



Global Vigilance, Global Reach, Global Power for America

The World's Greatest Air Force—Powered by Airmen,
Fueled by Innovation

Gen Mark A. Welsh III, USAF



The Air Force has been certainly among the most adaptable parts of our national military instrument of power. Every Service has made some adaptations, but I would suggest [that the Air Force's] seems to me, in my experience, to be most prominent, most visible, most important.

—Gen Martin Dempsey, USA
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

The Enduring Importance of Airpower

This past year, the United States Air Force released a vision statement that focuses on “Airmen, Mission, and Innovation.”¹ It recognizes Airmen as the power behind the Air Force and acknowledges the importance of innovation to our story. I encourage Airmen to understand and explain their role in producing airpower for America by telling the Air Force story through their own unique perspective. Building upon our vision, this article defines the Air Force’s five enduring core missions: air and space superiority; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); rapid global mobility; global strike; and command and control.

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Early airpower advocates, such as Brig Gen William “Billy” Mitchell, understood that “the future of our nation is indissolubly bound up in the development of air power.”² By integrating airpower capabilities within and across air, space, and cyberspace, Airmen bring to life the Air Force’s core missions. Today, Airmen utilize emerging technologies in air, space, and cyberspace. We are the only service that brings them together in ways that permit our sister services the freedom to maneuver without fear of attack by enemy air forces. America has only one force specifically designed and precisely employed to exploit the unique global advantages realized from operating in air, space, and cyberspace.

The Power of Airmen

The service’s unmatched capabilities exist because of the imagination, innovation, and dedication of its people. Airmen have historically pioneered new ways to shape the fight and reinvent the battle itself. Whereas pre-Kitty Hawk warriors relied on breaking through fortified lines, Airmen have always sought to go over, not through, fortifications to defeat our enemies and achieve the nation’s objectives.

Air Force Core Missions

Airmen bring to the nation’s military portfolio five interdependent and integrated core missions that President Truman originally assigned as airpower roles and missions to the Air Force in 1947. Today, we call these our core missions: (1) air and space superiority; (2) ISR; (3) rapid global mobility; (4) global strike; and (5) command and control. Each of these is, in its own right, vitally important; however, no single core mission functions independently. Airpower is maximized when Airmen leverage its unique characteristics—speed, range, flexibility, precision, lethality, and persistence. The Air Force is effective because its interdependent operations are synchronized to provide an



unparalleled array of options, giving America the ability to respond quickly anywhere in the world.

Air and Space Superiority: Freedom from Attack and Freedom to Attack

From the Pacific island-hopping campaign of World War II to operations today, air superiority has been and remains an essential precondition to successful military operations. It includes the ability to control the air so our military forces do not have to worry about being attacked from the air, while also ensuring that the joint force has the freedom to attack in the air, on the ground, and at sea. The Air Force has given our joint partners ample reason not to worry—not since 15 April 1953 has an enemy combat aircraft killed a service member in the American ground forces. Without air superiority, our military would have to radically change the way it fights, at the price of lives lost.

America's freedom to operate effectively across the spectrum of conflict also rests on its exploitation of space. As the nation's space force, the Air Force provides critical capabilities that enhance the military's capacity to navigate accurately, observe clearly, communicate securely, and strike precisely. The ability to access and exploit space, even when others try to deny us, remains vital.

Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance: Eyes and Ears on Adversaries

The Air Force has embraced globally integrated ISR as one of its feature calling cards. ISR is the foundation upon which every joint, inter-agency, and coalition operation achieves success. Our ISR Airmen identify and assess adversary targets and tactics with greater accuracy and speed than ever seen in the history of warfare. In 2012 alone, Airmen enabled the removal of 700 enemy combatants from the fight and identified over 100 weapons caches and explosive devices that would have otherwise targeted American and partner forces. Air Force ISR is about helping leaders make informed decisions to maintain deter-



rence, contain crises, or achieve success in battle. It allows policy makers to minimize uncertainty about our adversaries and their capabilities by providing knowledge that gives commanders a decision-making advantage. Globally integrated ISR permits American forces to carry out functions that they previously performed with much greater risk of danger and at higher cost. In the past decade, Air Force ISR has operated primarily in permissive environments, but tomorrow's fight may involve the most advanced air defense systems. In contested future environments, gaining and maintaining an ISR advantage will become increasingly difficult, and the Air Force will have to adapt its ISR capabilities for these operations.

Rapid Global Mobility: Delivery and Recovery on Demand

American power can be projected quickly anywhere on the earth as a result of the Air Force's ability to fly air refueling tankers and cargo planes globally on short notice. It provides swift deployment, in-flight refueling, and the means of sustaining operations from major combat to humanitarian relief. Rapid global mobility is woven into our history from the Berlin airlift to today—an Air Force transport departs on a mission every two minutes, every day of the year. Rapid global mobility is vitally important to every Soldier, Sailor, Marine, Airman, and Coast Guardsman because of our ability to evacuate wounded troops from the battlefield to emergency rear-area field hospitals. In one case, the Aeromedical Evacuation System flew a wounded Marine from a remote region of Afghanistan directly to Andrews AFB, Maryland. All told, he arrived at Bethesda Naval Hospital less than 21 hours after he was wounded. Today, the Air Force is flying patients across the globe—patients so critically wounded that most US hospitals would not consider moving them out of their intensive care units. Airmen continue to strengthen the efforts of our own government and international partners with the unique capability to get to the fight quickly, remain in the fight, and return home safely.



Global Strike: Any Target, Any Time

Global strike means that the nation can project military power more rapidly, more flexibly, and with a lighter footprint than other military options. The Air Force's nuclear and conventional precision-strike forces can credibly threaten and effectively conduct global strike by holding any target on the planet at risk and, if necessary, disabling or destroying it. Whether from forward bases or enabled by in-flight refueling, global strike derives from a wide range of systems that include bombers, missiles, special operations platforms, fighters, and other Air Force aircraft. This capability, unmatched by any other nation or service, will grow in importance as America rebalances its force structure and faces potential adversaries who are modernizing their militaries. The Air Force will focus future efforts on updating global strike assets to ensure that American forces are prepared to act when, where, and how they are needed.

Command and Control: Flexibility and Resiliency

Airmen execute the Air Force's other four interdependent and enduring core missions enabled by robust, adaptable, and survivable command and control systems. The Air Force provides access to reliable communications and information networks so that the joint team can operate globally. The delivery of airpower is intimately dependent upon operating effectively in cyberspace, which can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of air and space operations and help integrate capabilities across all domains. Adversaries are also making advances by linking their own combat capabilities electronically, creating military challenges that our forces must be prepared to address. The Air Force will field advanced command and control systems that are reliable, resilient, and interoperable, while recruiting and training innovative Airmen to operate them.



Airmen + Core Missions = Global Vigilance, Global Reach, Global Power

Each Airman, regardless of his or her specialty, contributes by providing—*Global Vigilance, Global Reach, and Global Power*. There are many examples of innovative Airmen bringing our five core missions together. During Operation Allied Force, two B-2 stealth bombers departed Whiteman AFB, Missouri, and attacked targets in Serbia, each dropping 16 satellite-aided precision bombs and paving the way for the rest of the initial aerial attack force. In 2011 the Air Force answered the call to help enforce a United Nations–sanctioned “no-fly zone” over Libya. In early 2013, F-22s, B-52s, and B-2s flew training sorties to South Korea to signal America’s resolve and ability to deliver weapons globally. For the last two decades, the Air Force has provided close air support, airlift, and ISR in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

America’s Asymmetric Advantage

The Air Force’s culture of “over, not through” gives our nation an incomparable capacity to act either independently or in full collaboration with our joint, interagency, and coalition partners. The Air Force’s core missions will continue to serve America’s long-term security interests by giving our nation and its leadership unmatched options to confront future challenges. Defending the nation’s interests during the last 20 years has dramatically increased the level of adaptability, creativity, and coordination between and among our sister services, interagency partners, and allies. Through it all, Air Force airpower has repeatedly deterred conflict, controlled escalation, and, when tasked by the nation’s leadership, destroyed an adversary’s military. Investments in Air Force readiness and future capabilities are essential if the United States is to maintain an agile, flexible, and ready force. Every Airman—and every citizen—should take pride in the fact that the United States Air Force will always provide *Global Vigilance, Global Reach, and Global Power* for America. ★



Notes

1. *The World's Greatest Air Force, Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation: A Vision for the United States Air Force* (Washington, DC: Headquarters US Air Force, 10 January 2013), <http://co.ng.mil/News/PublishingImages/13-01-10-USAF-Vision.pdf>.

2. William Mitchell, *Winged Defense: The Development and Possibilities of Modern Air Power—Economic and Military* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009), ix.



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General Welsh (USAFA; MS, Webster University) is chief of staff of the US Air Force, Washington, DC. As chief, he serves as the senior uniformed Air Force officer responsible for the organization, training, and equipping of 690,000 active duty, Guard, Reserve, and civilian forces serving in the United States and overseas. As a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the general and other service chiefs function as military advisers to the secretary of defense, National Security Council, and president. General Welsh is a graduate of Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, Army Command and General Staff College, Air War College, and National War College.

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