The Cultural Identity
of the United States Air Force

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Abstract

The Air Force has its own cultural identity, distinct from that of the other services. The service has a tendency toward occupationalism, due largely to a culture shaped by its history and its emphasis on technology over theory. As a result the Air Force relies heavily on a common understanding of the service's mission to promote cohesion among airmen. Failure to adapt the common underlying assumptions about the Air Force's mission in the face of a significant shift in national security requirements can have serious implications, particularly in terms of operational effectiveness, recruiting and retention, and organizing, training, and equipping the service. Understanding the basis for the Air Force's identity will help airmen understand the need for adaptation in response to changes in the national security environment.

Every organization has a culture, a unique identity based on underlying values and beliefs that directly affects how the organization functions. A military service's cultural identity affects such things as its operational effectiveness, its ability to recruit and retain members, and its organization, training, and acquisitions. It is common to talk about "military culture" being distinct from "civilian culture," but the reality is that each service has its own distinct identity. As with any other bureaucracy, a service's culture is based upon such things as its history and the types of operations it conducts. The Air Force has a very different culture from that of the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, so it understandably faces different challenges and have different requirements, particularly when it faces significant changes in the national security environment. Airmen who understand the basis for the Air Force's culture will be much more effective in preparing their forces and leading them in a conflict.

What is it that makes the Air Force unique? Its identity is based largely on its organizational and conceptual history and the primacy of technology over warfighting theory. These lead to a culture in which small, often technology-based, subcultures flourish, a condition that requires a common, service-wide understanding of the Air Force mission to hold things together. There are significant implications if airmen should lose that common vision, which some researchers claim has been the case since the end of the Cold War.

The Air Force's Unique Identity

Each of the military services is organized as a bureaucracy. The growth of the military after World War II sharply increased its bureaucratization. Military sociologist Morris Janowitz wrote

A great deal of the military establishment resembles a civilian bureaucracy as it deals with problems of research, development, supply, and logistics. Even in those areas of the military establishment that are dedicated primarily to combat or to the maintenance of combat readiness, a central concern of top commanders is not the enforcement of rigid discipline but rather the maintenance of high levels of initiative and morale.[1]

Samuel Huntington further described the military profession as being characterized to a large extent by its corporate culture of bureaucracy, associations, schools, and customs.[2] Military organizations are designed to be rational systems. They are assigned a mission and are expected to meet it with minimal cost. They share many of these traits with other public bureaucracies.

Despite these common attributes, the military services are different from other bureaucratic organizations, and indeed, have individual identities that are distinct from each other. While it is important to understand how they are affected by common bureaucratic factors, it is equally important to recognize how the unique nature of a particular service affects its capabilities. The Air Force's history and its reliance upon technology help to define the service.

The Importance of History

History plays a significant role in shaping an organization. An agency's formative experience is important, particularly its original purpose, which provides not only a mission but also an initial set of rules and norms. The personality of original leaders has a strong effect, as founders may be given a free hand to shape the organization in their own style and recruit individuals who will perpetuate the same values.[3] Another significant influence is an agency's history of operations, which suggests effective strategies and discourages concepts that have previously failed. An organization's unique identity is based largely on its corporate memory.

Of the American military services, the Air Force has the most limited historical basis for its identity. The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps each trace their organization's history back to the Revolutionary War, and their conceptual history extends centuries into the past.[4] Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, for instance, was written in 500 B.C., and remains on these services' recommended reading lists, as does Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, which he finished at the beginning of the 4th century, B.C.[5] The Air Force, on the other hand, can trace its conceptual history only to the beginning of the 20th century, when aircraft were invented, and its identity as a separate service only to 1947. Consider that the oldest book on the Air Force's current professional reading list was written in 1990, and most of the books do not specifically address airpower.[6] The idea of airpower simply is not as old, or as developed, as land and naval warfare.

The Air Force has fewer operational experiences upon which to draw, so its creation as a separate service in 1947 remains a particularly defining moment. The manner in which the Air Force was created sets it apart from the other services; while the others were

created when the nation was born, the Air Force started as branch of the Army, and airmen waged political battles for its independence. The method of its creation set the tone for many of the service's underlying values and beliefs.

The Air Force was created for a specific purpose: the exploitation of a technology that had come of age—the manned combat aircraft—as a means of delivering atomic weapons.[7] This purpose reflected the demands of the Cold War and resulted in the Air Force assuming the leading role in national security in the years immediately following World War II.[8] The creation of a separate Air Force reflected the importance of the independent nature of airpower and the primacy of manned bombers in pursuit of nuclear deterrence.

A unique Air Force identity evolved over time as airpower became better understood, doctrine was developed, and new traditions were started. That identity, however, has always been grounded in the debatable presumption that the Air Force should be separate from the Army. Though it has been a separate service for over 50 years, James Smith wrote that "the Air Force still remembers its struggle with the Army for independence, and it is sensitive to challenges to that independence or to its attachment to the ground combat mission."[9] Its modern identity relies heavily on the original views of its founders.

The sharp differences between air warfare and land warfare that led to the need for a separate service have prevented the Air Force from simply adopting the Army's organizational history as its own. Indeed, as part of its desire for independence the Air Force has abandoned much of its Army heritage and often finds itself in conflict with the Army over operational doctrine and command and control issues. Initial Air Force values were based on the belief that independent operations conducted by strategic bombers were the key to winning World War II, leading to a perspective that was very different from that of the Army or Navy.[10] The emphasis on independence and technology continue to have a significant impact on the Air Force.

The Role of Technology

Unlike the other services the Air Force is premised on a particular technology rather than upon a theory of warfighting. Much of the Army's and Marine Corps' cultures are based on theories of land warfare that have developed over thousands of years, and the Navy's culture draws heavily upon naval theory. Carl Builder suggested, however, that while many of the Air Force's original values were derived from airpower theory, the Air Force abandoned theory in favor of a focus on technology soon after its inception as a separate service. This occurred in part because the appeal of the Air Force was in what the airplane promised to avoid—nuclear war—rather than in what airpower theory promised to deliver.[11]

Success for the other military services generally meant defeating an enemy in battle, but the standard of success for the Air Force was very different. With the advent of nuclear weapons, the consequences of war were so horrible that political leaders did all they could to avoid their use. Even before the Soviets developed a nuclear capability of their

own, American leaders recognized that nuclear weapons could not be used as a means of furthering policy in the way that conventional weapons might.[12] This led to an emphasis on deterrence through the development of superior technology rather than on using that technology on the field of battle.[13] For the Air Force, the service that would be called upon to use these weapons, success was not determined by having better tactics and strategies than an enemy, but instead by having more and better technology that ensured an enemy would avoid a war.

Technology ultimately shaped the modern nature of the Air Force. Some of the Air Force's initial values were adopted from early airpower theorists who addressed the manner in which air warfare could be used to meet a variety of needs.[14] Airpower theory was largely abandoned in the 1950s, however, leading to an organization based instead on the mission of nuclear deterrence and the primacy of the airplane. The Air Force's elite corps—combat pilots—were continuously promoted to positions of leadership from which they could perpetuate these basic assumptions, and the Strategic Air Command, which controlled the service's nuclear weapons systems, initially provided the members of this elite corps.[15] The identification with the mission of nuclear deterrence and the values derived from early experiences provided a common set of beliefs and assumptions for airmen regarding the role of the Air Force.

The Effect of the Air Force's Identity on Cohesion in the Service

It is interesting to note that even with these common assumptions there are typically a number of subcultures within an organization that may conflict with each other.[16] Richard Scott found that informal structures, such as subcultures, tend to arise and may disrupt the intended effects of formal structures.[17] Other authors have determined that, without oversight, individuals who pursue their subculture's interests can thwart the efforts of the organization's leadership.[18] This suggests that the Air Force may experience difficulties in achieving goals because members of subcultures do not remain focused on the overall goals of the organization, emphasizing instead the advancement of their specialty or of themselves. An organization that is full of subcultures needs a common goal to keep everyone focused in the same direction.

Charles Moskos' model of institutional and occupational attitudes in the military suggests that a weak understanding of the service's mission leads to attitudes that threaten cohesion among subcultures and increases the focus on technical specialties and personal promotion. Moskos' concept of *institutional* attitudes is based on the idea that members of an organization who are bound by a sense of shared values perceive that their identity is defined by their membership in the organization.[19] Other authors suggest that when there is uncertainty regarding organizational values and beliefs, members will look to people outside the organization who exhibit qualities similar to their own, leading to Moskos' concept of *occupationalism*.[20] Military members with institutional attitudes focus on their role in the organization, while those with occupational perspectives emphasize market factors, such as levels of pay relative to civilians in the same specialty, rather than focusing on a bond they share with other members of the military.

Occupational attitudes can contribute to the growth of clearly defined subcultures in military services that may share more in common with their civilian counterparts than with others in the same uniform. Unclear norms and beliefs reinforce occupationalist tendencies, while a common understanding of basic assumptions restrains them.[21] These tendencies, if left unchecked, can lead to a lack of cohesion in an organization such that members are more focused on the activities of their subcultures or on individual needs than on the demands placed on their service.

The Air Force's emphasis on technology leaves it especially vulnerable to occupationalism. Moskos and Frank Wood suggested that the more technical the service, the easier it is for technical specialists to relate better to their civilian counterparts than to their fellow military members in different specialties.[22] While infantrymen, artillery forces, submarine crew members, and others in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps may have no civilian equivalent, the Air Force's technical specialists see many others in the civilian world who perform comparable functions. Wood wrote further that

> Because of their extensive use of technology, the Air Force and the Air Force officer corps tend to be most susceptible to increasing specialization and a diffused sense of purpose.[23]

Technical specialists in the Air Force have a tendency to focus on values and beliefs associated with their particular specialty, rather than on those of the Air Force as a whole. The highly technical and occupational nature of the Air Force has given rise to a large number of subcultures, a condition that has significant consequences.

Subcultures in the Air Force are well defined and are not inclined to mesh well with each other, as demonstrated in Figure 1. These subcultures are identified not only by functional specialization but also by the specific way that technical skill is employed. As a result, rather than simply differentiating between such broad categories as pilots and computer programmers, there are even sharper divisions between different types of pilots, different types of computer specialists, and so forth. There exists an inherent tendency toward loose coupling between the activities of the subcultures and the formal structure of the Air Force. Smith found that this trend continued, and perhaps increased, in the 1990s, as sharper differences arose among the subcultures.[24]
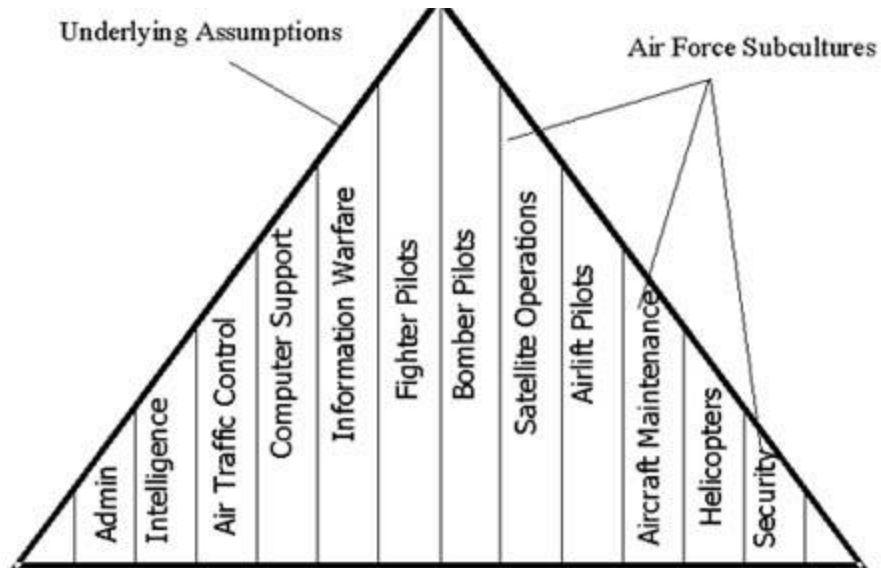
Figure 1
The Binding Effect of Common Assumptions in the Air Force

Cohesion among airmen requires a common sense of purpose and beliefs that bind subcultures together, and a loss of that cohesion leads to a wider gap between the different subcultures, as suggested in Figure 2.[25] Cohesion is further reduced in times of budget cuts, when subcultures "circle the wagons" and the divisions between them become even sharper.[26] Basic assumptions regarding the mission bind together the fractious subcultures so that they can work together toward the Air Force's objectives. The greater the ambiguity about a military force's mission, the lower its degree of preparedness, so it is better to maintain an Air Force in which the members have a clear understanding of the mission.[27] A common set of assumptions does not ensure harmony between the subcultures, but it does provide a common goal for which they can strive.
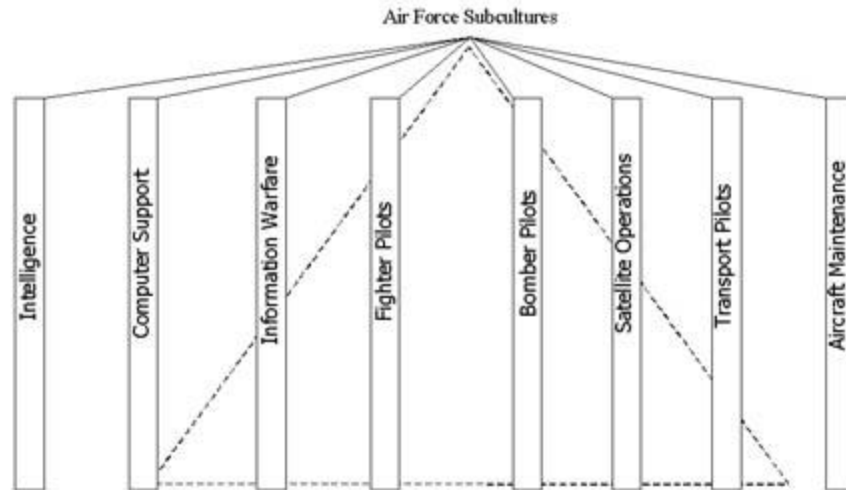
Figure 2
Disruption Resulting From a Lack of Common Assumptions

When the national security environment undergoes a significant shift, the Air Force must change its underlying beliefs and assumptions to meet its new requirements. If airmen do not understand the new mission they are required to assume, but instead develop conflicting ideas regarding their mission, they will lose the common values that bind the subcultures together. Occupationalist tendencies will overcome institutional attitudes when disagreement exists as to what the institution stands for. This can have immediate effects on combat effectiveness as well as long-term effects on retention and preparedness.

What is the Effect of a Lack of Cohesion?

Air Force leaders should recognize that some problems they face after a major change in the security environment may be caused in part by a lack of understanding of the Air Force's role. For example, the Air Force's retention problems in the 1990s are often attributed to improved economic conditions in the civilian sector that encouraged airmen to leave the service for comparable jobs. Economic data from the 1990s, however, show that the gap between military and civilian pay remained fairly stable—and even decreased for junior enlisted members—suggesting there was no additional economic incentive to leave the military during the post-Cold War period even as retention was declining.[28] It may instead be the case that retention problems were the result of diminishing incentives to remain in the service. Improvements in the economy are the easy culprit for retention concerns, but other issues, including diminishing cohesion, should be considered.

This consideration could affect the solutions to such problems. The best answer to the retention problem might not be financial incentives—which would weaken the reason for leaving the service—but instead might be a reinforcement of a shared Air Force mission, which would strengthen the primary reason for staying in. Many problems in military

effectiveness might be addressed by recognizing the role that a lack of understanding of the Air Force's mission may play.

Operational Effectiveness

Researchers have suggested that national security organizations can be effective only when their members are motivated by a feeling that what they do promotes the national interest.[29] General Michael Dugan, former Air Force Chief of Staff, suggests that airmen are motivated to focus the subcultures on a common goal by "participating in something bigger than oneself."[30] Other Air Force leaders also recognize the importance of a sense of mission to operational effectiveness. Former Secretary of the Air Force Sheila Widnall notes that airmen's morale is affected by how their work "contributes to national goals in a visible way."[31] Allowing airmen to focus on a commonly understood mission is critical to getting the most out of the Air Force's capabilities.

One of the most important tenets of airpower is that its strength is enhanced by synergy between various types of forces, as "the proper application of a coordinated force can produce effects that exceed the contributions of forces employed individually."[32] A common understanding of the Air Force's mission allows the different elements of the service to focus their efforts on preparing for and achieving the same goals. Failure to have a common understanding can lead to each subculture focusing on what it does best, rather than on what is required of it in a given situation. Division between subcultures sharply reduces the capabilities of the Air Force.

Flexibility and decentralized execution are other important capabilities that make airpower such an important tool. Cohesion encourages trust between members of an organization, enabling members to work together better and increasing the flow of information. For the Air Force, greater trust allows for less oversight and a leaner command and control structure. These enable airpower to be a highly responsive tool that can quickly address emerging targets and opportunities. This is essential if air forces are to maintain escalation dominance and effectively threaten an adversary's strategy. That responsiveness, however, is diminished when greater oversight and additional layers of command impede the flow of information. Reduced cohesion leads to a more hierarchical command structure and centralized execution of missions, limiting the advantages of airpower.[33]

Efficiency will diminish and resources will be wasted on non-value adding tasks when cohesion disappears. One of the key economic advantages of cohesion is that it reduces "transaction costs" by allowing organization members to make decisions more quickly based on accepted norms and by encouraging the development of trust, which reduces the need for oversight. For the Air Force, this oversight takes the form of detailed Air Force Instructions, large headquarters staffs, inspection teams, and robust command and control facilities. While each of these has some utility, there is a point beyond which each adds little to mission success, and simply absorbs resources. Operations could be accomplished just as effectively at lower cost if airmen knew and embraced common norms for performance. This would allow for smaller planning staffs, fewer regulations

that inhibit innovation, and a reduction in resources devoted to inspections. As cohesion is reduced, however, the need for these institutions rises, leading to resources being spent on oversight rather than on mission accomplishment.

Recruiting and Retention

The identification of oneself as "an airman" is one of the associational aspects that define service in the Air Force as a profession, not merely a job. A lack of common norms of behavior and shared values diminishes the strength of this identity and will reduce the commitment of airmen to the Air Force as a profession, leaving them more likely to be lured away by other jobs that offer better pay, location, or working conditions.

Lawrence Korb points out that the Air Force typically has the least recruiting problems but the worst retention problems. These difficulties are exacerbated by a lack of consensus regarding the mission and values. Korb points out that newer Air Force members are likely to leave if they see the organization's beliefs and structures conflicting with their perceptions of the national security environment.[34] This has not only an immediate impact on readiness but also a long-term effect of limiting the adaptation of underlying assumptions about the Air Force's mission, as the airmen who stay in and rise to senior leadership positions will be those who accept and advocate the out-of-date beliefs.

Retention difficulties lead to a high degree of turnover, resulting in experienced personnel leaving the service. This reduces unit effectiveness as qualified personnel are replaced by inexperienced airmen. The high turnover also increases the amount of resources devoted to recruiting and training as new airmen must be trained to replace those who left before them. As the gap widens between operational requirements and out-of-date assumptions, the service's ability to retain airmen for a career will be reduced, leading to high turnover costs and a loss of corporate knowledge in the future. These problems will have a long-term impact on Air Force readiness for modern operations.

Organizing, Training, and Equipping the Air Force

Air Force officials note that, once an operation begins, airmen will typically break down the barriers of subcultures and work together toward the common goal now in front of them.[35] The problem lies not so much in their ability to work together once a mission starts, but rather in the capabilities they develop beforehand. The Air Force is responsible for organizing, training, and equipping forces for operations, and the lack of understanding of real-world demands can lead to inappropriate or ineffective preparation. General Dugan makes the point that the Air Force interprets the national security strategy and organizes, trains, and equips its forces based on that.[36] Having a common understanding of the mission is the first step toward effectively preparing Air Force personnel to meet current and future needs.

The Air Force's structure is based on its mission. During the Cold War, for example, SAC had the forces and bases necessary to carry out the mission of deterrence, and other

commands were structured to support that mission. Clearly, an understanding of the demands of the environment plays a critical role in developing the most effective organizational structure for Air Force operations. When common assumptions disagree with real-world requirements, forces may be organized for a mission defined by outdated beliefs and then used in operations with entirely different requirements.

A lack of recognition and acknowledgment of the Air Force's mission and its requirements also inhibits the ability to adequately train forces. Without a common objective, training tends to be oriented toward specific functions, often based on the subcultures, without an appreciation for how those functions interact with others.[37] Training requirements, including such things as mission essential task lists, performance standards, and continuing education programs, should address the requirements that airmen will have to meet when conducting operations. Failure to understand the mission leads to failure to prepare for the mission.

During its formative years it became obvious that the Air Force would pursue and procure only those weapon systems that it felt contributed to its core missions.[38] Understanding the mission of the Air Force and the requirements for accomplishing it is therefore the first step toward acquiring the proper equipment. Only when the service recognizes the demands it will face can it procure the right types, and adequate numbers, of systems. A lack of a common focus can lead the Air Force to purchase systems more appropriate to an earlier environment than to the current one. Subculture interests can dominate service interests, resulting in an imbalance between the systems needed and the systems available.

Conclusion

Though it seems easy to simply put the Air Force into the category of "the military," the reality is that the Air Force has a very different culture from its sister services. The nature of its history and the importance of technology over warfighting theory have created a culture in which well-defined, and often competing, subcultures have flourished. The nature of the Air Force being what it is, members of these subcultures often have a tendency to identify more with their civilian counterparts than with their colleagues in uniform. Keeping all of these subcultures working together requires a common understanding of the Air Force's mission.

If that common understanding is lost the negative effect on the Air Force can be severe. Operational effectiveness diminishes as the focus of these subcultures shifts from an Air Force-wide mission to their own particular function. This limits the coercive impact of airpower as synergy and flexibility are reduced while the amount of resources committed to meet bureaucratic requirements increases. The long-term impact is felt as retention becomes more challenging and the organization, training, and equipping of airmen does not match the needs of a dynamic battlespace.

It is imperative that airmen understand the nature of the Air Force's identity and the impact it can have. This helps them better anticipate problems with personnel and with

operations, allowing them to work through these issues before they lead to adverse effects. Recognizing the importance of keeping forces focused on a common goal will enhance the Air Force's coercive capabilities today and into the future.

Notes

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24. Smith, 18.

25. Builder, 188.

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