

A New Chief of Staff, a Golden Opportunity

Building the Right Force over the Next Decade

Maj Timothy B. Murphy, USAF

With budget cuts beginning to take effect and sequestration looming, yesterday's carefully laid plans are quickly fading into oblivion. During constrained times, it is easy to reject ideas as unattainable, but we must remember to keep events in context. Even a brief glimpse into our service's history reveals that fiscal and political issues should not derail foundational concepts. Consider the state of the United States Air Service in the months directly following the end of World War I. After the Air Service played a major role in Germany's defeat and unequivocally demonstrated the potential of airpower, its leaders endured a drawdown which turned that fledgling organization into a hollow shell. The service contracted from 185 aerodromes and 197,338 total personnel to 22 squadrons and 9,596 personnel—decreases of 88 and 95 percent, respectively!¹ Yet, even in the midst of draconian cuts and an inhospitable political environment, the Air Service incrementally laid the groundwork for a phenomenally successful Air Corps and independent Air Force.

Today, Gen Mark A. Welsh III, the new chief of staff of the Air Force, faces a similar situation, though far less extreme than the one that confronted Air Service leaders after World War I. Budget cuts and political obstacles threaten the Air Force's recent progress toward balancing its capabilities in both conventional and irregular warfare (IW). Procurement of fifth-generation aircraft is essential for the Air Force, but this should not deter the new chief from building the right force over the next decade. One of the major issues for the service involves developing a balanced force capable of *efficiently* responding to threats across

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the spectrum of warfare. The Air Force adapted very well to the conflicts of the last decade, but it still lacks an appropriately proportioned and agile force structure and organization. Historically, the Air Force has planned, prepared, and equipped its force to deal with conventional threats and adapted as necessary in irregular conflicts. In 2008 Secretary of Defense Robert Gates famously admonished military leaders for failing to deploy needed assets to the theatre: “Because people were stuck in old ways of doing business, it’s been like pulling teeth.”² Rather than constantly adapting and enduring scathing comments from defense secretaries, the Air Force should begin now to lay the foundation for a balanced force capable of both fighting our nation’s high-intensity wars and countering IW’s threats to the legitimacy of friendly nations.

This article demonstrates how to build the right force even in an uncertain fiscal and political environment. It briefly discusses the Department of Defense’s (DOD) current strategic guidance and the Air Force’s plans to implement it with regard to IW; identifies the gaps between that guidance and Air Force implementation; and then suggests a series of incremental steps that the service should take to fill the gaps, developing the right force for the future in the process. The key to the latter entails empowering operational wings with a far greater ability to fight and win both conventional and irregular conflicts. Continuing to segregate IW missions and execution in disparate units throughout the Air Force will only prolong institutional apathy and unpreparedness for IW.

The Current Environment

The DOD’s strategic guidance of January 2012 articulates new priorities for sustaining US global leadership in the twenty-first century. Although the guidance directs a rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region, it also warns of destabilizing threats and violent extremists worldwide, particularly in the Middle East.³ Granted, the new “pivot to Asia” commonly evokes thoughts of greater roles for conventional forces, but at

the same time, it involves a significant need for irregular forces. If the Asia-Pacific region truly has substantial strategic value, then the United States will likely become engaged in countering threats to the legitimacy of its partner nations in the region. The strategic guidance anticipates this involvement by initiating an expansion of the United States' partnership with aligned nations to fulfill national priorities.⁴ Thus, the shift from Iraq and Afghanistan to Asia may actually increase the importance of countering irregular threats over the next decade.

Before the new strategic guidance came down from the DOD, the Air Force had worked for several years to improve its ability to operate in an IW environment. Airmen have labored tirelessly over the last decade to provide world-class close air and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support to ground troops as well as use global mobility to sustain conflicts in multiple theatres. As the conflicts progressed, the Air Force experienced unprecedented advances in combat medical care and made available thousands of individual augmentees to ground commanders and joint headquarters across the globe. During this time, Air Force Special Operations Command expanded its role, offering unequalled support to special operators throughout the joint force. The service also improved its capacity to supply air advisors who help shape air forces in partner nations. Finally, the Air Force developed detailed plans to acquire both light attack and light mobility aircraft that would further its efforts in building partnership capacity (BPC).

In light of the publication of the DOD's strategic guidance, the service is now in the final stages of preparing an operational road map for IW that will outline its contributions to the department's efforts in both BPC and IW. The document refers to this type of warfare as a struggle for legitimacy and influence over a relevant population rather than the coercion of key political leaders or the defeat of their military forces.⁵ It includes several goals, such as creating an institutional air-advisor capability in the general-purpose force, training Airmen to become equally proficient and capable in conventional warfare and IW,

equipping them for countering irregular threats, and developing the capacity of willing partner nations' security forces.⁶ Two objectives—fielding small teams of regionally oriented, expert trainers and establishing regionally aligned IW-capable forces—seek to attain some of the goals laid out in the road map, just as other goals and corresponding objectives are designed to improve the Air Force's capabilities in IW and BPC.

The Gaps

Sections of Headquarters Air Force have outlined excellent plans to assist these two efforts in the DOD's guidance, but without corresponding changes in the service's organization and structure, the road map will probably fall short of its aims. The fact that the bulk of the Air Force's general-purpose force consists of operational fighter, bomber, and mobility units reflects a service organized primarily to fight in conventional conflicts. However, these units—the backbone of the Air Force—will have little involvement in air advising and BPC unless leadership forces a shift in mind-set. Fighter, bomber, and mobility units care about what appears on their designed operational capability (DOC) statement—essentially a narrative description of a unit's wartime missions. If air advising, BPC, and other IW efforts are tasked only to specialized units in the general-purpose force, then the foundational units of the Air Force will have little to no role in the process. In fact the service has historically assembled ad hoc units for IW and then disbanded them when it perceived they had become unnecessary.⁷ Generating an institutional air advisor capability in the general-purpose force will prove difficult if it does not include units that carry out the Air Force's primary missions.

Another major area—the Air Force's structure—will likely cause IW and BPC efforts to fall short. Gen Norton Schwartz, former chief of staff of the Air Force, argued in 2010 that the service had only a limited need for a light attack platform because current aircraft could service any close air support requirement.⁸ He advocated acquiring 15 light

attack aircraft for BPC, and the Air Force included both those platforms and light mobility aircraft in its budget requests for fiscal years 2012 and 2013. Unfortunately, the service recently cut both programs, and the future of both aircraft is very much in question. Congress also expressed skepticism about these programs, but its concerns had to do with the plan to use the aircraft only for BPC missions.⁹

The Air Force eliminated the light aircraft program even though it has no dedicated capability within the general-purpose force to conduct IW. This is not to say that the service cannot perform in an IW environment—today's fighter, bomber, ISR, and mobility units effectively conducted their missions during the last decade. However, using advanced weaponry in an irregular conflict has its costs—and they are significant. An Air Combat Command study of 2008 concluded that replacing just one-and-a-half squadrons of deployed fighters with light attack aircraft would save well over \$300 million per year in fuel and operations costs.¹⁰ These are enormous savings, especially considering the fact that for most of the past 10 years, the Air Force had more than four fighter squadrons deployed in Central Command's theatre *at the same time*. These expenses do not even include degradation of the service life of fighters and bombers caused by the extremely high operations tempo since 2001.¹¹

Clearly, the Air Force could benefit from a change in mind-set, allowing it to alter its organization and structure to pursue BPC and IW more effectively. But we must ask ourselves whether such change is a worthy task—and if so, is it possible in the midst of significant budget cuts and political uncertainty? The answer to both questions is yes, but such action will demand a firm commitment from Air Force leadership, not to mention a specific (and cost-effective) plan for cultivating the right force over the next decade.

The Way Ahead

The plan to balance the force outlined below draws on two major premises. First, air and space superiority will and should always be the top priority of the Air Force. The other important core functions, such as global attack, rapid global mobility, and agile combat support, all depend upon that superiority. Buying the aircraft and support infrastructure to assure superiority is an expensive but a necessary priority for the Air Force, and this should not change. Second, the service could balance the force by taking incremental steps over the next several years. At present it has very little dedicated capability to conduct IW and expeditionary BPC within the general-purpose force, but the Air Force does not need to acquire these capabilities in the short term. The last decade proved that its current organization and structure can adapt to irregular conflict, so changes can safely take place over the long term. The service should set a goal of developing a proportional force over several years, but it should not view the latter in terms of dollars but in terms of *capability* and *efficiency*. Conventional missions, aircraft, and equipment will always involve considerable cost, but the Air Force needs to acquire new resources and personnel that will balance its capability to carry out both irregular and conventional warfare.

To produce the right force, the service should implement three successive stages: (1) make its operational wings responsible for IW and BPC missions, (2) resurrect the light attack aircraft and light mobility aircraft programs, and (3) work toward supplying most of its operational wings with indigenous personnel and light aircraft intended for BPC and IW missions. The Air Force can do so by spreading the costs of implementation over several years.

Stage One: Shifting Responsibility to Operational Wings

The first step in building the right force should focus on improving the IW and BPC capabilities of operational wings—more a shift in mind-set than in personnel and resources. Currently, operational wing commanders must fill, among others, individual augmentee or joint expe-

ditionary taskings, the latter directly supporting Army units and the former filling non-service-specific positions on the joint manning document. Wing commanders receive these deployment taskings and identify members within their unit to fill each assigned position. The wing is responsible for equipping its members, but most predeployment training occurs elsewhere. If an entire unit within the wing (such as a fighter squadron) receives deployment orders, most of its members typically prepare together and then deploy together. Unit deployments always mirror missions designated on the wing's DOC statement. Thus, the wing spends most of its time preparing and training personnel for deployments that will support potential missions on that statement.

To fully institutionalize IW and BPC missions within the general-purpose force, the Air Force should include these various missions on the DOC statements of operational wings. As indicated above, those wings already send their members on such missions, but changing the statement will formalize the process. Instead of relying almost exclusively on outside agencies to train members quickly, prior to deployment, the wing should have a cadre of personnel trained, equipped, and prepared for IW and BPC missions.

Furthermore, the Air Force should move responsibility to operational wings in a way that minimizes costs. Forming a cadre of wing-level personnel dedicated full-time to these two missions is unrealistic and, frankly, unnecessary. Instead of creating new units or organizations, the service should model its IW/BPC cadre after a functional organization like Wing Safety, whereby each wing could have an IW office that would develop and sustain the aforementioned cadre. Like Wing Safety, this office should have one field grade officer and a few dedicated noncommissioned officers to administer and oversee the program. Each squadron within the wing should have two or three IW personnel. The IW cadre would consist of subject-matter experts who prepare the rest of the squadron for IW missions. Like a squadron's safety tasks, its IW tasks should be additional duties, and IW personnel

should still perform the unit's primary mission. Ideally, the Air Force would track IW personnel through career-field designation prefixes and offer incentives such as ribbons or badges.¹²

After the experience of the last 10 years, constructing an IW program at the wing level would prove comparatively straightforward. Thousands of Airmen have deployed as individual augmentees or have done so to fill positions for joint expeditionary taskings; consequently, each operational wing already has a large pool of experienced personnel. If the Air Force waits to leverage this experience, it will miss a valuable opportunity. The three designated people in the IW office, mentioned above, should receive specialized instructor training at the Air Advisor Academy so they can teach quarterly IW refresher training to the wing's IW personnel. Wing commanders should then have squadron commanders solicit volunteers to fill the squadron's IW positions, giving preference to experienced individuals, sending them to initial training at the academy, and having them undergo quarterly training from the wing's IW office. The latter instruction should help these personnel prepare their unit members for deployment taskings. Ideally, when the wing receives such a tasking, its IW office (in conjunction with squadron commanders) should deploy IW personnel who match the career fields requested in the tasking. Even if IW personnel are not available, regular IW training at the unit level will better prepare all unit personnel for IW taskings.

Giving operational wings the responsibility for these taskings has several benefits. For example, the Air Force can capitalize on the experience gained by many of its members during the last decade. Thousands of Airmen have a great deal of combat experience outside the normal scope of their duties, and the service should work hard to capture that experience. Fostering a cadre of IW personnel at the wing level and providing quarterly training for them will enhance the preparation and quality of Airmen that the Air Force sends to fill these tasks. Rather than trying to quickly prepare Airmen just prior to a deployment, the service will have an abundance of well-trained personnel for these

missions. The greatest benefit, however, will come from innovation at the wing level. Shifting responsibility for these missions from centralized, specialized units to the larger Air Force will allow for greater ingenuity and innovation. Decentralization provides additional opportunities such as forming regionally aligned wings and allocating funds for classroom instruction in language and culture for IW personnel at the wing level. Regional alignment would further enhance the capabilities of IW personnel who receive deployment orders. As global combatant commanders begin to see the benefits of well-trained IW Airmen, they likely will encourage further innovation and improvement.

Stage Two: Reinstate the Light Attack and Light Mobility Programs

As the Air Force moves greater responsibility for IW and BPC to the wing level, it must renew the light attack aircraft and light mobility aircraft programs. The service will never truly balance its conventional and IW capabilities without making such an investment. Rather than compartmentalize these programs in specialized units, it should base the aircraft at wings tasked with conventional missions, sending light attack aircraft to fighter and bomber wings and light mobility platforms to mobility wings. Basing these aircraft at wings tasked with conventional mission sets will further institutionalize a balance between conventional and IW missions.

The Air Force could reduce the costs and personnel involved in fielding light aircraft by allowing wing pilots to become dual-qualified in both these and primary aircraft. For example, it could base light attack aircraft at an F-16 wing, which could qualify some or all of its pilots on them—a decision that would drastically lessen the expense of building additional squadrons and give pilots a greater breadth of experience. The Air Force could model the light attack and light mobility dual-qualification program on similar programs at U-2 and B-2 bases, as well as the old Accelerated Copilot Enrichment program, both of which offer a much cheaper way of developing flight experience in aircraft other than their primary ones.

Additionally, fighter and bomber wings could maintain a limited number of dedicated light attack pilots and dual-qualify the remainder, who could then fly either airframe and gain experience where the wing deems necessary. If the wing is tasked with missions in a permissive air environment, it could deploy its light attack aircraft and pilots instead of the high-cost, less-efficient fighters or bombers. Maintaining unit readiness with pilots dual-qualified on two combat airframes might present problems, but solutions certainly exist. Squadrons could designate certain pilots to maintain a higher state of readiness in light attack aircraft for a period of time and then periodically rotate those personnel. Dual-qualification would also alleviate concerns that pilots of the light attack or light mobility squadrons are junior or inferior partners of those who fly more advanced aircraft.

Operational wings would also have an excellent additional asset for training sorties and an organic outlet for cuts in flying hours. Fighter and bomber squadrons could use the light attack aircraft as support for a variety of their combat missions. Indeed, pilots could even carry out some missions, such as close air support, in either aircraft. During periods of budget cuts or limitations on flying hours, the wing could keep its pilots flying by shifting more sorties to the light attack aircraft since flying hours for these platforms cost only a fraction of those for fighters or bombers. Pilot readiness might decrease slightly in the wing's primary aircraft, but the pilots could continue to accumulate useful hours in the light aircraft. Most of the benefits described above would also apply to mobility wings with light aircraft.

Furthermore, such aircraft are far more feasible with regard to BPC in developing countries. In March 2010, Gen James Mattis promoted light attack aircraft as a "means to build partner capacity with effective, relevant air support."¹³ Many partner nations need reliable, capable, and easily maintained platforms from the United States instead of the high-tech aircraft that the Air Force currently operates.¹⁴ The service requires organic light aircraft and trained pilots to conduct BPC missions effectively. If operational wings already possess light attack

and light mobility aircraft, then they can realize that objective. By adding the ideas from stage one, wing commanders could deploy several light aircraft and trained IW personnel in relevant career fields. These IW teams, having their own aircraft, would perform well in a variety of regions and countries around the world.

The Air Force should quickly initiate the process of balancing conventional and IW capabilities at the wing level. To begin, it should procure 15–30 light attack and light mobility aircraft in the budget for fiscal year 2015. Fifteen of the former (including acquisition and research and development) would cost approximately \$289 million, and an equal number of the latter would amount to about \$73 million.¹⁵ The service should then base the light mobility platforms with the two mobility support advisory squadrons already tasked with BPC missions and use the light attack aircraft to quickly develop an initial cadre, basing them at a fighter wing to test the dual-qualification concept. Once the Air Force validates the idea behind using these aircraft, it can move on to the final stage.

Stage Three: Balancing the Force over Time

Modest, incremental changes over the long term are essential to creating the right force. If combatant commanders embrace the concept of wing IW cadres, the Air Force should expand the program as necessary to meet future needs. Ideally, every operational wing should have a cadre of IW personnel and the associated capability of immediately deploying fully trained and equipped individuals for IW or BPC missions. It should also plan to field larger numbers of aircraft after validating the light attack and light mobility concepts, preferably basing light mobility platforms at many operational mobility wings and light attack squadrons at numerous operational fighter and bomber wings. The Air Force should attempt to do so over several years and adjust the end state if it needs either more or fewer of these aircraft. Such a configuration would give the service the right force—proportional and capable of efficiently conducting both conventional and IW missions.

Addressing Concerns

The proposals offered here certainly raise valid concerns, such as the associated effects of reduced combat capability and elevated manning requirements.¹⁶ The combat issue should not prove too problematic since light aircraft are intended only for permissive air environments or partnership missions. The actual costs of these aircraft are minuscule compared to those of typical Air Force acquisitions and are easily manageable if spread out over several years. The service can minimize manpower expenses if it allows pilots to dual-qualify on their primary aircraft and light aircraft, but additional manpower and maintenance costs will remain. However, it should view these marginally higher outlays in terms of the increased capabilities of light aircraft and well-trained IW personnel. By adding approximately six aircraft, five pilots, and 18 maintenance personnel per unit, the Air Force could fully equip multiple squadrons for operations across the conflict spectrum, expand the pilot pool to meet a variety of needs, and produce experienced pilots more quickly and cost-effectively.

The range, response time, and risk of light attack aircraft also represent legitimate concerns, the former two considered a measure of how quickly the Air Force can respond to ground forces' call for support. A fighter jet can be on station to provide such support much faster than a light aircraft, but viable solutions to these issues exist. Specifically, the service must move beyond the recent model of centralizing all of its combat assets at one or two bases in-theatre—a necessity for advanced jet aircraft but not for light aircraft, which can operate out of smaller airfields closer to ground forces and thus improve response times and range considerations. Just as the Army and Marine Corps always station aviation assets close to their corresponding maneuver units, so could the Air Force expand these helicopter-centric bases into small airfields capable of accommodating both rotary-wing and light aircraft.

With regard to the risks associated with employing light aircraft in permissive air environments where surface-to-air threats still operate, one must understand that all combat environments entail risks. Rotary

aircraft from all of the different services already operate in these environments, and light aircraft are far more survivable than helicopters. Such risk-based arguments against light aircraft are disingenuous and overlook the substantial dangers that rotary aircrews successfully deal with in combat zones every day.

Perhaps the greatest concern is that expanding IW capabilities will threaten primary Air Force core functions such as air and space superiority, rapid global mobility, and global strike. Granted, these functions will always have priority over IW—and rightly so—but this should not prevent the service from gradually balancing its force over the long term.

Conclusion

No doubt, General Welsh will confront a number of challenges during his tenure as chief of staff. To continue its mastery of the air, the Air Force must acquire the F-35 and replace or upgrade other aging airframes. However, the task of updating an aging fleet need not supplant all other priorities. In the future, our nation will call on its armed forces to perform missions across the spectrum of warfare; consequently, the Air Force should build a force capable of efficiently answering any such request. Budget issues will exist in the near future, but the service can afford to build up its IW capabilities incrementally. Maintaining the status quo will permit the Air Force to continue its conventional superiority, but it will be forced to send F-22s and F-35s, instead of A-10s and F-16s, to austere, permissive locations. Twenty-five years from now, costs associated with flight hours and service life of fifth-generation fighters will prove astronomical in an irregular conflict. Is this really what we want when we can start changing now? ✪

Notes

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9. An internal Air Force memo dated 12 February 2010 outlined legal concerns that the light attack aircraft would not meet the "Purpose Statute" of 31 *United States Code*.
10. Col Russell J. Smith, "Common Sense at the Crossroads for Our Air Force," *Air and Space Power Journal* 26, no. 2 (March/April 2012): 106, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/digital/PDF/Issues/2012/ASPJ-Mar-Apr-2012.pdf>.
11. The costs briefly outlined above will increase astronomically in the future if the Air Force can respond only with F-22s, F-35s, and B-2s.
12. Flying and ground-safety officers in certain career fields are tracked by including an "S" prefix in their Air Force specialty code.
13. "Statement of General James N. Mattis, USMC Commander, United States Joint Forces Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 9, 2010," USJFCOM, accessed 15 October 2012, <http://www.jfcom.mil/newslink/storyarchive/2010/sp030910.html>.
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