Developing Aerospace Leaders for the Twenty-First Century

A Historical Context for the DAL Concept

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Editorial Abstract: Why is the Developing Aerospace Leaders (DAL) initiative needed? Dr. Thirtle points to a lack of unifying vision and the growth of occupationalism in the Air Force. In this article, reminiscent of Carl Builder's book The Icarus Syndrome, *he states DAL's objectives and explains why it is necessary to recapture the "heart and soul" of the service through deliberate cultivation of the aerospace power mind-set.*

> *To employ aerospace capabilities effectively, we'll continue to develop commanders who think in terms of exploiting the whole aerospace continuum—leaders able to employ forces that produce the desired effects, regardless of where platforms reside, fly, or orbit. These leaders with experience and cross-competence in the increasingly complex range of military disciplines will lead aerospace and joint forces to victory for our nation.*
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> —*Air Force Vision 2020*

WE LIVE IN a different world today than we did in the past, with a different set of expectations, different security challenges, and a different context of American culture and economy than before the Cold War. The purposeful act of developing aerospace leaders who are focused upon the successful application of aerospace power in this century is perhaps one of the most important and far-reaching functions the Air Force will undertake during the new millennium to address existing challenges.

Whom will we fight? How will we fight? When will we fight? In what medium will we fight? How will we define what *fight* means from an operational perspective? In light of the many changes the Air Force will encounter during the next few decades with respect to technology and the employment of forces in the battle space, the task of developing top-notch, well-rounded, broadened,

and educated leadership will be paramount to ensuring that the Air Force remains the world's best air service. Although the Air Force's emphasis upon quality will never cease to exist (it cannot), the methods and processes by which the service attracts, retains, and develops the future leadership corps are likely to change—indeed, they must. Aerospace leaders of tomorrow will have to be even more broadly oriented than they have been in the past—we will need leaders who have experience across multiple competencies and who can think in terms of exploiting the entire aerospace continuum: from information operations to air operations to space operations.

Can We Meet the Need?

During his first year as chief of staff of the Air Force (CSAF), Gen Michael E. Ryan recognized that the Air Force would need a comprehensive examination of major areas of policy in order to reflect the changing nature of the service.[1] One of these areas, force development, rose to the top of his list. But why is force development such a priority, given other pressing needs, such as the F-22 program or replacement of the service's aging aircraft fleet? Don't we have great leaders today? Has the Air Force not produced the best leadership that it could possibly produce? Do we not have some of the most comprehensive personnel- and career-development systems in the world? Answers to these introspective questions led the CSAF to further exploration.

As he examined his past experiences, discussed them with senior mentors such as retired Air Force general Robert J. Dixon, and compared them to the Air Force's present and future challenges, General Ryan could not determine whether or not the Air Force (with the same systems and methods used today) would purposefully develop the "right" qualities (leadership and experience) it would require a generation from now. Likewise, he could not tell whether or not the current systems for developing such leaders were as "healthy" as they could be—that is, did the Air Force need to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, flexibility, and clarity of its force-development process? The Developing Aerospace Leaders (DAL) initiative was designed to address such concerns.

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DAL and Its Objectives

Instituted by General Ryan in March 2000 to examine and recommend actions necessary to prepare future officers for Air Force leadership,[2] DAL seeks to answer the types of questions posited above. It benefits from the advice of senior mentors such as retired Air Force generals Bradley C. Hosmer and Billy J. Boles, as well as General Dixon. All three of these men have played a significant role not only in developing the DAL construct, but also in mentoring the effort itself. Although General Ryan originally established DAL with a two-year charter,[3] he has indicated that "the DAL project is not an end state, but a continuing process. It transcends the tenure of leadership. Over time, development issues will require further analysis and modification as institutional needs transition to meet future requirements. The broader DAL approach will remain the critical foundation upon which force development programs will be measured and implemented well into the next century."[4] To fulfill part of the charter, the DAL program office will identify and modify counterproductive policies, practices, and procedures as well as explore and recommend processes to support and make the best practices routine. DAL objectives include establishing processes and procedures that build a senior leadership corps able to

- understand national security interests and fully exploit the aerospace domain to support national objectives;
- develop, cultivate, and maintain operational competence in the medium of aerospace;
- envision, develop, acquire, sustain, support, and employ capabilities that exploit the aerospace domain to create military effects; and
- communicate the absolute and relative value of aerospace capabilities to the American people and their representatives.[5]

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Although DAL will initially emphasize development of the active duty officer corps, it will eventually include an analysis of Air Force Reserve, Guard, and civilian personnel as well.

Why Do We Need DAL?

An examination of Air Force history reveals no single reason but a multitude of reasons why the Air Force has instituted the DAL initiative at this time. General Ryan's concern about the organization's development of future leaders provides the most well-documented reason for change; however, interviews with Air Force senior mentors (Generals Dixon, Hosmer, and many others inside and outside the Air Force) also provide a rationale. To their credit, Generals Dixon, Hosmer, and Boles have provided (during both their active duty and retirement) a solid legacy upon which both the CSAF and the DAL initiative have built. Specifically, the Air Force needs DAL because of the lack of a unifying vision, the growth of occupationalism within the officer corps, the loss of heart and soul, and the need for cultivating a healthier mind-set.

Lack of a Unifying Vision

Airpower theory was developed by visionaries who initially bucked the system of the traditional Army in order to establish airpower as a unique method for conducting warfare. Men like Gen Billy Mitchell sacrificed their careers to change paradigms in the face of daunting opposition.[6] Paradoxically, even though the early visionaries had a common focus of establishing the Air Force, they had different reasons for embracing the role of airpower:

- Military professionals conceived of airpower theory as a more effective way to wage war and organize its means.
- Military aviators embraced this theory because it gave a higher purpose to their love of airplanes and flying.
- The American public was dismayed by the bloody stalemate of trench warfare in World War I and hoped to avoid its repetition by the use of aerial bombardment.
- American politicians, who had to raise money for the military, saw the use of airpower as a way to buy defense capabilities that were less expensive than those of Army or Navy forces.
- Mitchell and others of like mind sought independence from the Army.[7]

Many service members today would contend that the Air Force lacks a unifying vision that is coherent, well understood, and embraced by the totality of the officer corps. One may attribute some portion of this misunderstanding to changes since the end of the Cold War; the historical reasons cited above account for the rest of the misunderstanding.

Because different stakeholders had unique beliefs as to the purpose of an air force, people embraced airpower theory in different ways—a phenomenon that remains essentially unchanged.

It is not too far-fetched to think that the lack of a unifying vision, although necessary to establish airpower during its formative years, may be exactly what has caused the deterioration of a sense of ideological bonding in the Air Force today—the same type of bonding that DAL seeks to develop and institutionalize. The signal that US policy makers sent to the military, specifically the Air Force in the post–World War II time frame, was undeniable: technology development and delivery were important mechanisms—not only for executing the military mission, but also for the very existence and continuance of a military service itself. The Air Force embraced this ideology.[8] As opposed to the other military services that have identified themselves with a mission, the Air Force has identified itself with technology and has subsequently become associated with a specific type (the airplane). This identification has resulted in a weaker sense of community among airmen than exists among members of the other military services. The lack of a unifying vision has led to weak organizational ties and a focus upon systems as opposed to missions.[9]

The Growth of Occupationalism—Focus upon Specialty

Differing reasons for embracing airpower theory, mentioned above, accompanied by the role of technology, created a scenario that Charles Moskos has referred to as occupationalism—a situation in which individuals bond more with their job specialty than they do with the service as a whole.[10] Many Air Force leaders are concerned that the rise of occupationalism has negatively affected a broader focus upon teamwork and unification to accomplish the mission. General Dixon stated it best when he said that the "narrowness of focus" during the past has caused many officers to become more concerned about their specialty than about officership.[11]

How one answers the question "What do you do?" clearly expresses one symptom of this problem. As General Ryan stated in the DAL charter, he (as well as others, such as Generals Dixon and Hosmer) expects the response will be, "I am an Air Force officer."[12] The reality of the current situation, however, is that Air Force officers tend to refer to their occupational specialty in their answer. For example, a pilot would say, "I am a pilot" (or fighter pilot, bomber pilot, etc.); an acquisition officer might say, "I am a program manager"; and so forth. The danger of this occupational focus is that, in the end, the officer becomes more committed to a specialization than to the concept of officership itself, which could likely result in a lack of occupational unity.[13]

Loss of Heart and Soul

Although somewhat intangible, the concept of "heart and soul" also plays a significant role in defining the health of the organizational culture within the service. In *The Icarus Syndrome,* Carl Builder emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the role of leadership and the culture of the organization. To him, they represent the organization's heart and soul—both of which are critical to the efficacy of the Air Force in the twenty-first century. He expressed as much in a 1991 letter to Lt Gen Phillip J. Ford (then commandant of Air University's Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base [AFB], Alabama):

> As you indicated, airpower is one piece, the profession of arms is the other. One is the heart of the Air Force, the other is its soul. The senior leadership of the Air Force is the trustee of the heart; but everyone in the Air Force is a trustee of its soul. The heart is about organizational purpose or mission—airpower—and the soul is the profession of arms—the absolute and total commitment to mission. . . .
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> The problem, as I see it, is that the two—heart and soul—have failed each other: The senior leadership has failed to keep the heart—the mission of airpower—alive and vibrant by keeping it at the forefront of all its actions. And with-

> out the mission, members of the Air Force have had nothing to commit themselves to except their own careers or specialties.
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> The leadership can't dedicate the organization to its mission just by lip service; its decisions (including promotions and rewards) must reflect that dedication, or its followers soon detect the duplicity. Given that dedication of the organization to its mission, everyone joining the organization can appreciate and elect (or not) to commit to the mission. . . . To be sure, not everyone who joins an organization will commit to its mission; but those persons are not professionals at arms and they are not people that the organization should normally seek and reward. If the organization sends out mixed signals about its mission or its dedication to its mission, it can hardly complain if professionalism and commitment to the mission falter among its people.
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> Thus, I think that both the heart and soul have failed each other in the Air Force.[14]

A Mind-Set in Need of Cultivating

Examination of Air Force policy during the recent past indicates that at least two major paradigm shifts are under way. Both are outgrowths of changes associated with the post–Cold War era. The first involves the very thing upon which the Air Force was founded—technology. In this context, technology refers to airplanes, hardware systems, and so forth. From the public's perspective, this is the face of the Air Force. The second paradigm shift is taking place in the human side of the organization and involves a change to the mind-set that exists within the Air Force. This change provided both the impetus for creating DAL and a significant challenge for the Air Force as it enters the twenty-first century.

A review of Air Force history, mentioned earlier, reveals the turbulent nature of Air Force culture. In general, such turbulence appears to be the result of introspection and the propagation of thoughts prevalent many decades ago. For example, recent Air Force leadership has referred to a need for a "back to basics approach" in terms of how its people should conduct themselves.[15] Leaders have purposefully articulated the words *integrity, honesty,* and *character* in hopes that the Air Force can once again capture a certain attribute perceived to have existed many decades ago but now lost for one reason or another.[16]

Firsthand discussions with senior Air Force policy makers, conducted as part of the research for this article, indicated a very similar tone: Air Force leaders desire to recapture what their service has lost. Thus, the word *change,* used in the context of organizational change, actually means recapturing a sort of "paradise lost." For the Air Force, the blurring of the old paradigm is in the works, and the DAL effort will concentrate on cultivating a new focus within the organization—a focus, as General Ryan indicates, that "will require a change in the Air Force mindset and to some, their Air Force identity."[17]

The DAL project is a positive step forward in attempting to address the type and quantity of institutional challenges the Air Force has faced during the past five decades. By breaking down occupationalism, unifying the service's vision, and reinvigorating both the heart and soul of the Air Force, a good chance exists for "putting the train back on the tracks," in the words of one senior leader. Despite some officers' skepticism of the potential success of the project,[18] a failure to act may prove detrimental to the national security of the country, to the efficacy of aerospace power, and to the very existence of the service.

How Will We Know If DAL Is Successful?

Clear indications of DAL's success may prove elusive. Perhaps when officers do not identify themselves with a specific occupational specialization or when the service experiences a greater cross-flow and robust leadership-development process for officers of all specialties, we can then say that DAL has succeeded. Other measures of success might include individuals' recognizing the core pur-

pose of the service and perceiving how they fit into the overarching strategy. In any case, we will more than likely reap the fruits of DAL's success in the long run—probably a couple of decades from now. The institution of new processes and themes will likely occur in the short run, but we will not observe their effects until the Air Force's new lieutenants become leaders of the service in the third decade of the twenty-first century. The winning of future conflicts, coupled with the type of cultural changes described here, will serve as the ultimate proof. In the words of General Hosmer, "DAL will be successful when our officers lead by example and they don't have to think about leading. Aerospace leadership will be like breathing—it will be innate."[19] □

Notes

1. "Air Force Evaluates Professional Development of Its Total Force," *Air Force News Service*, 9 February 2000, 1.

2. Gen Michael E. Ryan, "Developing Aerospace Leaders Charter" (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, 13 October 1999).

3. Gen Michael E. Ryan, memorandum to the Air Staff, subject: Developing Aerospace Leaders Program Office, 19 January 2000.

4. Gen Michael E. Ryan, Commander's Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) 01-02, "Developing Aerospace Leaders," 22 March 2001, 2.

5. Maj Kathleen Cook, "Developing Aerospace Leaders" (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters Air Force, Public Affairs, 2001), 1.

6. For an excellent synopsis of the early years of the Air Force, see the first chapter of Herman S. Wolk's *The Struggle for Air Force Independence, 1943–1947* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1997). Carl H. Builder also provides a detailed account of the Air Force's beginnings in chaps. 4–9 of the *The Icarus Syndrome: The Role of Air Power Theory in the Evolution and Fate of the U.S. Air Force* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994). Lt Col Johnny R. Jones's *William "Billy" Mitchell's Air Power* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Airpower Research Institute; College of Aerospace Doctrine, Research and Education, 1997), is yet another contemporary presentation of early airpower history that details the thoughts of General Mitchell.

7. Builder, 66.

8. See Maj Cynthia J. Grey's "Beyond the Wild Blue Yonder: Creating an 'Air and Space' Culture in Today's Air Force," research report (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, April 1998), for a contemporary version of the same issue.

9. Builder, 9.

10. The term *occupationalism* arose from the work of Charles C. Moskos and Frank R. Wood in their book *The Military: More Than Just a Job?* (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1988), in which they raise the "institution versus occupation" dichotomy. One should not confuse *occupationalism* with *careerism*, which denotes an individual's attempts to manage his or her career with only promotions in mind—also cited by Air Force leadership as a problem in the late 1980s. For more on what careerism entails and how the Air Force's infusion of core values has alleviated this problem, see William Matthews's "Careerism Battle Is an Old One," *Air Force Times*, 24 February 1997, 16.

11. Gen Robert J. Dixon, interviewed by author, San Antonio, Texas, 23 September 2000.

12. Ryan, "Developing Aerospace Leaders Charter," 2.

13. See Lt Col John C. Scherer's "It's Time for the Basic Airpower School," research report (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air War College, 1 April 1996), for some interesting anecdotes and an extrapolation of this example.

14. Builder, xvii.

15. For specific examples, see Stephen Watkins's "Emphasizing Core Values: Fogleman Forges Onward to Change the Ethical Climate," *Air Force Times*, 6 January 1997, 14.

16. See *Preserving the Lambent Flame: Traditional Values and the USAF Officer Accession Program* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, September 1984) by Richard W. Stokes Jr. for a more detailed description of values and ethics.

17. Ryan, "Developing Aerospace Leaders Charter," 1.

18. Elaine Grossman, "Air Force Meets Skepticism on Addressing Leadership Challenges," *Inside the Pentagon*, 19 October 2000, 1.

19. Lt Gen Bradley C. Hosmer, interviewed by author, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 9 September 2000.