
A COMMENTARY

Interservice Rivalry and Air Force Doctrine

Promise, Not Apology

GENE MYERS

I RECENTLY ATTENDED a joint-service conference advertised by its war and staff college sponsors as a reasoned, non parochial discussion of interservice rivalry. With some notable exceptions, the conference admirably attained this objective. In some cases, however, I witnessed an occurrence of an increasingly common phenomenon—an attack on the US Air Force and its core doctrinal beliefs by two of its own. Col Richard Szafranski's "Interservice Rivalry in Action: The Endless Roles and Missions Refrain?" was one of the presentations.

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I guess I should have expected that somehow a modicum of service bashing would enter otherwise constructive academic dissertations, but the delivery of what I believe to be a fratricidal attack on the core beliefs and mission of the Air Force by two representatives of the service came as quite a surprise. This situation was par-

ticularly unpalatable because the Air Force was the only service to receive such harsh treatment during this two-day conference, which consisted of 24 presentations. If the conference had intended to foster an interservice free-for-all, surely all services would have received at least a share of the criticism—but such was not the case. Truly constructive criticism—the kind that offers even-handed critiques accompanied by at least some attempt to present remedies—was conspicuous by its absence from the two presentations. Their comments reminded me of others from presumably more parochial quarters.

This article uses Colonel Szafranski's remarks as a springboard to address concerns larger than academic fratricide. It points to the promise of airpower doctrine rather than serving as an apologist for it. It seeks to counter such parochial arguments by emphasizing the need for Air Force leaders (anyone in a position to influence policy, education, or attitudes) to understand the basics of their service's doctrine and to appreciate its historical, theoretical, and technological foundations.

The gist of the two presentations at the conference on interservice rivalry is that past budget cuts and resulting interservice battles over roles, missions, and dollars are but a preview of what's coming as future budgets are cut to draconian levels (as low as \$150 billion a year, according to some commentators). In this environment, Szafranski asserts, the Air Force will not be able to hold its own.

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The supporting arguments are not new. The other services have used them in their efforts to obtain an increased share of the nation's defense budget. Their arguments, however, are somewhat different in that they address not doctrinal issues but the competency of the service members themselves. Some of the arguments are as follows:

- Unlike their colleagues in the other services, Air Force officers neither study their history nor care about lessons of past air warfare. When practitioners are uncomfortable with their doctrinal dictums, they tend to substitute technology in the form of glittery new weapons and computerized command and control (C²) wizardry for sound, experience-based doctrine.
- Those few officers who concern themselves with the study and formulation of doctrine must "genuflect" to the holy grails of independence, decisiveness, and central control of aerospace power in order to get a hearing from the "fighter pilot dominated" service. Although Air Force critics note that these icons of air warfare form an inadequate basis for a vibrant doctrine, they offer no reasonable substitute for them.
- Both strategic attack and air superiority are insufficient as rationale and unproved in reality. In the future, the Army and Navy will provide their own air superiority with an improving array of defensive weapons; the Air Force will have little to do. Further, after all these years, strategic attack is still an unproved theory—despite much Air Force rhetoric to the contrary. World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War did little to prove the effectiveness of the theory of bypassing surface forces and bringing decisive power straight to the heartland to affect the enemy's willingness and long-term capability to continue conflict.
- In the coming budget bloodlettings fostered by the need to balance Uncle Sam's books, the Air Force will come out on the short end of the stick because it has not adequately justified itself in the pages of the history its leaders refuse to acknowledge. As a result,

the American people feel more comfortable with "traditional" surface forces (of the Army and Navy) and will insist that a large portion of the budget pie go to those services. Thus, the Air Force may need to fear for its organizational future.

The clear implication is that the Air Force—or what will replace it in the smoldering wreckage of the coming budget battle—will be useful for nothing other than the direct support of surface (read Army) forces. In this postrivalry world, close air support and interdiction would usurp the concepts of strategic attack and air superiority as the Air Force's reason for being. In such a world, the Army and Navy in all their land, sea, and air guises would be fully justified—both doctrinally and, most importantly, financially.

The idea that strategic attack is an unproved theory and should be relegated to history's dustbin is absurd.

While I tend to agree with the general notion that Air Force personnel in general show little interest in their history, I don't think Air Force officers are any more or less "guilty" than officers of any other service in this respect. In most cases, the more junior people in the field/at sea are busy with the rigors of daily life—learning and doing the jobs they were trained to do. This is not intended either as a criticism or an excuse; it's a fact of life in an increasingly complex and busy environment. With some exceptions, the staff billet offers the chance and need to become familiar with the macro view of the whys and wheres of military employment and with the senior command position that absolutely demands it.

That said, I have difficulty accepting the criticisms leveled at the Air Force. In general, I submit that the "holy grail" of central control, decisiveness, and independence derided by many critics across the services as substitutes for air doctrine consists in fact of precepts learned through the school of experience. For more than 60 years, lead-

ers and visionaries like Billy Mitchell, Hap Arnold, Carl Spaatz, Ira Eaker, and John Warden—keenly aware of both their service's history and potential—outlined the importance of these precepts to the fielding of effective air forces. In fact, these military principles were first clearly codified as early as 1943 with the publication of War Department Field Manual (FM) 100-20, *Command and Employment of Air Power*, published by the Army to counter the ineffectiveness of dividing airpower applications early in the war.¹

To insist, as do many airpower critics, that the failure of airpower to win in Vietnam is somehow an indictment of the Air Force is preposterous.

I would also point out doctrinal “truths” that riddle Army, Navy, and Marine doctrine but that escape without even a tip of the hat from the Air Force's critics. These include such dictums as Marine air serves *only* Marines; *only* troops on the ground can achieve decisive victory; or *only* the Navy can provide forward presence. I suggest that from an airman's perspective, it is very tempting to launch similar assaults on many of these guiding principles as poor substitutes for a comprehensive doctrine. However, doing so without reference to the expansive volumes of Army and Navy doctrine amounts to taking central beliefs out of their logical context and opening Air Force doctrine to similar parochial attacks—a notion dismissed by most airpower critics, assuming they are aware of it at all.

I also state proudly that the Air Force is indeed the most technologically oriented of the services—not as a substitute for doctrine but as a result of it. More than any other service, the Air Force must rely on technology to keep it on the cutting edge of military capability. Indeed, it is the only service charged by law with developing and maintaining the *nation's* capability to operate military forces in the hostile environments of air

and space.² Additionally, one need only review other service (as well as Air Force) failures that resulted from too firm a foundation in history (read tradition) to realize that proper doctrine must come from the careful blending of past and future.³ Lessons of the past are vitally important, but caveats about repeating the past carry a double meaning.

The idea that strategic attack is an unproved theory and should be relegated to history's dustbin is absurd. History, not theory, points to several facts—one of which is that the European strategic bombardment campaign accomplished the following:

- Destroyed the German air force as it defended against heavily armed bombers escorted by the most advanced fighters in the world.
- Played a decisive role in World War II by devastating German industry and transportation, albeit over a longer time than predicted. German leaders like Albert Speer clearly acknowledged the devastation to German war-making capability caused by the raids.⁴
- Allowed the Normandy invasion to proceed. Without the destruction of the Luftwaffe and the mauling of the Reich's oil industry and transportation, chances were very good that the Germans would have flung General Eisenhower's forces back into the sea—a likelihood acknowledged by Eisenhower himself and Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery (commander of the invasion's ground forces).

Air forces again demonstrated the utility of strategic attack—this time conclusively—during the Persian Gulf War, when the coalition marshaled airpower in all its forms and service livery to render the adversary leadership deaf, dumb, and blind, and isolate it from its military forces. Only then did the ground war proceed.⁵ Nonetheless, critics could correctly point out that since every conflict differs in terms of environment, intensity, adversary, and objective, the contributions of strategic attack would vary from decisive (as in war winning) to unnecessary. But the tone and context of some recent comments lead me to believe that these critics would

no doubt subscribe to the view expressed by many marines and soldiers that placing ground troops in harm's way from the "get go" in bloody surface action is the only way to really "win" a war.

Despite the critics' strident denunciation of air superiority, I would insist that it is in fact a *vital* function of air forces. It isn't always required, but surface forces laboring under constant air attack will surely notice its absence. One need only reflect on the trials of the British in the Falklands War in 1983 and of most of Western Europe's forces in 1939 and 1940 to realize the importance of this mission.⁶ I agree that active defenses of surface forces are becoming very lethal and effective. Deprecation of the air superiority mission, however, ignores the synergy created by active defenses both in the air and on the ground as well as the crucial need for offensive counterair to take the war to the enemy's airfields and missile launchers before they can begin their deadly missions. It also ignores the effect of stealth and concentrated precursor attacks on surface defenses—demonstrated so effectively during Operation Desert Storm.

To insist, as do many airpower critics, that the failure of airpower to win in Vietnam is somehow an indictment of the Air Force is preposterous. I suggest that there is plenty of blame to go around: ridiculously tight civilian control, the substitution of body and sortie counts for effective military strategy, outrageously poor military C² procedures founded in blatant service parochialism, the now discredited theory of gradualism, and the fact that one side waged total war while the other did not—to name but a few. I would use the "he who is without sin" argument with throwers of interservice rocks and would suggest that Navy and Army failures were every bit as stark as the Air Force's. They didn't win the war either.

In short, I would characterize Colonel Szafranski's article as a visible incarnation of an almost fashionable current tendency among many people in the military establishment to bash the Air Force. If such criticism came from other services, I would chalk it up to organizational paranoia brought on by the aftermath of Desert Storm and by the shadow of budget decimation. Prop-

erly or not, it now seems politically correct to see airpower as the source of "immaculate interdiction"—a quick way to punish offenders while not risking many American lives or exposing the resultant blood and destruction to much media scrutiny. On the one hand, the fact of the matter is that in some cases such use of airpower is appropriate—it might suffice to accomplish national objectives. On the other hand, to see airpower as a panacea for all problems is as erroneous as using it only to support land forces. The real strength of airpower and space power resides in their versatility and ability to make a major—in some cases, decisive—contribution in just about any

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scenario. The fact that the denunciations addressed here come from Air Force representatives is disappointing but not as bothersome as the errors in their doctrinal conclusions, which are common to non-Air Force detractors of airpower, and which this article attempts to address.

Airpower critics' accusations of ignorance on the part of Air Force people may require a little more introspection, not only from me but also from them, because many of their conclusions are reminiscent of those drawn by people uneducated in the history and theory of airpower doctrine. I would also admonish the people responsible for running the world's premier air force to pay attention to the principles that supposedly guide their service and to the procedures for assembling airpower doctrine. Despite critics' pronouncements to the contrary, such doctrine is the result of a very deliberate process that involves "ivory tower" airpower theorists, historians, and technocrats as well as folks in the field who must deal directly with the doctrine's

strengths and weaknesses—to the degree that they are willing to be involved.⁷ Airpower doctrine is the result of as careful a blending of history, theory, and technology as is currently possible in an admittedly bureaucratic system that, like any other, tends to defer to position and rank rather than process and consideration. Nonetheless, airmen must know their doctrine and must be

prepared to participate in its development and application. In the words of Gen Ronald Fogleman, Air Force chief of staff, “We’ve got to understand airpower—its strengths, its weaknesses, and its potential—if we are to fully capitalize on it to attack an adversary’s strategy and to compel him to do our will.”⁸

Notes

1. FM 100-20 was printed on 21 July 1943 and reprinted in 1990 at the direction of Gen Michael Dugan, then the Air Force chief of staff.

2. See Department of Defense (DOD) Directive 5100.1, *Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components*, 25 September 1987. This document states that a primary function of the Department of the Air Force is “to organize, train, equip, and provide forces for the conduct of prompt and sustained combat operations in the air” (page 19). The directive goes on to designate specific missions for the service, including air superiority, space operations, and control of vital air areas. The Air Force is the only service so tasked by national authority.

3. Glaring examples that come immediately to mind include (1) the slaughter in the mire of World War I trenches caused to great extent by religious adherence to the spirit of the offensive and failure to recognize the lethality of modern weapons like the machine gun, (2) the virtual strangulation of the British Isles and the decimation of the US Merchant Marine during the first years of World War II for lack of antisubmarine warfare training and equipment despite proof of the submarine’s effectiveness in World War I, and (3) the prohibitive losses suffered by US bombers early in World War II’s European strategic air campaign due to the Army Air Forces’ insistence on unescorted bomber penetrations (compare the bombers’ splendid success after escorts were provided).

4. See *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey: Over-all Report (European War)* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 107; and Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

5. See Col Richard T. Reynolds, *Heart of the Storm: The Genesis of the Air Campaign against Iraq* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, January 1995); and Col Edward C. Mann III, *Thunder and Lightning: Desert Storm and the Airpower Debates* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, April 1995). These two volumes discuss in great detail the rationale and planning factors behind the successful Desert Storm air campaign as well as the chronology and process of its execution.

6. See Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, *Battle for the Falklands* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1983) for discussion of the problems produced by Britain’s lack of air superiority over both land and sea.

7. An example of recent criticism (the constructive kind, not the sort of bashing highlighted in this article) of the doctrine development process includes Prof Dennis Drew’s conclusion that doctrine, which oftentimes “seems to reflect the opinion of the ‘senior officer present’ . . . is our theory of victory. As such, it deserves our best intellectual efforts and our utmost attention. In the past, our doctrine has received neither. The first step in correcting this unacceptable situation is to treat the development of doctrine as a profoundly important and continuous intellectual process rather than simply a bureaucratic requirement.” Col Dennis M. Drew, USAF, Retired, “Inventing A Doctrine Process,” *Airpower Journal* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 43, 51.

8. Gen Ronald R. Fogleman, “Airpower and the American Way of War,” presentation to the Air Force Association Air Warfare Symposium, Orlando, Florida, 15 February 1996.

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