



# Air-Mindedness

## Confessions of an Airpower Advocate

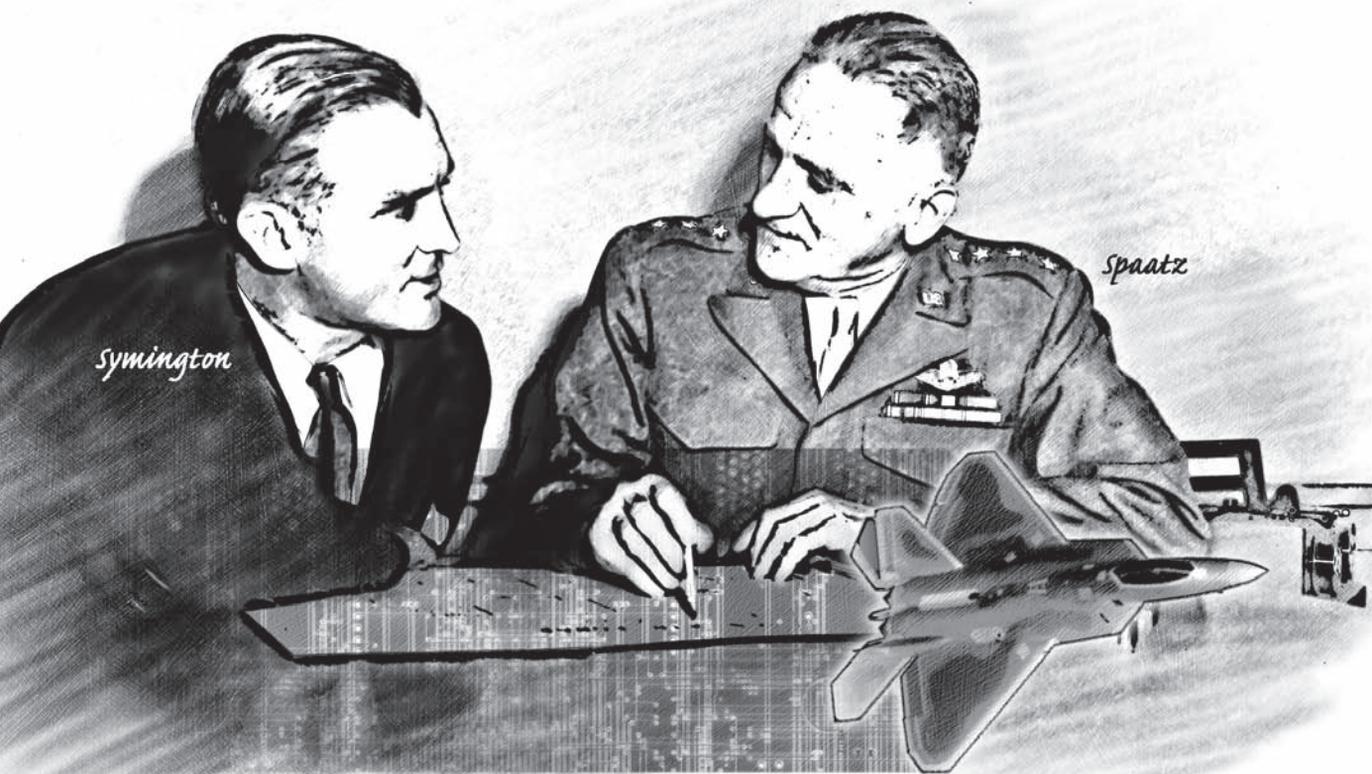
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As Airmen face the challenges of justifying their requirements in the Defense Budget and continue to plan and execute air, space, and cyberspace operations around the globe, there are precious few opportunities to reflect on the events that made the US Air Force what it is today or to consider the value of an independent Air Force to the nation. Certainly, many events involving the United States Air Force look significantly different when viewed from a historical perspective—perhaps because we tend to view current events through bureaucratic lenses that are colored by the issues of the day. But when we review those same occurrences years later through a strategic lens, unclouded by news headlines and with the benefit of

history, our observations can lead to important new lessons which would have been difficult to recognize at the time.

### Multidimensional Perspectives on Airpower

It is also important to recognize that Airmen, like any other group of people, tend to perceive events in a way that reflects their own institutional and bureaucratic perspectives. In a sense, each group's point of view is deficient by itself; however, taken together, they can provide a useful picture for detailed analysis. Arguably, people view the Air Force from at least four different perspectives: First, there is a national view, which re-



flects how the people of the United States see the Air Force generally, as through the eyes of Congress or the media. The second view is the perspective of joint force commanders and their representatives, which typically translates to how we are regarded in the Washington arena by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff. The ground services—the Army and Marine Corps—view us from a third perspective: the air support we provide to their operations. It is important for Airmen to recognize the difference between multiservice tactical operations and interdependent joint operations so that they can provide the critically important fourth perspective, which is the employment of airpower at the operational and strategic levels. Finally, it is also important to recognize the intrinsic value of each independent service: to advocate for the innovation and technology that support the service's approach to military operations and national security. It is this facet of the Air Force which ties it to every other independent air force around the world. While each point of view is important, none provide a complete picture without the others. In recent times, there have been frequent attempts to view the Air Force through just one lens, which leaves these observers with a simple “black and white” view of our brilliantly colored, multidimensional institution.

## Does the Nation Need an Independent Air Force?

Perhaps most importantly, we need to consider why the nation sees value in an independent Air Force. We should ask ourselves the question “Why did the Congress decide to establish the Air Force as an independent service in the first place?” Certainly, our Air Force was forged in the battles of World War II although much work had taken place over the years predating this conflict to establish our independence. But World War II

marked the first time that political leaders could clearly see what airpower provides the nation. To answer the question previously posed, we must consider that at the time of the creation of our service, four major operational commands existed: Strategic Air Command, Air Defense Command, Air Transport Service, and Tactical Air Command (listed in order of their size at the time of the Air Force's establishment in 1947). Here is the telling question: “Without the capabilities inherent in Strategic Air Command or Air Defense Command, would the nation have seen a need for an independent Air Force?” It seems reasonable to conclude that, as important as these missions are, it is unlikely that Congress would have established an Air Force for the sole purpose of providing airlift and air support to US ground forces.

Of course, today we have neither a Strategic Air Command nor an Air Defense Command; however, the organizations themselves are not as important as the fact that we continue to provide the nation with the capabilities these two commands offered when they did exist. Strategic Air Command could hold targets at risk without deploying large forces and putting them into harm's way. Air Defense Command made it difficult for an adversary to threaten the people of the United States or its global interests with attack. Nevertheless, we have demonstrated these capabilities in recent years but didn't recognize the significance of our activities because we understood the events only in the context of the bureaucratic issues we faced at the time. Since our reorganization in 1992, which was based largely on functional alignment, Air Force members have tended to view events through a mobility perspective, a combat air forces perspective, or a space perspective rather than an Airman's perspective. We need to recognize and reinforce the idea that the value of an independent Air Force lies in the synergy it provides across these functional capabilities—not in the effective-



ness or efficiency of the independent capabilities themselves.

We can also understand the value of the US Air Force by comparing our use of the air domain with that of the other services' aviation forces. The Army optimizes its air arm to provide organic mobility, surveillance and reconnaissance, indirect fires, and close air support to tactical forces in battle. Naval aviation has the primary role of protecting the fleet; however, by moving to littoral regions in the vicinity of military operations and conducting flight operations from the sea, it provides the nation a unique capability for presence around the globe. Rather than support its infantry with airpower, the Marine Corps fully integrates aviation with its infantry forces, functioning as a single, interdependent, ground-centric force that can operate from land or sea. Only the US Air Force has historically operated from garrison locations to project power at long distances, employing "effects" platforms (strike, airdrop, surveillance/reconnaissance, and air superiority aircraft) enabled by our "strategic" tanker capabilities. The Air Force offers exceptional support to ground or maritime operations but has the unique ability to deliver global and theater effects from its garrison locations. We demonstrated theater-wide reach and power in World War II, extending this capability worldwide during the first two decades of the Cold War.

### The Legacy of Strategic Air Command

People who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s saw an abundance of movies about World War II in theaters and on television. The nation was captivated by its "flyboys." When people thought of the United States Air Force, they based their thinking on movies like *Twelve O'Clock High* that showed bombers, protected by long-range fighters, changing the course

of history and the nation's approach to warfare. Of course, in these two decades, people were also very familiar with the significance of the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As Strategic Air Command evolved, it transformed from a primarily conventional bombardment command to an organization almost exclusively focused on nuclear deterrence. (Recall its motto Peace Is Our Profession.) The command not only possessed bombers but also controlled the tankers that made it possible for those bombers to reach their targets on the other side of the globe. The bomber crews understood the tanker mission well, and the tanker crews understood their contributions to the bombing mission very well. However, both of these capabilities focused solely on delivering nuclear weapons against targets in the Soviet Union. The value of long-range air strike came under scrutiny early in the 1960s with the introduction of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), but bombers continued to play an important role in the nuclear "triad." Air Defense Command, not Strategic Air Command, experienced a significant decline in resources because the nation no longer saw a need to maintain a robust strategic air defense against air attack. Interestingly, the Soviet Union did not match the United States in this regard—it continued to maintain and expand its formidable air defense capability.

### The Evolution of Tactical Airpower

Not a popular war but certainly a watershed event for the Air Force, Vietnam involved large numbers of ground forces participating in what we called at the time "limited intensity conflict." Moreover, Vietnam was definitely not an air-minded campaign—the primary measures of effectiveness were casualty ratios, not the attainment of operational or strategic objectives. Of significance to

Airmen, Vietnam dramatically changed the way we look at airpower: rather than a means to avoid attrition warfare, it became a critical enabler for force-on-force conflict. With increasing numbers of ICBMs and now submarine-launched ballistic missiles, we took bombers off alert and deployed them to Southeast Asia to become part of the war effort. It soon became clear that the bomber crews, which had operated independently throughout the Cold War, did not know how to integrate with other combat air forces. The loss of 15 B-52s during Linebacker II serves as an example of this failure to exploit the benefits of force packaging. The Vietnam experience convinced Air Force leaders of a critical need to better integrate Strategic Air Command's capabilities with those of Tactical Air Command—one of two primary lessons for Airmen from Vietnam. (The second concerned the need for a fighter optimized for air superiority.) However, we often forget that Linebacker II, which again demonstrated our ability to hold targets at risk without force-on-force conflict, was also responsible for driving the North Vietnamese to the negotiation table, which soon put an end to this conflict and brought home our prisoners of war. This should have been our primary observation: airpower not only can support tactical ground operations but also can enable other instruments of national power, such as diplomacy, to achieve strategic effects.

A number of events that would have huge effects on the Air Force occurred in the 1980s. First, negotiations for the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty began in 1982 when the United States proposed substantial downsizing of both sides' nuclear arsenals. Second, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 centralized operational authority in the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as opposed to the Service Chiefs and designated the Chairman as the principal military adviser to the President, Na-

tional Security Council, and Secretary of Defense. Finally, in 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, signaling the approaching end of the Cold War. As a result, in the early 1990s, the Department of Defense had begun downsizing to a level called the "Base Force" when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. The Air Force had worked aggressively to develop integrated conventional-bomber operations, and the F-15 fighter allowed us to dominate the skies over Iraq. The Air Force conducted a 38-day air campaign that enabled ground forces to occupy southern Iraq in only 100 hours. We proved that we had learned the lessons of Vietnam. Although we celebrated our victory, we also continued the massive downsizing of American forces commonly referred to as the Cold War "peace dividend."

## Functional Reorganization of the Air Force

We took our bombers off alert in September 1991 as Gen Merrill McPeak, the Air Force chief of staff, launched an effort to reorganize a significantly smaller Air Force. Having no requirement to maintain an aircraft alert force, the service disbanded Strategic Air Command, divesting its bombers to a new command, Air Combat Command, and its tankers to another new command, Air Mobility Command. Because bombers did not sit alert, they were no longer considered part of the nuclear-deterrence force, which provided an important benefit at the time. Specifically, many countries that previously would not allow the United States to operate bombers from their soil now found conventional-only bomber deployments acceptable. However, negative consequences accrued as well: soon bombers were no longer regarded as an active element of the nuclear deterrence force, and the Air Force lost its sense of a common institutional mission. From this time forward, Air-



men would identify themselves as members of the combat air forces, mobility air forces, or the space community. Consistent with Goldwater-Nichols, members of the combat air forces would continue to be operationally assigned to multiple combatant commands; however, Air Mobility Command was operationally aligned to a single combatant command, US Transportation Command, and the space community remained aligned to a single combatant command, US Space Command. Airmen began to associate “global reach” with Air Mobility Command and “global power” with Air Combat Command. A brief attempt occurred to associate “virtual presence” with space. Capitalizing on our success in Operation Desert Storm, Airmen successfully argued the value of a joint force air component commander, but for the most part, the other services continued to divide responsibilities along geographic rather than functional lines. Since joint task force commands continued to be assigned geographically (with two notable exceptions led by Airmen: the functional joint task forces for Operations Northern and Southern Watch) and because Airmen were excited that they had control of air across an entire theater, to this day Airmen do not have an effective career-development path to become joint task force or regional joint force (combatant) commanders.

The bomber community, once the largest in the Air Force, downsized dramatically and transitioned from one known for “range and payload” to one known for its “persistence and payload.” The integration of bombers and fighters constituted a formidable capability, but the B-52’s relatively slow speed made it difficult to integrate into large force packages; consequently, the B-1 became the backbone of the conventional bomber force. In 1992, when Navy and Air Force fighters began flying patrols over northern and southern Iraq, the Air Force saw a diminishing role for bombers and other

long-range conventional strike capabilities in Airmen’s view of airpower.

## Decisive Roles for Airpower?

In July 1995, the international community agreed to extend the threat of air strikes against Bosnian Serbs if they attacked any of the remaining “safe areas” in Bosnia, which included Gorazde, Tuzla, Bihac, and Sarajevo. Croatian forces entered the fighting in early August, and Operation Deliberate Force began on 30 August 1995 with attacks against Bosnian Serb military targets in response to a Bosnian Serb mortar attack on civilians in Sarajevo. The alliance conducted air strikes over 11 days during the period ending 14 September 1995. The threat of attacks from the air as well as from Bosniak and Bosnian Croat forces forced the Bosnian Serbs to send Serbian president Slobodan Miloševic to represent their interests in negotiations that led to the Dayton Peace Agreement. As one source still reports, “Operation DELIBERATE FORCE proved that airpower can have a decisive role when serving achievable, clear policy objectives.”<sup>1</sup> However, looking back with a historical perspective, Airmen must realize that (1) airpower caused indigenous forces (Bosnians and Croats) to pose a threat to a much more powerful ground force and (2) airpower enabled the effectiveness of the diplomatic instrument of power. Bombing by itself did not produce the outcome, but without bombing, it is unlikely that Serbia would have negotiated with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Thus, Bosnia offers two important, though largely ignored, lessons for Airmen: airpower can enable indigenous ground forces to fight successfully and can enable other instruments of national power to become more effective.

In March 1999, NATO initiated Operation Allied Force to compel Miloševic to stop the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo and to withdraw Serbian forces

from the province. Although the alliance initially designed the air campaign to destroy Serbian air defenses and high-value military targets, it increasingly used air to attack Serbian units on the ground as well. Strategic targets included bridges across the Danube, factories, power stations, telecommunications facilities, and the headquarters of a political party led by Milošević's wife. Allied Force marked both the first operational use of B-2 bombers, which flew from Whiteman AFB, Missouri, to their targets and back, and the return of B-52s to high-altitude bombing. Although the role of airpower in bringing this conflict to resolution has prompted much debate, a RAND report suggests that Milošević decided to capitulate on 3 June because (1) he realized that his ethnic-cleansing strategy had not weakened NATO's resolve but had actually increased the alliance's commitment; (2) after a defiant initial response to the bombing campaign, the Serbian population eventually became war weary and willing to accept concessions; (3) damage to Serbia's infrastructure and economy undermined the support that Milošević required to ensure his regime's survival; (4) he expected NATO to transition to an unconstrained bombing campaign if its terms, by this time supported by Russia, were ignored; (5) NATO indicated that it was considering a future ground invasion (an effective coercion tactic even though it would have required at least two to three months of deployment preparation); and (6) NATO provided Milošević with an agreement that gave him some domestic political cover. The same RAND report notes that "damage to Yugoslav military forces and the 'resurgence' of the Kosovo Liberation Army generated little pressure."<sup>2</sup> Kosovo led to a debate regarding airpower's "decisiveness," but this tactical discussion is not as important to Airmen as the value of airpower in enabling diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of power. The strategic value of airpower as an enabler for other instruments of na-

tional power is the lesson that every Airman should draw from NATO's victory over Milošević. It also offers a great lesson for Airmen involved with strategic-deterrence planning: Milošević conceded because NATO provided him an acceptable political outcome to end his aggression—and threatened him with significant military cost if he continued.

Just two years later, Operation Enduring Freedom gave Airmen an opportunity to reinforce long-established lessons of airpower. On Sunday, 7 October 2001, American and British forces began an aerial-bombing campaign targeting Taliban forces and al-Qaeda. Early combat operations included air strikes from B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers flown from the continental United States and Diego Garcia, extended by tankers based in the Middle East; carrier-based F-14 and F/A-18 fighters operating in the Arabian Sea off Pakistan; and American and British Tomahawk cruise missiles. Later, land-based fighter aircraft would fly sorties into Pakistan from both the Middle East and Central Asia. From the very first day of the conflict, strategic airdrop provided humanitarian aid, clearly indicating that the United States was fighting the Taliban government and its support for al-Qaeda, not the people of Afghanistan. In early November, planners at US Central Command advocated the need to introduce US ground forces because they felt that the indigenous forces could not prevail against the Taliban without US and allied assistance on the ground. But on 9 November, the Northern Alliance, with the support of special operations forces, joint tactical air controllers, and airpower, fought against the weakened Taliban and captured Mazar-i-Sharif, taking control of Kabul just four days later as the Taliban fled the city. US and allied forces established their first ground base in Afghanistan southwest of Kandahar in late November, with strategic airlift as the only source of logistics for several months. The first lesson for Airmen from these Afghanistan operations is the immense



value of long-range strike, including bombers and fighters, enabled by tankers. The second lesson is the capability of airpower to enable the effectiveness of indigenous ground forces against more powerful forces. We also learned the value of special operations forces in support of airpower as enablers of indigenous forces. The third lesson reminds us of airpower's flexibility—it can deliver both bombs and humanitarian aid.

Finally, we can learn some great lessons from Operation Iraqi Freedom, the first of which corrects a common misperception that ground forces entered southern Iraq without the benefit of air superiority. Few people are aware of an operation called Southern Focus, which began in the summer of 2002 and ensured air superiority over southern Iraq when Iraqi Freedom's ground operations began in March 2003. Southern Focus was based on a change in rules of engagement that enabled more effective use of airpower than under the rules in force during Southern Watch. As a result, when ground forces entered southern Iraq, they did so without fear of bombardment from the air. Additionally, in northern Iraq, airpower and special operations forces combined to work with the Kurds to protect the oil fields. The original plan called for a ground invasion from Turkey, but when that option was no longer available, planners developed and successfully implemented a scheme employing airpower, special operations forces, and the Kurdish Peshmerga (an indigenous militia force). To prevent the possibility of a Scud missile launch from the Western Desert of Iraq—the other major concern—the Air Force, again working with special operations forces, developed a plan to put a blanket of surveillance and attack assets over the Western Desert with special operations forces conducting special reconnaissance of designated sites on the ground. As a result, the Iraqis launched no Scuds into Israel. Although operations in Iraq continue, several lessons for Airmen have

already become apparent. First, useful synergies result when airpower and special operations forces operate interdependently to attain asymmetric effects. Second, we saw that airpower can enable the effectiveness of a small or weakened ground force, as the Kurdish Peshmerga demonstrated in northern Iraq. Finally, Airmen can find different and innovative ways to achieve air superiority and ensure the protection of our ground forces.

## Conclusion

Can we apply the Airman's perspective to suggest alternative approaches to other issues facing our nation today? Clearly we can—and we must. Airmen look at problems differently; thus, finding alternatives may require that we restate the problems we are attempting to resolve. For example, are the operations in Iraq “irregular warfare,” or are they “irregular peace” operations? Airmen should study Gen David Petraeus's “surge” in detail to understand the reasons for its effectiveness—specifically, the surge in manpower was accompanied by a change in strategy that focused on achieving stability rather than eliminating insurgents. Cyberspace serves as another example. Currently, we primarily focus cyberspace military operations in the areas of computer network operations and cyber security. Is cyberspace simply about the maintenance and security of our digital communications, or is it the foundation for a new “economic and social age” to replace the industrial age under which we operate as a nation today? The answer to this question has profound implications for the US military as well as our entire way of life. Finally, as we examine our priorities and mission as an Air Force following the past two years' events that involved bombers and ICBMs, we need to ask ourselves whether these were isolated occurrences restricted to the nuclear operations community or events symptomatic of our

overall loss of focus on why we exist as a service.

The international political environment has changed, but a quick review of recent military and national security operations suggests that the nation needs the US Air Force for the same reasons it was established in 1947:

- to sustain a full-spectrum force that encourages innovation, stimulates science and technology, and strengthens partners across the globe;
- to offer alternatives to force-on-force conflict by developing strategies based on operating interdependently with other US and partner instruments of power;
- to provide alternative joint courses of action that reduce the risk of US and friendly-force casualties when operating as an interdependent joint and coalition force; and
- to support ground commanders with the world's best air surveillance, close air support, and other supporting tactical capabilities.

As we consider the role of the Air Force in the future, we clearly see that,

from its beginnings, our service has postured itself to protect America's homeland and citizens from attack, to help assure our allies and partners, and to contribute to the advancement of America's global interests. We do this with our airlift, long-range strike (tankers and attack platforms), surveillance and reconnaissance (air and space), force enhancement from space, and other capabilities inherent to air forces. To put this in clear terms that apply to all Airmen regardless of their functional specialty, "Airmen protect the nation and its global interests by conducting global, regional, and tactical operations through air, space, and cyberspace." In short, we Airmen are distinguished by our air-mindedness! ✪

#### Notes

1. "Operation Deliberate Force," *GlobalSecurity.org*, [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/deliberate\\_force.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/deliberate_force.htm) (accessed 27 April 2009).
2. "Why Milosevic Decided to Settle the Conflict over Kosovo When He Did," RAND Research Brief, RB-71 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB71/index1.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB71/index1.html) (accessed 27 April 2009).



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Lieutenant General Elder (BS, MS, DE, University of Detroit) served as commander, Eighth Air Force (Air Forces Strategic), Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, and as joint functional component commander for global strike, US Strategic Command, Offutt AFB, Nebraska, at the time of his retirement from the Air Force. He also commanded Task Force 204, activated in November 2007 to oversee the Air Force's nuclear bomber and reconnaissance activities in support of US Strategic Command. General Elder served as the first commander of Air Force Network Operations and led the development of the cyberspace mission for the Air Force. His staff experience includes senior leadership positions with the Joint Staff, Air Staff, Air Combat Command, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He has commanded at all levels; led unit deployments to Southwest Asia, Europe, and the Pacific; and held senior command positions in Operations Southern Watch, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom. Prior to his final assignment, he was commandant of the Air War College and vice-commander of Air University. A command pilot with more than 4,000 flying hours, including 83 combat hours, General Elder is a graduate of Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, Air War College, and the National War College.

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