a financial shoestring a revolutionary jet engine that induced significant doctrinal changes.

3. Day-to-day operations of the Air Force, in peace as well as in war: the major source of doctrine. Major technological breakthroughs are important stimuli to doctrinal change, but they are far from the commonest cause of such changes. Daily operations are the source I want to consider now.

Historical experience provides the proof of what has worked and what has not worked. Experience carries us beyond the visions and speculations of theorists. Actual experience reveals that which is practical. But what do we really mean by experience? Living through an operation is in one sense “experiencing it.” However, that is not what we mean by *usable experience for doctrinal purposes*. To be usable, the experience we observe or live through has to be reflected upon and *recorded*. Recording is a demanding task, for it involves explicating the context in which the experience was acquired—the prevailing conditions, institutions, equipment, and the like.

Without thoughtful reflection, careful analysis, and objective *recording*, experience is almost meaningless. Frederick the Great recognized this problem. “Some of my packmules,” he said, “have experienced three campaigns, but they still don’t know anything about waging war.” We have able and talented officers in the doctrine shop in the Pentagon and at the doctrine center at Langley AFB, Virginia, as well as in other echelons of the Air Force, but they are utterly dependent upon the historical experience of the Air Force at large to provide them with the evidence, the case histories, and the after-action reports that provide the substance of doctrine.

I’ve been working the doctrinal problem for nearly 50 years, and my observation is that the weak link in the process of generating doctrine is the paucity of well-prepared after-action reports. If the people who are charged with formulating doctrine have only a few cases upon which to base the generalizations that we call doctrine, then almost certainly their inferences are going to be skewed.

Doctrine is everybody’s business in the Air Force. We have never sold that idea. Perhaps we should come up with a system of incentives for the most useful after-action reports produced each year. Our Canadian army friends have tackled the problem head-on. They established the *Canadian Army Doctrine Bulletin* as a vehicle to circulate new doctrine and to provide a forum for the discussion of ideas that have not reached

the status of formal doctrine. This strikes me as a good idea, but if our existing professional journals are doing their job properly, then surely the discussion of doctrinal ideas ought to take a large place in their pages.

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Although I have indicated that our collective experience—properly recorded and communicated for people assigned to formulate official doctrine—should be a major component of doctrine, we certainly don't mean to suggest that past experience is an infallible guide to future action. That's why we say that doctrine is advisory, suggestive, and not mandatory. As Mark Twain put it, "History doesn't exactly repeat itself, but it rhymes."

### Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 69.
2. Col Edward C. Mann III, *Thunder and Lightning: Desert Storm and the Airpower Debates* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, April 1995), 157–58.
3. I am indebted to my former student, Lt Col Dan Kuehl, USAF, Retired, currently on the faculty of the National Defense University, for the two doctrinal illustrations offered here.
4. G. F. R. Henderson, *The Science of War* (London: Longmans, 1905), 418–19.
5. Gen John Shalikashvili, chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, memorandum CM-367-94 and enclosure to Gen Merrill A. McPeak, chief of staff of the Air Force et al., 18 July 1994.
6. Gary Waters and John Mordike, eds., *Regional Air Power Workshop: Darwin* (RAAF Base Fairbairn, Canberra, ACT, Australia: Air Power Studios Centre, 1993), 43–44.

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