

Six Steps to the Effective Use of Airpower

On “The Drawdown Asymmetry: Why Ground Forces Will Depart Iraq but Air Forces Will Stay”

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“War can . . . engrave lessons like no other human endeavor.”
—Thomas Hughes, *Over Lord*¹

Then-Lieutenant Colonel Clinton S. Hinote’s 2008 analysis of the Iraq drawdown and the continued role of airpower in that conflict serves as a foundation for six steps to the effective use of airpower today.

In Summer 2008, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* published an article by then-Lieutenant Colonel Clinton S. Hinote that anticipated six steps of airpower.² Written shortly before the withdrawal of forces from Iraq began, the article defended the drawdown but argued a large contingent of US Air Force personnel should remain in place to support the coalition with airpower and protect Iraqi airspace.

Hinote’s analysis reflected the operational experience of a combat pilot and former combined air operations center war planner. Moreover, it demonstrated wisdom and sound reasoning in underscoring warfare’s moral dimension, an imperative consideration for all military engagements. Thirteen years later, his analysis remains compelling and supports the six-step framework described below.

Airpower

From the time airplanes first took to the skies, war theorists and military commanders have marveled at their battlefield potential. Early on, military thinkers and leaders saw how the far-ranging mobility and tremendous speed of these new warfighting machines gave them “complete freedom of action and direction,” allowing them to shift the point of attack rapidly and at will.³

Engagements in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War confirmed airpower is indeed a singular and formidable capability in the hands of a battle commander. Notably, however, these campaigns also demonstrated that effective and ethical use of airpower depends on several prerequisites. Airpower is but a tool; it does not within itself contain an

explanation of how to employ it properly in a war effort. Using it well and avoiding its misuse requires military leaders to follow several foundational principles, core tenets of airpower that transcend the platform itself. With Hinote's analysis in mind, this article identifies six principles for today, briefly illustrating them with examples from World War II to Vietnam.

Carefully Establish Military Objectives

The effective use of airpower begins with the communication of clear military objectives. These objectives serve as the foundation of the wartime effort, driving strategic decisions and rules of engagement; an air operation without them will suffer from "all Mach and no direction." Military objectives include the positive—what the military intends to achieve—and negative—outcomes the military hopes to avoid. Examples include US President Lyndon B. Johnson's insistence during the Vietnam War that South Vietnam remain free from communism (positive), and that China not enter the war (negative).

These objectives were not clearly set forth during Vietnam, however. As Mark Clodfelter explains, discordant objectives regularly emerged from the president's weekly meetings with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and military leaders interpreted them in contradictory ways, muddling the war effort.⁴

Developing good military objectives is hard for several reasons. First, they may be unrealistic—a point that may escape leaders in times of crises. Historians have questioned whether, for instance, it was possible for the US military to win the war in Vietnam without striking the North, even at the risk of Chinese intervention. Second, military objectives may be unachievable due to ancillary factors such as political battles, budgetary restrictions, or waning domestic or international support, all of which complicated Johnson's decisions during the Vietnam conflict.

Third, military objectives may be constrained by other military conflicts around the globe. Fourth, they are nearly always complicated, as they confront the complexities and friction of war and attempt to predict an unknown future. The United States successfully navigated such complexities in the Korean War when it fought a limited war for the first time and found a way to achieve victory without using nuclear weapons or getting into a larger war with China or the USSR.⁵ Fifth and finally, military objectives may be disjointed from political ends. Without strong political-military integration, the military may spend blood and treasure achieving battlefield victories that fail to accomplish goals of the state.⁶

Hinote consistently referred to these elements in his article. First, he raised questions about the US military strategy in Iraq, noting the surge (alternatively viewed as the ways or means) was not clearly tied to objectives (the ends)—that is to say, political-military integration was incomplete or missing in the Iraq campaign. To this point, he cited General Anthony Zinni, who had complained there was, in fact, no strategy at all.⁷

Other issues were also limiting the military's ability to succeed, according to Hinote. Many years of fighting had exhausted soldiers and strained families as well as the air fleet itself—items that retrospectively call into question whether military objectives were achievable. Additionally, the large commitment of military forces to the Middle East had degraded America's capacity to project power in other parts of the world—in other words, the Iraq campaign was constraining.

Hinote believed a reorientation of US military strategy in Iraq was needed. But he also believed a complete US withdrawal would shake the country, leading to a failed state that terrorists would exploit. He felt the troop level should be militarily sustainable abroad and politically acceptable at home (i.e., both realistic and achievable).⁸ Following the surge, the US military did draw down its forces in Iraq gradually over the next four years, ending its presence in 2012. The country still was unstable at that point, leading to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The United States defeated ISIL in Operation Inherent Resolve using small ground force teams supported by powerful airstrikes—a balanced approach concordant with Hinote's ideas.⁹

Determine the Role of Airpower

Once leaders have established and clearly conveyed their objectives, they must determine airpower's role in achieving them. The USAF does not by itself accomplish all objectives in a military conflict and win the war but works in conjunction with other services, agencies, and partners in Joint warfare, usually operating as a combined force that leverages a wide variety of capabilities. As Hinote knew, fighting Jointly is never easy. In the Korean War, for example, interservice disputes and a lack of Joint doctrine created substantial friction, although in Vietnam, new plans such as the Concept for Improved Joint Air-Ground Coordination advanced Joint warfare.¹⁰

Although airpower's role may vary extensively from campaign to campaign, its signature function in any engagement is to maintain air superiority. Military theorists J. C. Slessor and Giulio Douhet emphasized the need to command the air in conflict, and World War II general officers,

including General George Kenney, reiterated the importance of air superiority in all military operations, as did commanders in Korea and Vietnam. Without command of the air, armies and navies always face a far higher risk of defeat.¹¹

Fundamentally, air forces support a war effort by providing strategic airpower, tactical airpower, air support, or a combination thereof. Strategic airpower places air commanders in a supported role, which they typically execute in bombing sorties that strike the enemy's warfighting capacity.

While various approaches to bombing have been proposed, the US strategy of precision bombing employed in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam was highly effective. The targets of precision strikes may be the "industrial fabric" of a nation such as petroleum depots, power plants, or factories for military parts; lines of communication including conduits for transportation, supply, and information; or forces themselves consisting of command-and-control nodes, military bases, or soldiers on the ground.

Tami Davis Biddle argues that in the World War II European theater, although bombing methods were still being refined, the United States had such success with precision bombing that the Nazis were compelled to pull forces from the front, disperse their factories, and invest in defensive weaponry.¹² This approach also yielded success in the Korean War, with attacks on North Korean industry, and in the Vietnam War, especially during the devastating Linebacker I and II campaigns that forced peace negotiations.¹³

Tactical airpower puts air capabilities in a supporting role and generally focuses on providing close air support and air interdiction of enemy forces, which may consist of standard military units, insurgents, or guerrilla fighters. Targeting plans should be developed in close collaboration with ground force commanders.

To the detriment of operations and responsible use of resources, the Korean and Vietnam Wars featured discord between US Army and Marine Corps leaders and the Air Force as they debated whether strategic bombing or close air support should be the primary air mission. This discord is an issue that clear objectives from Washington could have perhaps solved. If forces cannot obtain the air support they need, they may begin developing their own capabilities—the US Army's equipping of helicopters with close air support armaments in Vietnam being but one example—often resulting in unnecessary redundancies.¹⁴

Air support includes critical functions such as transportation and airlift, intelligence collection, and communications facilitation. In World War II, the Germans conducted impressive airlift operations during the Blitz-

krieg, and the United States was similarly successful in airlifting supplies to the Chinese to keep them in the war.

Shortly after World War II, the Berlin Airlift of 1948–49 further highlighted this role of airpower. Air support also extends to intelligence gathering, a fundamental function that ensures commanders have situational awareness of the battlefield and real-time tactical reporting to aid their operational planning and execution. Similarly, air support ensures dependable communications between units, allowing them to be in lockstep even when the operational tempo is fast. Throughout the Vietnam War, intelligence, reconnaissance, and communications support were highly successful. Each of these air support functions has vastly different requirements that commanders must prioritize and synchronize with due attention.¹⁵

Hinote considered these realities in his analysis and advocated supporting the remaining troops with robust airpower. He correctly stated that just as the Air Force cannot succeed without firepower on the ground, armies cannot succeed without help from the air. The Air Force needed to, therefore, continue Joint air operations in Iraq: attack the enemy, prevent it from massing forces, and protect military bases (all elements of tactical airpower). At the same time, the Air Force needed to provide airlift, intelligence, search and rescue, and communications services—all elements of air support.

Throughout that fight, the Air Force needed to maintain air superiority over the country, giving ground forces top cover and deterring conventional attacks on Iraq by adversaries.¹⁶

Recognize Capabilities and Limitations of Airpower

As planners determine airpower's precise role in the war, they must consider its capabilities and limitations. Their assessment begins with choosing the right platform and weaponry. Well-defined objectives help commanders make good decisions in this regard, although questions forever remain about what capabilities are best since each aircraft has distinct strengths and weaknesses. Strategic platforms often emphasize firepower and defensive armaments, while tactical platforms provide faster response and longer loiter times. Regardless, selecting the right aircraft for complex battle campaigns is never easy.

The US Air Force has occasionally tried to use a single airframe to fulfill multiple roles—utilizing strategic bombers for ground support during World War II or modifying fighters for strategic bombing in Vietnam—but these dual-use aircraft often are jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none platforms that do no job overly well.¹⁷

In addition to selecting their aircraft, planners must consider tactics, which often morph over the course of a war as pilots attempt to take advantage of new capabilities, correct flying deficiencies, and exploit enemy vulnerabilities. World War II aviator Pete Quesada's use of dive-bombing, radar, and enhanced radio communications; Kenney's development of parafrag and skip-bombing; and fighter pilot John Boyd's creation of ingenious air maneuvers in the 1950s are examples of ingenuity in action.¹⁸

Airpower's effectiveness can be hampered by the absence of clear command and control processes which can be difficult to establish in Joint and combined warfare. The institution of a single air commander for theater operations in the Korean War was an illustration of leaders overcoming this shortfall.¹⁹

Finally, campaign planners look for stable doctrine that captures the most critical principles of warfare and encourages unity of effort within the force. Good doctrine on precision bombing, for instance, emerged during Vietnam, providing theater commanders with a common standard for the first time.²⁰

Airpower has other inherent limitations. Pilots and crew members implicitly understand restrictions imposed by weather and terrain that can make mission accomplishment difficult or impossible. Tyranny of distance may geographically separate commanders from the battlefield, making operational decisions harder and slower. Intelligence is always incomplete and sometimes wrong, complicating planning and operations. Technology is persistently advancing, requiring aircraft and weaponry upgrades to stay ahead of the adversary. Training is frequently abridged or skipped during crises, expanding the number of untrained or under-trained airmen in the force.

On the adversary's side, defenses are constantly adapting, forcing planners to adjust for success. Simply stated, decision makers must resist the temptation to focus solely on airpower's impressive capabilities without giving due consideration to its extensive limitations.²¹ Hinote was keenly aware of the need to consider both the capabilities and limitations of airpower. He discussed people, equipment, airframes, and weapon systems, examining opportunities and risks. And he acknowledged commanders would need to overcome tyranny of distance, battlespace complexity, logistical barriers, and other challenges to succeed in Iraq.²²

Adopt a Whole-Force Approach

Having prepared an operational plan that articulates airpower's role, leaders must then empower its enabling functions. General Henry "Hap"

Arnold may have expressed this idea best when he proclaimed air wars are won through “total aviation activity,” not just by bombers and fighter jets. The total air effort includes functions across the force that enable airpower: logistics, acquisitions, maintenance, training, and myriad other activities.²³

For this reason, Arnold restructured the air forces during World War II, evoking Napoleon’s maxim that organizing the military properly is the most critical step in attaining victory. Kenney, too, understood this reality; he oversaw bombing sorties but also emphasized intelligence, maintenance, airlift, and other functions. Commanders during the Korean and Vietnam Wars extended the whole-force approach to the entire war machine and codified it in doctrine. While results were initially mixed, these leaders did lay the groundwork for a post-Vietnam focus on Joint doctrine that ultimately improved warfighting.²⁴

As a pilot and planner, Hinote understood the importance of the whole force in executing air operations effectively. He discussed at length the logistics, ground support, systems, and intelligence activities that must be integrated across the campaign for the commander to succeed.²⁵

Adapt and Overcome

As war proceeds, leaders must be prepared to adjust their operational plans to accommodate changes in the strategic environment and solve new problems that arise. Battle conditions are unpredictable—a phenomenon Clausewitz alluded to as “a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty”—and no objectives or plans survive unscathed once fighting begins.²⁶ Airmen should be poised to adapt and ready to experiment, seeing each crisis as an opportunity rather than a threat. Moreover, military leaders should prepare their organizations to embrace this eventuality.

Arnold, Quesada, and Kenney embodied these principles in the opening decades of airpower, truly a time of trial and error. Arnold was particularly keen on adaptation; he challenged his Airmen to innovate, and he forged relationships with industry, putting the greatest minds to work on airpower’s hardest problems. By contrast, Nazi Germany was rather poor at adaptation; historians have suggested its overbearing, top-down control and aversion to trusting field commanders were key contributors in the Axis loss of the war.

After World War II, US modernization continued with the enhancement of night-mission capabilities and airburst weapons in the Korean War and the introduction of new gunships, laser-guided bombs, and better radar in Vietnam.²⁷ New capabilities and novel methods are very often the keys to victory. Hinote discussed adopting adaptive and innovative

methods to transition the Air Force from an active fighter force into a smaller contingent charged with partnering and overwatch roles. He also considered its ability to support in-country humanitarian missions and messaging campaigns, all the while managing deployments effectively.²⁸

Act Ethically Always

For modern just war thinkers of high credibility such as James Turner Johnson, the demands of ethics and prudence align seamlessly. This alignment can be seen in his call for the maintenance of noncombatant immunity, which in common speech is a special admonishment to the military to protect and defend all innocent life always.²⁹

As leaders execute an air campaign, they must ensure ethics guide their decisions, even, or perhaps especially, in the heat of battle. They have not always done so. Prior to World War II, for example, the United States and its Allies unanimously adopted the Hague Rules, preventing the indiscriminate killing of civilians, a practice they called the “hallmark of barbarism.”³⁰ Yet during the war as commanders encountered difficulties in bombing campaigns, they gradually disregarded this precept and began to engage in relentless area bombing in Europe and firebombing in Japan, methods that indiscriminately killed thousands. During the Korean War, the US Air Force continued to utilize firebombing as a tactic.

Some contend the World War II raids were essential, a driving factor in the Axis surrender, but Richard Overy has shown that in Europe they did not crush the enemy’s resolve as intended, and Biddle has argued that the impact of mass bombing on morale is simply not measurable.³¹ Regardless, even if these methods did work, efficacy should never trump righteousness—the ends can never justify the means, and leaders are always called to a higher standard.

Importantly, Hinote also made an ethical claim: the United States was morally obligated to stay in Iraq until the government could stand on its own. To withdraw fully and leave 28 million Iraqis to face chaos and turmoil would have been wrong, he believed. Hinote agreed with diplomat James Dobbins who said the United States had assumed responsibility for Iraq when it invaded the country and removed Saddam Hussein from power—in short, we broke Iraq, and we had the obligation to fix it.³²

On ethics, the article could have made an even stronger argument by appealing to the just war tradition, particularly its discussion of *jus post bellum* (“justice after war”). Over the centuries, just war thinkers including Saint Augustine, Thomas Moore, Martin Luther, Francisco de Vitoria,

Francisco Suárez and others noted the importance of not harming the innocent and being merciful to the vanquished.³³


The article also may have profited from a discussion on right action, which Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas said requires the moral virtue of practical wisdom, or prudence.³⁴ Answers to questions such as whether to stay in Iraq and for how long were ultimately ethical prudential judgments, needing to respect the common good of both the US public and the Iraqi people.

Personal integrity and the pursuit of virtue are the core of ethics for moral action begins with the self. The Air Force embodies this principle in one of its core values: Integrity First. In a timeless but oft-neglected passage of *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz warns commanders to develop their sense of war's ethical dimension in his remarks on the nobility of moral considerations on the battlefield.

In their efforts to act morally, commanders must be on their guard: war is brutal and violent, and as Conrad Crane has noted, the constant presence of death during war can harm decision-making on ethical matters.³⁵ At a minimum, Airmen should be armed with an understanding of the just war tradition, a time-tested guide rooted in centuries of sound philosophical thought that sets forth the ethical principles of warfighting—before, during, and after conflict.

Just war doctrine is an invaluable resource to help guide commanders when decisions are less clear. Officially enshrined in the *Department of Defense Law of War Manual*, this tradition explains we are moral creatures before we initiate combat and tells what obligations we must not ignore, lest we become the evil we are fighting.³⁶

Conclusion: Airpower Cannot Determine Its Own Utility

Airpower is a potent asset in the military arsenal—"the offensive weapon par excellence"—but whether it succeeds or fails in achieving wartime objectives depends on how leaders employ it.³⁷ Clausewitz stated military leaders need to lean on warfighting principles in times of conflict, and the six steps above, drawn from the annals of history, are proven tenets that should serve commanders well.³⁸ Building on Hinote's analysis, these ideas should both embolden and caution us to remember that the correct understanding of airpower stems not from its platforms and its capabilities alone, but from the deepest possible appreciation of the purpose of war and our moral obligations. 

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Notes

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