

A Call to the Future

The New Air Force Strategic Framework

America's Airmen are amazing. Even after more than two decades of nonstop combat operations, they continue to rise to every challenge put before them. I wish I could say that things are about to get easier, but I cannot, because the dominant trends point to a complex future that will challenge us in new and demanding ways. Adversaries are emerging in all shapes and sizes, and the pace of technological and societal change is increasing—with a corresponding increase in the demand for air, space, and cyber power. In this context, senior United States Air Force (USAF) leaders realize we need a single, integrated strategy to focus the way our service organizes, trains, and equips the force to conduct future operations. We need a strategy that points the way forward and does not limit us to an intractable view of the future—one that is actionable, with clear goals and vectors that are implementable, assessable, and revisable. This article describes that strategy—the new USAF strategic framework for strategy-driven resourcing.

Intellectual Preparation

In a 2014 *Air and Space Power Journal* article, I explained how Airmen contribute to the nation's defense by providing global vigilance, global reach, and global power for America.¹ The article introduced two key documents: *The World's Greatest Air Force: Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation*, and *Global Vigilance, Global Reach, Global Power for America*. For the USAF, these documents represent an aspirational future, assert the enduring importance of airpower, and define our core missions. These key documents represent the beginning of what I expect will be the reinvigoration of USAF strategic thought for the coming decades.

For the next step in this journey, I want to discuss the USAF's new strategic framework that will guide us as we move forward. We have recently released two important documents in our strategic document series—*America's Air Force: A Call to the Future*, which is the USAF's strategic vision, and the *USAF Strategic Master Plan (SMP)*, which translates that conceptual strategy into comprehensive guidance, goals, and

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objectives.² Together, these documents lead the Strategy, Planning, and Programming Process (SP3) that will arm and empower the USAF, in collaboration with our partners, to defeat adversaries and to defend the nation and our allies in a complex future. Additionally, an upcoming *Air Force Future Operating Concept* will add to the document series by describing how we will operate in the future and how new capabilities will fit together.

America's Air Force: A Call to the Future

The Air Force's ability to continue to adapt and respond faster than our potential adversaries is the greatest challenge we face over the next 30 years.

—*America's Air Force: A Call to the Future* (2014)

A Call to the Future provides the long-term imperatives and vectors for our service to ensure it is able to execute our core missions over the next several decades and is the lead document in our strategic document series. It builds upon “who we are” and “what we do” and provides a path to “where we need to go.”³ That path is strategic in nature and extends beyond the budget horizon to ensure our USAF meets the nation's defense needs over the next 30 years. *A Call to the Future* is the natural companion to *The World's Greatest Air Force: Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation*, since the two together provide the broad vision of the USAF.

Strategic Context and Challenge

Understanding that we cannot “see” into the future, four emerging trends provide a strategic context for the strategy. The USAF will need to win in complex battlespaces characterized by rapidly changing technological breakthroughs, geopolitical instability, a wide range of operating environments, and an increasingly important and vulnerable global commons. These trends will shape the operational environment and highlight the broader strategic issues for national defense.

Speed is a common thread among these trends. As *A Call to the Future* states, “We must commit to changing those things that stand between us and our ability to rapidly adapt.”⁴ Faster adaptation and re-

sponse—what I call strategic agility—will sustain the USAF’s unique contributions that are critical to the nation. Our challenge is to develop and nurture a future USAF that will excel in solving national security problems and that is appropriate for the rapid pace of change occurring throughout the world.

The Air Force We Need

A Call to the Future emphasizes two strategic imperatives—agility and inclusiveness—to position the USAF for success in the coming decades.⁵ Agility is the counterweight to the uncertainty of the future and its associated rate of change. More than a slogan, agility is a call for significant, measurable steps to enhance our ability to wield innovative concepts and advanced capabilities in unfamiliar, dynamic situations. By embracing strategic agility, the USAF will be able to move past the twentieth century’s industrial-era processes and paradigms and be ready for the globally connected, information-based world of the coming decades. We will become more agile in the ways we cultivate and educate Airmen and in how we develop and acquire capabilities. Our operational training, employment, organizational structures, and personnel interactions must also become more agile.

Inclusiveness recognizes that “none of us is as smart as all of us.” The ability to harness diversity of thought within our Airmen and our partners is the key to developing a truly agile force because it ensures we are leveraging the broadest set of resources to produce the maximum number of options. To do this, we will focus on improving the structure of the USAF team, evolving our culture to address emerging challenges, and strengthening our connections both external and internal to the service.

Strategic Vectors for the Future

A Call to the Future lays out five strategic vectors along which the USAF will posture for the future, focus investments, implement institutional changes, and develop employment concepts.⁶

- *Provide effective twenty-first-century deterrence.* The nuclear mission remains the clear priority, and the USAF will continue to ensure we have the capabilities necessary to sustain a credible ground-based

and airborne nuclear deterrent. In addition, the USAF must pursue a suite of options to deter a wide range of actors.

- *Maintain a robust and flexible global integrated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capability.* To counter growing threats and meet expanding requirements, the USAF will employ a robust and diverse network of sensors arrayed across the air, space, and cyber domains. ISR will become more timely, efficient, flexible, and effective; it will also be a robust and survivable force multiplier for operators.
- *Ensure a full-spectrum-capable, high-end-focused force.* The USAF must focus on capabilities that enable freedom of maneuver and decisive action in highly contested spaces. However, we must retain the skills and capabilities to succeed in conflict across the spectrum of intensity and range of military operations.
- *Pursue a multidomain approach to our five core missions.* Full integration of the air, space, and cyberspace domains is the next leap in the evolution of our service. Future Airmen will intuitively address problems with a multidomain mind-set.
- *Continue the pursuit of game-changing technologies.* The USAF must maintain a technological edge over our adversaries by shrewdly seeking out, developing, and mastering cutting-edge technologies—wherever and whenever they emerge.

To Organize, Train, and Equip

A Call to the Future does not constitute an *airpower* employment strategy. It is a strategy that transcends multiple domains. The USAF strategy is also *not* a road map focused solely on next year's budget or a "stay the course" mentality. These matters, important as they may be in the short term, are not critical to the institutional USAF three decades from now. The strategy is about becoming more agile and adaptive. It is a framework to guide acquisition, science and technology, human capital, and other investments. It is also a broad strategic path for the next 30 years coupled with the recognition of an evolving environment that demands a new approach by the USAF.

The Plan

The recently released *Strategic Master Plan (SMP)* describes what we will do to implement the USAF's strategic imperatives and vectors, making them reality. It translates strategic vision into action by providing authoritative direction for service-wide planning and prioritization. The *SMP* includes four annexes—"Human Capital," "Strategic Posture," "Capabilities," and "Science and Technology"—that provide more specific guidance and direction, further aligning the *SMP*'s goals and objectives to future resource decisions. Certain sections will remain classified to ensure critical elements of the future force stay linked to the overall strategy. However, most of the *SMP* remains unclassified to ensure wide distribution and unambiguous direction for the USAF. An ambitious and far-reaching undertaking, the base *SMP* will be updated every two years, with the annexes reviewed annually, to ensure a consistent and relevant connection between today's realities and tomorrow's potential.

Converting *Conceptual Strategy* into *Programmatic Reality*

The SP3 places strategy at the head of the programming and budgeting process. Without the SP3, the strategy and *SMP* are merely words on paper. The SP3 connects the strategic document series to day-to-day operations and is the strategic roadmap. The process translates strategy into programs and capabilities that are budgeted and funded—and then become reality. This iterative process ensures strategy and plans serve as the overarching framework for program development in a repeatable manner. It will also provide a unified, understandable, and consistent USAF message, clearly linked to strategic guidance—one that senior leaders can focus on to provide direction.

The USAF strategy and the *SMP* provide authoritative guidance to key planners across the Air Staff and major commands. These planners will align their supporting plans with the goals and objectives of the *SMP* as they apply their expertise to inform planning and resourcing. In particular, core function leads will produce core function support plans that further refine resource planning in support of national security and the joint force.⁷ Other USAF flight plans will address issues that are not fully covered by the core function support plans. These flight plans will provide additional guidance and specific direction for crosscutting issues and other functional areas throughout the USAF. Together, these plans create a constellation of supporting and directive documents to

ensure the strategy becomes reality. The SP3's integration process enables USAF senior leaders to make critical planning choices based on a comprehensive, unified portfolio of priorities, risks, and capabilities.

In this more robust strategy-driven environment, commanders and staffs will have proper direction and the necessary authority to reach goals by working discrete but connected actions. The guidance and direction in the *SMP* are designed to enable better enterprise-wide solutions to challenges and close the gaps that can form in execution. Those ideas and concepts that are not linked to SP3 or are not relevant will be easily identifiable; thus, they can be terminated to make room for new ideas and initiatives. The greater USAF enterprise will remain engaged and current, ready to resource and execute required programs to make progress on our strategic goals. Previously disconnected, these actions maintain vertical and lateral links across the force—epitomizing the balance of centralized control with decentralized execution.


A Concept of Operations for the Future

This summer, we plan to release a new *Air Force Future Operating Concept* that will further inform strategic planning by describing how Airmen will operate the capabilities wielded by the future USAF and how those capabilities will fit together. A natural companion for *A Call to the Future*, this document will provide an innovative portrayal of how an agile, multidomain USAF will operate in 20 years' time. It will describe future capabilities in broad terms and how these capabilities will fit into the future environment. The concept will depict a desired future USAF that is the product of two decades of successful evolution in strategy-informed planning and resourcing; furthermore, it will serve as a baseline for continued concept development, experimentation, and refinement.

Whether you are a USAF leader, joint operator, government partner, or trusted ally, the *Future Operating Concept* will help articulate what role Airmen will assume in the future defense of the United States. It will frame the strategic picture of the USAF and coalesce the imperatives, vectors, and goals present in *A Call to the Future* and instituted by the *SMP*.

A Call to Action

Because strategy is not prescient, we must be adaptive as we seek to balance the present with the future. Some key decisions that will have lasting effects long into the future must be made now. We will make those decisions by connecting new concepts and plans to the strategic framework. To the operator in the field, it may be difficult to find your direct connection to the entire SP3 process—such a long-range strategy may seem divorced from today’s reality. However, you are connected; our future will be built on your skills, experiences, and insights. I am confident in you, and I trust your judgment. We will continue to organize, train, and equip you to win today’s fights while we evolve to confront tomorrow’s challenges. That is why we have created a broad strategic framework, which includes mission, vision, and strategic context, to answer our nation’s call.

To all readers, I leave you with closing thoughts from *The World’s Greatest Air Force: Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation*: “The United States Air Force is a remarkable success story! Our history may be short, but our heritage is legendary. We truly stand on the shoulders of heroes. Those heroes expect us to make this Air Force even better. To do that, each of us must find new ways to win the fight, strengthen the team, and shape the future. Every Airman, every day, can make a difference—be that Airman!”⁸ 

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Notes

1. Mark A. Welsh III, “Global Vigilance, Global Reach, Global Power for America,” *Air and Space Power Journal* 28, no. 2 (March–April 2014): 4–10, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/digital/pdf/articles/2014-Mar-Apr/SLP-Welsh.pdf>.
2. Headquarters US Air Force (HQ USAF), *America’s Air Force: A Call to the Future* (Washington, DC: HQ USAF, July 2014), http://airman.dodlive.mil/files/2014/07/AF_30_Year_Strategy_2.pdf; and recently published *Strategic Master Plan*.
3. HQ USAF, *The World’s Greatest Air Force: Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation—A Vision for the United States Air Force* (Washington, DC: HQ USAF, January 2013), <http://www.osi.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-130111-016.pdf>; and HQ USAF, *Global Vigi-*

lance, Global Reach, Global Power for America (Washington, DC: HQ USAF, n.d.), http://www.af.mil/Portals/1/images/airpower/GV_GR_GP_300DPI.pdf.

4. HQ USAF, *America's Air Force*, 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 9–13.

6. *Ibid.*, 14–19.

7. Core functions refer to the USAF's 12 service core functions: Agile Combat Support, Air Superiority, Building Partnerships, Command and Control, Cyberspace Superiority, Global Integrated ISR, Global Precision Attack, Nuclear Deterrence Operations, Personal Recovery, Rapid Global Mobility, Space Superiority, and Special Operations. Core function leads are major commands designated to lead each of the core functions, which is captured in core function support plans.

8. HQ USAF, *World's Greatest Air Force*, 4.

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