

America's Air Force

Strong, Indispensable, and Ready for the Twenty-First Century

After examining every aspect of the American effort in World War II, President Harry S. Truman and his military leadership team were convinced that the nation needed an independent military service to operate exclusively in the air domain. The legendary exploits of the US Army Air Forces in World War II demonstrated that airpower, through gaining and sustaining air superiority and providing close air support to ground forces, was a *sine qua non* for success in major land operations. Moreover, the Army Air Forces' achievements established that air forces, through providing airlift, reconnaissance-based intelligence, and strategic bombing, could create important effects that were largely independent of tactical support and, in fact, could affect all levels of conflict, oftentimes simultaneously. These Army Air Forces contributions that were so valuable to the Allied victory are the very ones that today, seven decades after the end of World War II, still provide a shared identity and sense of purpose for Airmen, and make the US Air Force critical to the national defense.

Raison d'être—Then, Now, and Tomorrow

As it was then, the ability of airpower today to produce significant operational outcomes requires its comprehensive and integrated employment. The US Air Force is able to employ airpower in this fashion—to strategic effect—because Airmen comprehend and appreciate airpower's rapidity, global range, versatility to conduct a variety of missions, and flexibility to produce outcomes at multiple levels.¹ Over the past 65 years, Airmen have refined their understanding of these attributes and therefore of their role as the nation's principal airpower provider.

Today, only the US Air Force leverages globally scaled yet regionally tailorable air, space, and cyber capabilities specifically to affect outcomes that are distinct from only the effective tactical support of surface forces. To be sure, Army aviation continues to support ground maneuvers, Navy aviation remains critical to the security of our maritime fleets on the open seas and in littoral operations, and Marine aviation continues to be

integral to expeditionary amphibious and Marine air-ground task force operations in support of littoral campaigns. And most certainly, Air Force airpower remains ever dependable in providing tactical support whenever and wherever it is needed.

But strategically oriented airpower—that which provides *Global Vigilance*, *Global Reach*, and *Global Power* with unrivaled speed, versatility, and flexibility—is nearly exclusive to the US Air Force, and will remain in decidedly high demand, as the latest defense strategic guidance predicts in enumerating the 10 primary mission areas of the US armed forces.² Many of these areas emphasize Air Force capabilities—for example: deterring and defeating aggression, projecting power in anti-access and area denial environments, conducting space and cyber operations, and maintaining the preponderance of our nation’s nuclear deterrent.

To fulfill these airpower-intensive mission areas, and to ensure requisite access to increasingly contested air and space domains, the nation will continue to need an air force—the US Air Force—that, in addition to ensuring continued timely, precise, and reliable support to its surface force teammates, is singularly dedicated to fulfilling the nation’s full-spectrum airpower needs. Steeped in a mindset that views the battlespace in all three dimensions, Airmen are conceptually unbounded by topographical features. The Air Force will continue to leverage the inherent characteristics of the entire expanse above the earth’s surface in order to provide the full spectrum of airborne capabilities, from close air support to air mobility to global strike.

It is with this perspective that Airmen instinctively unfurl the entire map of the battlespace, to gain greater situational awareness over a broader expanse of distance and time. To every Airman, emphasizing approaches that traverse “over” or “around” rather than “through” is the prevailing *modus operandi*. The Air Force is a service that operates with a holistic view of air and space, providing harmonized, seamless capabilities across the full spectrum of operations, even as surface activities necessarily transition between *terra firma* and the maritime.

However, to the casual observer, it would appear that the Air Force has been less involved, or possibly less relevant, in the nation’s post-9/11 pursuit of its adversaries. Perhaps this is understandable, given the ground-centric nature of the conflict and the sterling professionalism and performance of our supremely skilled Army, Marine Corps, and special

operations teammates during sustained operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, as we demonstrate below, this is not the complete story.

Still others have come to believe, mistakenly, that the adaptations that the Air Force prudently made during the past decade—adjustments that were necessary given the wartime challenges that we faced—have distracted Airmen from their enduring and core contributions.³ Quite the contrary, we Airmen in fact have focused on our enduring airpower contributions, even as we tended to a few noteworthy but nontraditional assignments, such as convoy and base security, and Provincial Reconstruction Team command opportunities. Other than addressing these and a few other exigencies, we Airmen have concentrated on what a first-rate independent air force is expected to provide for the nation that it serves. In the case of the US Air Force, it is those enduring contributions—control of the air and space domains; global intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); rapid global mobility; and global strike—that Airmen have provided proudly and reliably since the establishment of the nation's independent air service.

In so doing, the Air Force not only has demonstrated its efficacy. It also has made the case that support roles and independent roles are not mutually exclusive, but rather reciprocally supportive. This is true particularly in modern warfare, which is becoming ever more interdependent across the various domains. For example, prior to Operation Desert Storm, artillery was arguably the most destructive force on the battlefield. Thereafter, surface forces have depended largely on airpower to destroy opposing forces, while air forces often count on ground forces to compel adversaries to abandon hardened or otherwise safer positions and to hazard into areas where they subsequently are more vulnerable to attack from above.

In this vein of increased interoperation, Air Force contributions in the last decade have been critical to enhanced and more meaningful integration across the military services and their primary operational domains—a point that is even more noteworthy considering that budgets of late have encouraged parochial retrenchment and protection of narrower institutional imperatives. Notable examples of contributions that have enhanced our integration and interoperation include

- advancing the state of air mobility with capabilities such as the Joint Precision Air Drop System;⁴

- expanding our ISR enterprise capacity to process, exploit, and disseminate timely, accurate, and relevant intelligence to tactical forces;
- assisting in revisions to close air support and joint fires doctrine to strengthen protection of friendly ground forces; and
- modifying aircraft and weapon systems such as the B-52 Stratofortress and B-1 Lancer to employ in new and innovative ways.

Representing our team-oriented approach, these innovations do not diminish our commitment to our core service contributions. Quite the opposite, these adaptations and others in fact have helped us to reconnect with our heritage while consistently helping to ensure our national defense. This reclaimed heritage has solidified confidence in our enduring functions and our ability to perform our duties well. We celebrate the many important ways in which Airmen have contributed and will continue to contribute to our nation's security and to fulfilling our geostrategic interests.

We find that our ground-force teammates have provided some of the most full-throated, wholehearted, and significant arguments for the efficacy, value, and reliability of the US Air Force. Throughout operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the world, Airmen have refined their role according to operational requirements and urgent needs of the combatant commanders. In so doing, Airmen have become even more credible, dependable, and valued members of the joint team. Few, if any, division commanders would want to “go downtown” without Air Force bombers and fighters preparing and securing the battlespace.⁵ Hardly any company commander would unnecessarily hazard an enemy engagement without Air Force close air support. And, almost certainly, no platoon leader would prefer to guess what danger might be lurking around the corner, over the wall, or on the roof, rather than be with situational awareness par excellence from Air Force remotely piloted aircraft and their ability to target, track, and in many cases, engage the enemy.

Air Force Contributions to the Nation's Strategic Interests

Put another way, the Air Force is held in high regard by those who depend on its distinct capabilities the most. The fact that land warfare, by necessity, has been the US military's emphasis in the last decade does

not obviate the continued demand for strategically oriented and globally postured Air Force airpower. Indeed, this need will come into greater focus as the nation rebalances its strategic emphasis and effort toward the Asia- and Indo-Pacific. Accompanying this recalibration is the immediate challenge of substantially increased distance and time, both from the homeland and within the region itself, which covers 13 time zones and more than 100 million square miles.

It therefore is entirely clear that the nation will continue to depend on inherent airpower characteristics and unique Air Force contributions. Domain control, ISR, rapid global mobility, and global strike, as well as the additional distinctive ability to conduct high-volume, cross-domain command and control of air, space, and cyber capabilities, will remain essential to the nation's strategic interests. Essentially, this "four-plus-one" construct represents, most fundamentally, those capabilities and contributions that are at the core of the world's preeminent air force.

But Air Force contributions are valuable not only to the portfolio of US armed forces capabilities alone. The assured access to international airspace that the US Air Force provides is of tremendous importance to civil and commercial aviation as well. The United States, by many measures, is still the world's only genuine air and space nation, with strategic interests across its many dimensions—commercial, financial, diplomatic, legal, military, and others—that remain undeniably connected to aviation and aerospace. For example, the nation's economic health and prosperity are tied to the more than two billion passengers and some 35 percent of international trade (by value) that transit via international airspace annually. And, according to Federal Aviation Administration forecasts, air system capacity in "available seat miles"—the overall measure of commercial airline activity level, both domestically and internationally—will increase around 4.5 percent this year, and is anticipated to grow through 2031 at an average annual rate of 3.6 percent.⁶ These are but a few high-level statistics that presage a continuing upward trend in aviation and airpower's importance to our Nation's strategic interests. The US Air Force is prepared to maintain its place among the elite of the aerospace community, which has underpinned America's global awareness and influence since the early 20th century, and which will continue to leverage the advantages of air and space power for national effect in the 21st. However, with the proliferation of advanced technologies and high-speed computing that enable nonstate actors to exert influence in what formerly was the

exclusive domain of well-resourced nation-states, we must contend with a broader array of threats, including to the global commons. Among these threats are burgeoning anti-access and area denial challenges to our nation's ability to project global power, and competition in vital air and sea lanes of communication and transit that could turn unimpeded thoroughfares into crippled chokepoints. The US Air Force stands ready to meet these wide-ranging security challenges.⁷

The Air Force is prepared as well to continue providing our national leaders with strategic options that otherwise might not be available. Exemplifying this strategic versatility, flexibility, and readiness are the simultaneous operations of March 2011, when the Air Force, along with joint and coalition partners, spanned both intercontinental distances and the full continuum of operations to provide humanitarian relief in Japan and combat airpower and air support in Libya, all the while sustaining operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Conclusion

The four distinct Air Force contributions of control of the air and space domains; global intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; rapid global mobility; and global strike represent not only our traditional core mission areas, but also those unique capabilities that will endure for the foreseeable future. They also serve as an anchor point around which all Airmen can rally with a core identity and a shared sense of purpose. Leveraging the inherent characteristics of air, space, and cyberspace into our unique and enduring contributions will be vital to our national interests in the future security environment. From potential higher-end conflict with near-peer competitors, to insurgencies and other localized and geographically distributed crises, to natural disasters and humanitarian crises—the need for airpower and its distinct advantages will endure.

The US Air Force is a proud and reliable member of the joint team. To face a future that will present wide-ranging challenges, we will have to leverage each unique strength within each of the military services. Every carefully tailored and considered contribution, bringing the capabilities of each and every military branch, is indispensable to the success of the joint team. Without the US Air Force working with its joint team members, there would not be a US armed force as we currently know it—certainly not one that can maintain its place as the most respected military in the world.

It therefore is ever more important that Airmen reaffirm and recommit to the core Air Force identity that gave rise to the nation's independent air service. For a service that has a heritage so closely tied to the advancement of technology, a deep appreciation for the key and enduring Air Force contributions is particularly important. This awareness strengthens us and allows us to adapt accordingly, as technologies advance, operational requirements emerge, and methods of warfare evolve. What once was primarily the domain of aviators is now necessarily trending toward greater prominence for operations other than manned flight—to name a few: space, remotely-piloted, and cyber operations—as well as the vital functions that battle-field Airmen perform “outside the wire,” shoulder-to-shoulder with their ground-force teammates. As the Air Force evolves according to changing domestic circumstances and dynamic global complexities, Airmen will find such diversity to be critical to the vitality of the Air Force. But we will remain as Airmen who have a clear appreciation for the core and enduring contributions, and the *raison d'être*, of the US Air Force.

Gen Norton A. Schwartz, USAF, Retired
Nineteenth USAF Chief of Staff

Lt Col Teera Tony Tunyavongs, USAF
*USAF Chief of Staff PhD Fellow, Fletcher School
of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University*

Notes

1. For our purposes here, we are adopting the esoteric distinction between “versatility” and “flexibility.” See Air Force Doctrine Document 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*, October 14, 2011, 39–40.

2. *Defense Strategic Guidance*, 5 January 2012, 4–6.

3. See, for example, David W. Barno et al., *Sustainable Pre-eminence: Reforming the US Military at a Time of Strategic Change* (Washington: Center for a New American Security, May 2012), 43.

4. By raising the altitude for releases from 1,000 feet or less to 20,000 feet or more, JPADS kept aircrews safer and on more efficient flight profiles, while, in reducing the number of required convoys, it limited exposure of convoy personnel to what otherwise would be hazards in hostile zones. All told, JPADS improved accuracy and effectiveness in delivering food, cargo, and other vital supplies and materiel during the height of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

5. Norton A. Schwartz and Robert B. Stephan, "Don't Go Downtown without Us: The Role of Aerospace Power in Joint Urban Operations," *Aerospace Power Journal* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 3–11.
6. *FAA Aerospace Forecast: Fiscal Years 2011–2031* (Washington: Department of Transportation, 2011), 5.