AMERICAN AIRPOWER AND GRAND TACTICS

Deterring conflict is the foundation of U.S. military strategy. Because of airpower many future conflicts won't start for fear of being lost. But if deterrence fails, American airpower can be the key that unlocks control of battle for our operational commanders on future battlefields. Considering the leverage of airpower, no wonder each military service has its own "air force."

I need not dwell on an obvious point: no single element of our national military power can do the job alone. There are critical roles for land, sea, and air forces in most plausible scenarios.

The spectrum of conflict ranges from all-out nuclear war to low-intensity conflict (LIC) and counterterrorism, and airpower has significance across this spectrum. But for reasons which should become clear as you read on, our discussion here focuses on what airpower can do for conflicts falling between large-scale nuclear war and LIC.

In what follows, I want to draw your attention to the scale of conflict on which Air Force tactics, exercises, and practice need to focus. The heart and soul of our profession is how to organize war -- our special variety is war in or from the air -- to achieve the national objectives of the United States.

As a Service, we may need to do that better. We tend to focus on how to carry out a given combat plan, and we are very good at it. We focus on how to spread limited resources over too many plans, and we are good at that too. However, the first obligation of military professionals to the nation is to conceive and construct the best, overall combat plans -- ones that produce victories when deterrence fails. In the world of general-purpose forces, Airmen have too often left that core responsibility to others.

By contrast, we airmen conceive and construct excellent plans at the level of flight lead, strike lead, and quick contingency action. Our tactical air schools focus at this level, we exercise at this level (since bigger is more expensive), and we tend to work on the integration of supporting forces at this level. However, the greatest payoffs for effective airpower will come through the manner in which airpower plays on a larger scale: the combat plan or grand tactics designed and used by operational commanders whose forces include land, sea, and air elements, and almost certainly the forces of allied nations.

How Do We Get There?

The arena of large scale combat is getting tougher. If we are to earn our professional stature in the future, airmen need to pay close attention to several points. Let me hit you with four key ones:

1. Today's airmen must firmly grab the lessons of the past that really count. I'll tell you some of my favorites; find the rest on your own.

2. Think about airpower from the perspective of the operational CINC. You must understand your boss's problem in order to work it.

3. Focus hard on new capabilities coming down the road. How will we integrate them for full effect? This is hard to do now and expensive to practice. Integrating and practicing will get much tougher, especially on the scale of an entire theater.

4. Our predecessors in the 1930s prepared for the awesome challenges which they had the vision to foresee, and they did it by testing ideas -- where they could -- to see what worked, and by energetic debate when actual trials were not possible.* We need to get the dialogue heated up over our ideas about tomorrow's airpower, testing the testable and subjecting the rest to hot, honest, and professional discussions.

*When an issue can't be settled by trial and error, often the best test is the opinion of other professional airmen. Of course, it can be hard work to explain and defend an idea, and it can take courage to display new ideas before peers. It may require even more to voice them to the bosses. But that should not slow down anyone reading this.

Study Lessons of the Past

In working future airpower issues, we need to understand the lessons of the past, from the early days of air combat right on through the most recent operations. Reinventing wheels is a sad waste of the intellect already devoted to airpower by the airmen who went before us. Reinventing them in a crisis will almost certainly bring disaster. The wheels are there in great and fascinating stacks, for your instruction and use. For instance, Billy Mitchell taught us to try out new ideas and be willing to go where the answer takes us. Doctrine and equipment follow. Another example: In World War II, George Kenney "left airmen gasping" with his imaginative ideas for establishing advanced air bases, and for integrating his efforts with Navy air to cut off sea movements by isolated Japanese forces.* Kenney was close enough to MacArthur that he could help mold MacArthur's campaigns to take full advantage of fresh ideas. An unexpectedly successful Pacific Campaign resulted. Finally, as we saw in Vietnam, fragmentation of airpower will inevitably reduce its value to an operational commander. Disunity of effort devalues airpower.

Other key lessons about airpower abound. Airmen who aspire to take a hand in planning the deterrence of, or victory in, future conflicts need to know them. If you want a place to start,

*Haywood S. Hansell, Jr., The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan: A Memoir (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, USAF, 1986).

try Lt General George Kenney's General Kenney Reports* and General William Momyer's Air Power in Three Wars.**

Think Big

Appropriate points of departure for discussions of airpower's role in our military future are national security policy, grand tactics, and joint operational art. National objectives are achieved, in part, by influencing the minds and actions of our opponents through national security policy. Since future military operations will occur under the shadow of large nuclear arsenals held by both the Soviets and by us, we can expect political restraint in conventional war. We must plan and apply airpower giving careful consideration to the risks of escalation.

By grand tactics I mean the conception, planning, and highly integrated execution of joint or combined military operations across wide battle zones, whether maritime, continental or a combination. To influence the enemy's mind and actions, effective grand tactics must be planned and steered by leaders with "winning" ideas. Sun Tzu's emphasis on the initiative, the significance of deception,*** and Liddell Hart's concept of the out to lunch

*George C. Kenney, General Kenney Reports (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949)

**General William W. Momyer, Air Power in Three Wars (1978)

***Sun Tzu. The Art of War, Translated by Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982)

indirect approach* are good examples of winning ideas that apply to nearly any military circumstance. Good grand tactics are tactical cunning on a very large scale -- a theater or global scale.

In my opinion, the entire military profession in recent decades has neglected grand tactics in our pursuit of victory on the battlefield. And you will recall, from an earlier paragraph, that I suggested we airmen were particularly guilty. The Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed a few years ago to turn this situation around, and it is turning -- but we have a long, long way still to go. Some early bright spots do exist; USAFE's Warrior Prep Center is an example. Another is PACAF's recent work to build a theater campaign plan keyed to the most effective use of air power.

The step by step execution of thoughtful grand tactics -- leveraged with smart uses of advanced technology, keen awareness of the Principles of War, and generous doses of good old-fashioned leadership -- is the key to victory when deterrence fails. This is what operational art is all about.

The actual direction and execution of combat tasks by an operational commander -- including visible moves by which strengths and intentions may be signalled or screened -- these

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* Liddell Hart's views about the "indirect approach" are captured by his statement, "The indirect approach is as fundamental to the realm of politics as to the realm of sex." See B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, Second Revised Edition (New York:New American Library, 1967), p. 18

move-and-countermove dynamics with the opposing commander are operational art.

Who are the actual operational commanders responsible for carrying out national security policy by developing appropriate schemes (grand tactics) and executing them (operational art)? The list is short. It includes unified commanders (CINCPAC, CINCSOUTH, CINCENT, CINCSPACE, CINCSOC), sub-unified commanders (e.g. COMUSJAPAN), Joint Task Force commanders and a couple of combined commanders, (SACEUR, CINCCFC). Important roles are included for the forces of CINCMAC as well; without theater resupply and intratheater movements of forces and equipment, the other combatants might as well have stayed at home. And CINCSAC is a heavy player too, with missions including air refueling and, possibly, the provision of bomber aircraft with conventional weapons. Also, conceivably, there could be a commander -- now undesignated -- operating at the global level if that were ever required. And the arena where these commanders vie for control of the battle is where combat airpower pays off.

If airpower is successful in unlocking control of the battle, it will be through helping the operational commander fulfill his core tasks. He has several which he must integrate into a smooth warfighting system:

- maneuver forces and firepower to threaten, control territory, and prevent access critical to the opponent.

- concentrate and produce leverage with firepower, using land, sea, and air forces
- deceive and confuse the opponent to multiply the value of assigned forces
- establish communications to hear from subordinates and to orchestrate the conflict
- develop an intelligence system to read the enemy's actions and intent
- use logistics to weight the campaign
- destroy the enemy's will and, if necessary, his capacity to fight

But what happened to close air support? Interdiction? Offensive and defensive counterair? They are the missions around which we airmen organize and apply airpower. However, they are not the way the problem is confronted by the overall -- the operational -- commander. He needs to manipulate an enemy -- to get him overextended, to trick him into defending or attacking at a great disadvantage -- using these core operational tasks above, in order to control his actions and mindset. That's the operational commander's bottom line.

Can modern airpower contribute? Of course, and massively. Airlift is another way to spell rapid-maneuver-of-critical-forces. So is close air support and interdiction, which in some circumstances can act as maneuvering forces as well as firepower. They are the most powerful operational fires available, short of nuclear weapons. And their ability to be shifted where needed -- to be directed and controlled with agility -- is unsurpassed. This is why the inherent speed, range and flexibility of airpower make it such a dominating force on the battlefield. Feints and misdirections are easily achieved in modern air operations. And aerospace's vantage point is superb for gathering timely information and for communicating.

But to bring airpower's unique capabilities to bear effectively on a conflict, our air commander must help to mold the operational commander's scheme of attack and combat plan -- to shape his operational art. The air commander must understand the joint/combined operational concepts so thoroughly that he could design and implement campaign plans as if he were the operational commander. The genius of both Kenney in the Pacific and Spaatz, first in Africa and then Europe, is that they helped their operational bosses (MacArthur, Eisenhower) alter the campaign to take advantage of what airpower could do.

In my opinion, this is the essential lesson for future airpower. The air commander must mold the theater grand tactics so that

his airpower doctrine, tactics, and equipment can put the maximum muscle into it.

Since the air commander works at this (large) scale, that's the scale our thinking, exercises, tactical doctrine, simulations, etc. should move towards. Then the air commander will know how to shape the campaign so that we can have maximum impact.

Integrate and Test New Capabilities

Just as the best theater-wide combat plan takes maximum advantage of airpower's dominating force on modern battlefields, the best air plan takes maximum advantage of the fruits of advanced technology. Our service is built on innovation, pumped by trying things out to see if they work, and how they can be improved to work better.

But constant innovation and new technological magic in the field can be tough on the air commander. He needs operational confidence in order to apply doctrine, tactics, and equipment to the basic game plan his boss and he designed together. By this, I mean that he must be reasonably certain that his equipment and plans work in the "fog and friction" of war -- bad weather, fatigue, garbled or missing messages, imperfect logistics, and poor luck.

New technology, and tactical practices to match, need to be tested, developed and practiced hands-on by users under near-realistic conditions (for example, Red Flag) in order to build

operational confidence. Without that buildup, new technology will not be used to its best effect if we go to war.

In the future, it will be both more important and harder to test, integrate, and practice with the revolutionary equipment we see on the horizon -- survivable, low observable platforms such as advanced technology bomber and advanced technology fighter; proliferated antiradiation missiles; and so forth. We should be able to find and destroy enemy airborne and high-value surface assets, and rupture the radar nets of the Soviet air defenses quickly. But practicing with the new equipment on the scale needed may be impossible. So we'll need to simulate the employment and integration of emerging capabilities, which may demand simulation and modeling beyond what we know how to handle today.

To wrap up the point: the theater air commander needs to know what works best on a large scale. Exercise and practice at that scale is hard to do now -- and it's going to be harder as new technology is fielded. Simulation and modeling may be a substitute, but we don't know how to do that yet either!

Debate: Needed

Can airpower make a big difference in deterring or winning future conflicts? Sure it can -- when we apply past airpower lessons to future military problems, use airpower to achieve the larger objectives our boss has defined, and assure that new

capabilities are tested, integrated and practiced on in the right (large) scale.

The future will be different -- perhaps radically. We won't be able to answer all the questions with tests and practice. We should fill the pages of Airpower Journal with insightful and provocative ideas about the matters outlined here, both within and beyond our ability to test by actual trial. You will agree that they are matters of life and death, dealing with central issues of national security.

When can airpower substitute for ground maneuver forces? Should unit air commanders be able to carry out mission orders, like their Army and Navy counterparts, as well as detailed frag orders? To what extent can ground forces contribute to air superiority? We must debate new issues and old ones with candor and resolve them thoughtfully to cope with our future challenges.

We are launching this periodical at an auspicious time -- on the concurrent eve of the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution and the 40th anniversary of the U.S. Air Force.

Our changing capabilities are again going to test how well we adapt. But the best we can do in the field will leave us lots to disagree about.

Have at it, airmen!