

Brig Gen Billy Mitchell's
Continuing Legacy to USAF Doctrine

by

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*The influence of air power on the ability
of one nation to impress its will on
another in armed contest will be decisive.*

--Brig Gen William "Billy" Mitchell,¹

Introduction. Brig Gen William M. (Billy) Mitchell's death on Feb 17 1936, closed a relentless crusade by a driven man. General Mitchell's crusade was to convince US political and military leadership of the absolute need to develop and better orchestrate air power. As an air power advocate, General Mitchell chose increasingly abrasive methods to gain acknowledgement, acceptance, and support from national and military leadership. These methods ultimately resulted in Mitchell's personal misfortune, but gained the nation's eventual attention for his cause. Therefore, General Mitchell's crusade was not fought in vain, although he did not live to see the vision reach any degree of maturity. Mitchell embraced emerging theories of air power of his day, married those thoughts to his own experience, providing arguments which would translate into doctrinal foundations of future generations of American air power advocates. However, Mitchell's theories of air power, were not solely intended to feed into the glacial pace of military doctrine; they were focused as leverage to convince America of the ways and means to best organize, train, equip, and employ an air force. Elements of Mitchell's theories have ultimately become enduring doctrine for today's US Air Force. The purpose of this paper is to cross-exam basic USAF doctrine, in the quest to collaborate key aspects of the doctrine to General Mitchell. The focal point of the effort will be to extrapolate Mitchell's influence in establishing the foundation in which current USAF tenets of air power and USAF core competencies reside.

Tenets of Air power. There is widespread speculation of whether air power theory proposed by Italian theorist, Giulio Douhet, was more or less plagiarized by General Mitchell.² Although originality in thought may be lacking, it was General Mitchell's grasping of air power potentials, which lead him to develop basic arguments as logic for a separate US Air Force. Mitchell provided and/or carried lessons learned abroad to establish the classical necessary foundation of airpower theory for America's future Air Force. As a result of his court martial and resignation in 1926, Mitchell left many of his theories to be subsequently developed into doctrine by the US Army Air Corps Tactical School; the key breeding ground for both future doctrine and leaders of the World War II US Army Air Forces.³ Prior to his resignation, General Mitchell synthesized various thoughts of air power of his time to establish fundamentals, which would later be defined as "tenets of air power." Mitchell used these fundamentals as fodder in his campaign to establish a separate US Air Force. Notable among his arguments was the requirement to establish unity of command of the air effort by an air minded commander, as well as centralized command/de-centralized execution.

Flexibility, synergy, persistence, and concentration of purpose for air power would only be gained through establishing an Air Force, separate from the Army or the Navy. Mitchell argued for the autonomy of the air power commander, to be given reign to employ these "tenets" to accomplish appropriate objectives, without subservience to a ground commander. He did believe in collaboration between air and surface forces, and was supportive of joint structure.⁵ Mitchell's argument of reasons why there needed to be a separate Air Force, would later become doctrinal "truths" institutionalized as USAF Tenets of Air power":

Requires Centralized Control and Decentralized Execution
Is Flexible and Versatile
Produces Synergistic Effects
Uniquely Suited to Persistent Operations
Operations Must Achieve Concentration of Purpose
Operations Must Be Balanced

USAF Tenets of Air power⁶

The Tenets of Air power are congruent to Principles of War, but require an airman's expert understanding to be applied correctly, to achieve desired end-state of the air power effort; as such, they are the accepted basis of organizing and employing elements of the US Air Force.⁷

General Mitchell learned first-hand the inherent value of the tenets of air power, by serving as the overall de-facto air commander for allied air forces in the St.-Mihel offensive in WWI. There with an allied staff, he orchestrated the air operations of 1,481 allied aircraft to meet the needs of the supported commander.⁸ Following St.-Mihel and the conclusion of the war, General Mitchell began his aggressive crusade to gain separate of command of the US Air Force, which he felt was necessary to develop both capabilities and strategies of air power. General Mitchell differed considerably from his notable contemporary Italian strategist, Giulio Douhet, by belief in balanced development and capabilities of air power. Offensive and defensive counter air *balanced* with strategic attack, with initial priority to gaining mastery of the air was necessary to exploit air power in the quest for victory.⁹

The "quest for doctrine"—Mitchell's "roles and missions" efforts following World War I. In essence, Mitchell masked his true ideas of offensive airpower behind the facade of coastal defense following the dramatic reduction of US airpower following World War I. Two factors provide illumination. First, Mitchell knew airpower needed a vital post war mission, in order to retain sufficient funding to allow continued development. Coastal defense provided that opportunity.

The close of World War I issued a significant return of the American philosophy of isolation—"avoiding foreign entanglements" as President Washington once spoke. As such, Mitchell would have known both national leadership as well as the American people wanted only to think in terms of defensive, vice offensive military strength. American leadership and its population understood the tremendous firepower naval battleships could inflict on a nation. Billy Mitchell's bombing of naval ships, culminating with the sinking of the ex German battleship, Ostfriesland on July 21, 1921 with six 2000 lb. bombs provided clear illustration of how airpower could

accomplish the coastal defense mission at a fraction of the cost of a fortified defense network.¹⁰ Weapons placed accurately within a couple hundred feet of a ship's water-line, caused a ship "thought to be relatively safe from aerial attack" to rapidly sink. Thus Mitchell's successes in establishing airpower to defend the nation from seaborne attack, helped to a small degree to keep funds (meager as they were) funneled to the post war air service. These attacks also buoyed Mitchell's belief in accurate aerial attack to destroy surface vessels as an "article of faith"--and a vital aerial capability.¹¹ Thus, Mitchell could arguably translate (from the battleship sinking demonstration), a doctrinal role for US airpower. Today's joint exercise program provides a similar venue, in order to demonstrate a technology or capability, which then evolves into a doctrinal mission.

Secondly, Mitchell, to a large degree, sought gains in both a *balanced* and *incremental* fashion. Offensive airpower for the US in the early 1920's was too radical an idea for America to grasp or effectively pursue based on threats and conditions of the time. Mitchell was too rational a man to immediately leap to martyrdom. Early on Mitchell believed the military establishment as well as national leadership would eventually understand the significance of the battleship sinking demonstration. Thus, during the battleship sinking exercise, Mitchell may have recognized the "glacial pace" at which doctrine evolves, and chose a course where the "facts" of airpower's value and capability could speak for themselves.

Core competencies. Threads of General Mitchell's relevant vision may also be discerned in today's US Air Force through four of six core competencies: **Air (and space) superiority, global attack, precision engagement, and global air mobility.** Taken together, these tenets and core competencies are enduring aspects of a turbulent era, where Billy Mitchell's vision codified historical logic, which eventually would lead to the establishment of the US Air Force. However, beyond establishing a separate service, relevancy of General Mitchell's fundamental beliefs in the employment of air power are they are woven into the very fabric of current USAF doctrine, and therefore a critical element in America's security strategy.

Air and Space Superiority. Control of air and space enhances and may even secure, freedom of action for friendly forces in all geographical environmental mediums.¹² During the initial bombing campaigns over Germany in 1943, the US Army Air Forces disregarded Mitchell's belief that air mastery was a prerequisite and an enabler to other air operations (such as unescorted bomber operations).¹³ The result was unsustainable losses of unescorted B-17s.¹⁴ Mitchell believed opposing nation's air force battling for control of the air, could make such battles decisive, because follow-on operations may not be committed without air superiority. The value of this belief was born-out in the Battle of Britain, where Germany never committed invasion forces, because they had not wrested control of the air from Britain's Royal Air Force.¹⁵ Because he felt gaining and maintaining air superiority was so vital an enabler, Mitchell argued the preponderance (60%) of aviation forces should be dedicated to the effort--in contrast, only 20% of aviation assets should be dedicated to bombing operations.¹⁶ Although the percentages of apportionment have changed, today the first priority primarily still goes to achieving air superiority. Mitchell also established the methodology in "how to provide escort" that is still used today (sweep versus close escort).¹⁷ USAF (and joint) doctrine argue air superiority is the enabler to ensure friendly forces have freedom to attack and freedom from aerial attack. As space

weapons develop so will the need to counter threats to friendly space operations by the same competency transposed on the space medium--gaining and maintaining space superiority.

Precision Engagement. Billy Mitchell's bombing of naval battleships, in 1921 was also an initial application of precision engagement--however crude by today's standards.¹⁸ Weapons placed accurately within a couple hundred feet of a ship's waterline, caused a ship "thought to be relatively safe from aerial attack" to rapidly sink.

Global Attack. This USAF core competency is concerned about being able to attack rapidly and persistently anywhere on the globe with a wide range of munitions.¹⁹ The legacy behind global attack is the USAF doctrine of strategic bombardment against enemy centers of gravity. General Mitchell was an initial proponent of strategic bombardment, and offered distinction on the scope and intent of strategic bombardment. Differing somewhat from Douhet, Mitchell argued the efforts of strategic bombardment should be primarily focused on the enemy's war-making infrastructure, vice a civilian terror weapon--which should only be targeted as reprisal, to deter the enemy from attacking friendly civilian objectives.²⁰ Mitchell fervently believed the successful defeat of the enemy's industrial war-making capability through bombardment could eliminate forever the static force on force warfare of World War I--greatly reducing cost and effort to break the will of the enemy.²¹ However, it is important to note again his balance of strategy--while arguing for attacking an enemy's war-making centers of gravity, he still believed situations may require attacking the enemy's fielded forces.²²

Global Air Mobility. Air mobility is an article of air power. General Mitchell believed in the importance of civil aviation, as a peacetime base for wartime needs.²³ Today a significant portion of USAF global air mobility is provided by civil aviation--through the Civil Reserve Aviation Fleet (CRAF). Again, a Mitchell belief has been institutionalized as both air mobility doctrine and capability. In any significant conflict, the US is virtually required to call on its CRAF partners to achieve the required lift capability.

Summary. Brig Gen Mitchell eventually chose an abrasive path to "wake up" national leadership, the military establishment, and the American people of the need to commit resources to developing and sustaining airpower. Mitchell's legacy and influence was instrumental in sustaining America's air development between the two world wars. I believe the cause of air force establishment was well served by Mitchell. However, largely because of his abrasive nature it became too easy for Mitchell's opposition to discount the validity of his views for airpower's future utility and subsequently take his thoughts and ideas out-of-context. In this light, greatly understand Mitchell's over-riding belief to awaken the nation of the vital need to develop airpower—but his outspoken nature and approach could not adequately separate personal views from his duty of public service.

Thus, General Billy Mitchell is not a saint, there are many examples where he erred in judgement, plus several illustrations of ideas were completely off base (such as faith in the dirigible). However, as articulated in the preceding paragraphs General Mitchell can clearly be regarded the first US principle proponent of air power. It now should be readily apparent to readers where General Mitchell's legacy arguments have been institutionalized in current USAF doctrine and core competencies. The relevancy of his arguments are very evident today, by the

manner and methods by which we organize, equip and employ USAF air power to achieve appropriate national military objectives.

Endnotes

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2. Paret, Peter, *Makers of Modern Strategy, Military Thought from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986, page 631.
3. Paret, page 633.
4. Winton, page 35-36.
5. Earle, Edward Meade, *Makers of Modern Strategy, Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943, page 498.
6. Department of The Air Force, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, Air Force Doctrine Document 1*, Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Force Doctrine Center, 1997, page 22.
7. Air Force Doctrine Document 1, page 22.
8. Hurley, Alfred, USAF, *Billy Mitchell, Crusader for Air Power*, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1964, page 35.
9. Paret, page 631.
10. Hurley, page 67.
11. Earle, page 499.
12. Air Force Doctrine Document 1, page 29.
13. Hurley, page 63.
14. Air Force Doctrine Document 1, page 29.
15. Wilbanks, Dr. "A531 Advanced Operational Warfighting—The Battle of Britain," Notes taken during class on Battle of Britain, Ft Leavenworth KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, January 11, 1999.
16. Hurley, page 63.
17. Hurley, page 83.

18. Hurley, page 67.
19. Air Force Doctrine Document 1, page 32.
20. Hurley, page 80.
21. Hurley, page 92 and 112.
22. Earle, page 498.
23. Hurley, page 76.

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