

Book Essay

Decade of War

No Lessons Endure

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While preparing to read *Decade of War*, vol. 1, *Enduring Lessons from the Past Decade of Operations*,¹ to discern what its lessons might mean for airpower, I could not help but recall a passage from T. S. Eliot's "Gerontion:"

*History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.*

Volume 1 of the report discusses 11 strategic themes that arose from the study of enduring lessons and challenges of the last decade. It did not deserve my skepticism, as the lessons below are straightforward and valuable.

- **Understanding the Environment:** A failure to recognize, acknowledge, and accurately define the operational environment led to a mismatch between forces, capabilities, missions, and goals.
- **Conventional Warfare Paradigm:** Conventional warfare approaches often were ineffective when applied to operations other than major combat, forcing leaders to realign the ways and means of achieving effects.
- **Battle for the Narrative:** The [United States] was slow to recognize the importance of information and the battle for the narrative in achieving objectives at all levels; it was often ineffective in applying and aligning the narrative to goals and desired end states.
- **Transitions:** Failure to adequately plan and resource strategic and operational transitions endangered accomplishment of the overall mission.
- **Adaptation:** Department of Defense (DoD) policies, doctrine, training and equipment were often poorly suited to operations other than major combat, forcing widespread and costly adaptation.

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- **Special Operations Forces (SOF)–General Purpose Forces (GPF) Integration:** Multiple, simultaneous, large-scale operations executed in dynamic environments required the integration of general purpose and special operations forces, creating a force-multiplying effect for both.
- **Interagency Coordination:** Interagency coordination was uneven due to inconsistent participation in planning, training, and operations; policy gaps; resources; and differences in organizational culture.
- **Coalition Operations:** Establishing and sustaining coalition unity of effort was a challenge due to competing national interests, cultures, resources, and policies.
- **Host-Nation Partnering:** Partnering was a key enabler and force multiplier, and aided in host-nation capacity building. However, it was not always approached effectively nor adequately prioritized and resourced.
- **State Use of Surrogates and Proxies:** States sponsored and exploited surrogates and proxies to generate asymmetric challenges.
- **Super-Empowered Threats:** Individuals and small groups exploited globalized technology and information to expand influence and approach state-like disruptive capacity.²

The Big Lessons: Why Learning is Difficult for Us to Apply

If reflection leads to discernment, then we should begin with three big lessons. The first big lesson is that no lessons endure. It is hubris to think otherwise. We—humankind—are notoriously poor students, especially when it comes to war. The second big lesson regards “lessons learned” efforts themselves. Only a nation expecting to fight again would promulgate lessons for fighting better or more efficiently. That is prudent. The third is that “lessons” are prophylactic: they use the past to advise us to take protective measures to avoid bad things in advance of these bad things occurring in the as-yet-undefined future. This is helpful as long as we guard against a belief in stasis and remain aware that good lessons taken from bad wars may embolden some—“been there, done that”—to undertake bad wars in the future.

Sadly, we each—people, groups, and nations—have to learn for ourselves what it means when we say that war is a mortal contest of wills waged by humans. Lessons learned of any kind join 3,000 books published daily, 144 billion daily e-mails, and scads of articles, blogs, and journals, all resulting in tons of text.³ That may be a cultural bias. Reading, it seems, may neither be necessary nor sufficient for learning about war. We paragons of animals—even the illiterate—bring whatever strengths and weaknesses we have into this contest of wills. The struggle is dominated by the alpha males and alpha females in government and

in the armed forces on all the sides. On our side, their will becomes our will, whether that will is good or wrong-headed, vacillating or steadfast. Thus, there is no assurance that we can apply what we learn if the leaders will otherwise.⁴

Humans live, grow, learn, forget, and die, with newer and slightly different alphas eventually replacing the older ones. Military rookies are formed by the adapted survivors from the “last war” that formed them. These survivors and their followers advance in rank if they match the attributes of those advancing them. It is a system that runs the risk of perpetuating mental monocultures. The alphas in elected government must govern, raise money,⁵ and please both their constituents and their political party to remain in office. Military service, respectfully, is not a credential they must have, nor need to have.⁶ Our senators and representatives do the best they can to oversee—to check and balance—the executive, the generals and admirals, and department and agency heads that constitute the leadership of our combat and combat support armed forces.

So, given this very complex arrangement, what are the lessons airpower should draw from a decade of war? References to airpower in *Decade of War* are catholic, and not all are service-specific. They include:⁷

- High and often conflicting demands—damage assessment, delivering aid, search and rescue—for air assets (p. 4).
- Value of manned expeditionary intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms in Task Force ODIN and Project Liberty (p. 4).
- Availability of precision air-based weapons made to precise and discriminatory engagements (p. 8).
- Value at the unit level of increased ISR support to determine positive identification and screen for potential collateral damage (p. 8).
- Need to prevent civilian harm from airstrikes (pp. 20, 27).
- Difficulties aircrews encountered in providing air support when those from different nations had different caveats limiting what actions they could support (p. 29).
- Different and non-interoperable systems limiting the utility of available capabilities among coalition nations in exchanging information, leading to incomplete operating pictures, reduced battlespace awareness, and increased risk to forces (p. 29).
- US possession of the majority of valuable types of ISR assets as well as precise, low-collateral-damage weapons (p. 30).
- Partner nations (some of them) lacked ISR capabilities and airpower, which limited both mobility and responsiveness to threats (p. 30).
- Reliance of host nations on US- or coalition-provided key enablers such as air support, logistics, or ISR capabilities (p. 33).

Those are useful even though they omit the damage (possibly irreparable damage, post-sequester) done to airpower's airlift, rotary-wing, air refueling, strike, and unmanned platforms resulting from a mechanically brutal operations tempo. Other noteworthy airpower contributions included air base defense, convoy security, and medical support. As the author of the *Decade of War* summary notes, "The scope of the lessons identified in this report is broad, and many of the ideas are difficult to translate into concrete action."⁸

Returning to the 11 lessons advanced in *Decade of War*, the following is my list of those most appropriate for airpower. While they do not profess to be durable, they may well help airpower contribute even more to the next fight.

Lesson 1. Understanding the Environment: *Microenvironments Matter*

In war, entire social systems take on entire social systems, and each system contains an almost indeterminate number of complex and interacting subsystems. Parsing these into buckets like geographical, informational, social, political, ethnic, tribal, cultural, religious, and economic does only a little to unravel the complexity or interactivity. The carbon (humans) and silicon (equipment) elements in the microenvironments are what really matter, and these cannot be well understood from the top down. They have to be understood from the inside out and the bottom up. It is in the small bits and at the seams that the vulnerabilities manifest. The regimen for training and developing airpower leaders does not do a good job preparing them to understand and exploit microenvironments; it never has. So we should change it and create incentives for immersion into other systems. Airpower needs more folks in embassies, in intelligence, and in the field with the others who rely on airpower. We should also have closer ties to the *ground* and *naval* elements of *foreign* militaries. It is they who need to understand the *value* of airpower, and it is we who need to understand what they don't understand.

Lesson 2. Conventional Warfare Paradigm: *Every Big Fight is a Bunch of Little Fights*

The big fight is system versus system. The little fights at the subsystem component level can change the outcome. Targeting looks for centers of gravity, key nodes, and choke points. Each person involved in the creation of airpower should become a "targeteer" and an expert in some subcomponents of the opposing system. Operational planning succeeds if it is joint, and joint improves if it includes current and immersed microenvironment experts. Understanding the desired outcome of the big fight illuminates how each and every targeteer working in concert can win each small fight. Attacking the network is inferior to attacking the analogs of the "bios" or the "kernel." Getting hung up on putting the name of the contest into the right bucket—conventional, COIN, irregular, and so forth—need not be an airpower thing. Airpower's thing is acquiring knowledge about how air, space, and cyber can dismantle or befuddle

any opposing system top-down, taking it apart by preying on its bottom-up vulnerabilities. Getting the technology to do the impossible is also an airpower thing.

Lesson 3. Battle for the Narrative: *Tell the Truth to the Good People and Lie to the Bad*

Perhaps it's less about the "battle for the narrative" than it is about doing right things right and for the right reasons. Among the opposition—at the subsystem component level—are some "good" people. Airpower's cyber can help make sure they get the truth. Likewise, within our system—at similar levels—is what some would characterize as "bad" carbon. Yet, because they are within our system, they are "good," even if they are unhelpful. We must make sure they get the truth. Denial, deception, misdirection, and other forms of the *ruse de guerre* are well within the rules of the struggle; they are merely ways of not admitting a sensitive truth to the "bad." A system may have to conscience some smarmy things in war, but smarmy cannot be illegal or unauthorized in our country. Nor can it be carpet bombing in the age of precision weaponry. Airpower, by the admissions of many generals and admirals from wars past, saves friendly lives. Airpower leaders should be assertive to the point of being outspoken (obnoxious?) that *mors ab alto* always saves—and often can even substitute for—"boots on the ground." *That* particular truth needs to be understood by *every* mom in the United States.

Lesson 4. Transitions: *Wars End*

The purpose of fighting always has been to end the fighting. What may be both new and may endure is that social activism is global now—and air-delivered munitions have huge potential destructiveness—so airpower application needs to be done with diligence.⁹ For example, if the war requires that our airpower destroy an adversary's airpower, military and civil aviation and infrastructure, electrical power distribution networks, communications, and bridges, then airpower should know that the "you break it, you buy it" rule may be invoked when the fighting ends. The lesson for airpower is that while it may be unpopular in the joint setting, airpower is obligated always to think two or three moves ahead and dissent when the boss—rarely an airpower officer—wants shock and awe without having evaluated or wanting to accept potential longer-term consequences.

Lesson 5. Adaptation: *Is "Doctrine" That Isn't Working Really More Like "Dogma"?*

The lesson for airpower is to always be open to reexamining both airpower doctrine and joint doctrine that is not quickly and repeatedly delivering success. Doctrine can be nightmarishly complicated, overheating fiber to sluice information, making satellites gasp for energy, or destroying forests for more paper.¹⁰ Airpower must understand—and contribute to everyone's understanding—of

the nature and character of the fight we're in, and airpower must then adjust to deliver positive results in *that* environment. The environment could change overnight. John Boyd called this understanding “the big ‘O’”: Orientation. Adapt doctrine to survive and succeed.

Lessons 6, 7, 8, and 9. Special Operations Forces—General Purpose Forces Integration, Interagency Coordination, Coalition Operations, Host-Nation Partnering: *One Team, One Fight*

We cannot afford—in multiple dimensions—to go it alone in the future. So, accept that we have special operations forces, land-sea-undersea-air-subspace-space-cyber-intelligence general purpose forces (along with their various and often incompatible information-sharing and cooperation protocols); we have diplomats, allies, coalitions, friends, spectators, churches/temples/mosques, national and international nongovernmental organizations, industries (and export controls), consultants, media, electorate, academe, and our “wingers,” both left and right. Each department also has its own interagency processes (and caveats), so it is going to be unavoidably complicated.

Integrating the diverse carbon and silicon components of these subsystems into one cooperative—or “as cooperative as possible”—system is table stakes for the future. Who are the airpower experts and “names” among any of these domains today? Who are the airpower experts who understand and can influence these multitudinous microenvironments? It would be very valuable if airpower attended to this.

Lessons 10 and 11. State Use of Surrogates, Proxies, and Super-Empowered Threats: *Expect Bad People to Be Bad, and Potent*

The under-appreciated on the planet¹¹—the disenfranchised, the wronged, the struggling, the potentially suicidal, the greedy, the outlaws—are among us. They always have been. Now, however, technology can connect them and unite them in common purpose. To be “appreciated,” some or many are willing to become what we would call “evil” and add their energy and talent to the things that bring them attention, glory, salvation, or wealth. We can address the sources of discontent—the absence of world peace and harmony—or we can protect ourselves by being diligent and knowledgeable enough to avoid rude surprises. We can also do both. In all cases, leaders need to recognize that there may be lone wolves lurking everywhere airpower is generated, from the lab and the factory to the runway.

Beefing up airpower's counterintelligence capabilities and more closely connecting them to operational airpower and to airpower counterintelligence counterparts would be a start. We also should understand that the same technologies that connect and help unite evil also inform evil about ways to hurt: for example, pressure-cooker bombs. Some ways to hurt airpower can hurt big: incapacitated operators, maintenance technicians, munitions handlers, security forces, and

medics can stop the daily production of airpower at its generative points. It would be wise to expect bad people to be bad, and it would be advisable to expect them to try to be powerfully bad in the future.

What Does All This Mean?

It means we can and must extract concrete value from a *Decade of War*. Any “lessons learned” are rebuttable hypotheses on conventional consensus wisdom that, even if unrebutted, require reflection, seasoning, and tempering to be useful to individual players and the nation as a whole. Airpower needs its own voice and its own perspective to inform its chewing before it swallows. Our leaders need to assert the lessons *they* derive from the facts. Their followers—airpower’s Iron Majors—need to be supported in resisting homogenization into some kind of a mediocrity of thinking. We all need to be committed to doing right things right and for the right reasons. “Lessons” are a great place to start the dialogue.

Notes

1. Summarized in Elizabeth Young, “Decade of War: Enduring Lessons from a Decade of Operations,” *PRISM* 4, no. 2 (2013): 123–41, <http://cco.dodlive.mil/files/2013/06/PRISM-4.2-Final-for-Web.pdf>. The full 50-page report is available at <http://blogs.defensenews.com/saxotec-access/pdfs/decades-of-war-lessons-learned.pdf>.

2. Joint Staff J-7 Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis (JCOA), *Decade of War*, vol. 1, *Enduring Lessons from the Past Decade of Operations* (Suffolk, VA: JCOA, 15 June 2012), 2.

3. See <http://royal.pingdom.com/2013/01/16/internet-2012-in-numbers/>.

4. A flaw of the “enduring lessons” may be that they are insufficiently inclusive and comprehensive because they fail to assess and learn from the *domestic* consequences of a decade of war. What will be the longer-term social consequences of the casualties, the physically disabled, the large number of post-traumatic stress disorder victims, an increased suicide rate among veterans, and other domestic social developments arising from a decade of war?

5. “House members, on average, each raised \$1,689,580, an average of \$2,315 every day during the 2012 cycle. . . . Senators, on average, each raised \$10,476,451, an average of \$14,351 every day during the 2012 cycle.” Mike Masnick, “How Much Does It Cost to Win Election to Congress?” 14 March 2013, <http://www.techdirt.com/articles/20130313/02101422307/how-much-does-it-cost-to-win-election-to-congress.shtml>. Other sources cite similar numbers. See Jon Terbush, “What It Costs to Win a Congressional Election,” *The Week*, 11 March 2013, <http://theweek.com/article/index/241194/what-it-costs-to-win-a-congressional-election>.

6. It may be that a lack of military experience among the overseers capitalizes on diversity and injects novelty and promotes innovation within the armed forces. Innovation in the armed forces, one might hypothesize, seems to be inversely proportional to the percentage of lawmakers with military service. “In 2013, just 19% of the 535 combined members in the U.S. House and Senate will have active-duty military service on their resume, down from a peak in 1977 when 80% of lawmakers boasted military service. In the current Congress, 22% are military veterans.” Julie Snider and Tony Hargo, “Number of Veterans in Congress Continues to Decline,” *USA Today*,

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20 November 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/11/20/fewer-congress-vets/1716697/>.

7. JCOA, *Decade of War*, vol. 1, page numbers as indicated.

8. Young, "Decade of War," 140.

9. For example, every spectator has an opinion on what ought to be the obvious distinction—but apparently is not—between felonious offenses and whistleblowing, and many express their opinions and act on them.

10. "This accursed war [World War II] will surely be over by 1948 because by then there'll be no more paper left on the planet!" Attributed to Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, 1st Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, <http://www.celebritytypes.com/quotes/bernard-montgomery.php>.

11. From the Latin *appretiatius*, meaning "estimate the quality of," generally with a sense of "high estimation."

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