

AIRPOWER IN SMALL WARS

Vital Lessons and the Road Ahead

by
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Understanding the attributes of small wars operations is essential to all military officers. Additionally, it is essential United States Air Force (USAF) officers understand the role of aviation forces in these conflicts. In other words, the “airman’s perspective” must apply to small wars as well as big ones and this paper will advocate for increased USAF emphasis on small wars. To accomplish this, the article will begin discussion on the nature of small wars and associated historical lessons and the role of airpower in the prosecution of these conflicts. To conclude, the article discusses the role of airpower in future small wars and offers recommendations to the USAF.

NATURE OF SMALL WARS

The guerilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog’s disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough...the dog succumbs to exhaustion...without ever having found anything on which to close his jaws...He becomes too weakened in military terms, overextended; in political terms, too unpopular; in economic terms, too expensive.¹

Small wars are an inherently political activity with the center of gravity being the local population, not enemy combatants. Therefore, small wars cannot be conducted by an outside force or entity imposing its will on the public. “The principal burden [has] to rest with the indigenous government and its armed forces.”² To accomplish this, small wars should consist of a three phase approach. The first phase is to aid the government in providing for the needs of their population. By eliminating discontent within the population, the support for enemy elements will fade away. The second phase of the approach involves direct military action against the enemy fighters themselves. During this phase, restraint should be strictly enforced for military operations to avoid oppression. The final phase is to reconcile differences and reconstruct the country’s infrastructure. It is during this phase that former enemies are converted into loyal citizens. Further, social, political and economic reform should be instituted.³ Small wars are the toughest form of warfare to be attempted by a nation. It requires all instruments of national power to be utilized in concert and requires military power to be wielded in a manner at odds with the conventional doctrine of most modern nations.

The United States Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual* (SWM) documented U.S. small wars experiences in the Caribbean during the 1920s and 1930s and upholds many of the British lessons from policing their empire. According to the SWM, small wars operations are undertaken in concert with diplomatic pressure under the authority of the U.S. executive branch. These operations are undertaken to “suppress lawlessness or insurrection” as opposed to being a campaign of conquest, which the SWM considers “contrary to the policy of the government of the United States.”⁴ Further, the SWM describes the goal of a small war as the “social, economic, and political development of the people.”⁵ To achieve these ends, persistence is more important than decisive combat action.

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British Colonel C.E. Callwell understood this concept and clearly counseled that small wars were long, often dirty and brutal undertakings. According to Callwell, “as a general rule the quelling of rebellion in distant colonies means protracted, thankless, invertebrate war.”⁶ The 2003 supplement to the SWM supports Callwell’s assertion when it stated that “small wars are potentially long wars, making pre-determined exit strategies and rigid timetables unrealistic and counterproductive.”⁷ Moreover, Callwell cautions modern armies to avoid the belief that capture of the enemy capital brings collapse of resistance in small wars and describes the difficulty of bringing irregular forces into battle. This does not mean, however, that these wars are unnecessary. In today’s interconnected world, allowing outlaw regimes to flourish or permitting the use of ungoverned territory by criminals or terrorists increases threats to U.S. national security. On this point, the SWM supplement is again instructive when it said, “In small wars, survival interests of the greater power are not immediately at stake. However, it is possible that an unsuccessfully prosecuted small war could lead to a more serious situation where survival interests do become involved. Thus, small wars should not be viewed as somehow less important than big wars.”⁸

THE ROLE OF AIRPOWER

Our institutional rigidity will cause us to impose our doctrine, our organization, and our technology on the...armed forces [of our allies] to the point that they might be rendered incapable of successfully continuing the war after our withdrawal. We will have transferred to them our repertoire.⁹

Airpower can play a very important role in the prosecution of small wars to prevent international lawlessness or the threat of radical ideologies. Indeed, airpower has played a significant role since it was first used by the British and USMC. However, airpower in small wars is generally not decisive at the operational or strategic levels of war but can be decisive during engagements with enemy forces at the tactical level. Especially, when those forces are in massed formations or fixed locations. History teaches that the primary roles and missions for airpower in small wars have remained consistent regardless of the theater in which air operations are executed or the government executing them. Those roles and missions include the primary mission of supporting ground forces with airlift, helicopter mobility, reconnaissance, and close air support. As was demonstrated in the Greek Civil War and the Huk rebellion in the Philippines,

Airpower can deny security to the guerrilla, can degrade his logistical infrastructure, and can greatly contribute to his demoralization. An air force can observe, track, and attack the guerrilla alone or in conjunction with surface forces. Airpower provides flexibility and initiative in the movement of ground forces. Should the guerrilla aspire to conduct conventional operations, he exposes himself to concerted strikes from the air.”¹⁰

These observations have held true since the first use of aviation forces in the small wars of the 1920s and 1930s and remain true in present day operations.

The USMC SWM provides important descriptions of the role of aviation forces in small wars. Moreover, the SWM made some observations about aviation that hold true today. In the marine experience with small wars air opposition was “nonexistent or negligible” and there were

few targets for bombing, especially by 1000lb bombs. As a result, the focus of aviation efforts was the support of ground units. The challenges presented to USMC aviation units in small wars included the lack of a forward line of troops and the fluid nature of the battlefield. These challenges made it difficult to provide close air support (strikes) for ground forces. Another challenge was the flexibility/mobility of enemy forces. To counter this problem, the SWM called for the capability of reconnaissance aviators to strike enemy forces immediately upon detection or else risk the chance of losing contact.¹¹ Another requirement outlined by the SWM was the need for flexible aviation platforms. The need for wide latitude in tactical employment was discussed because an aviator often needed to go from reconnaissance to strike missions to close air support of ground forces all in the same sortie. Finally, the SWM notes the need for air lift operations to increase the mobility of ground forces, air drop operations to resupply ground forces, and the air evacuation of wounded troops. In the view of the SWM, aviation provided primarily force enhancement capabilities rather than direct combat effects. In short, aviation in small wars is different than aviation operations in large conventional conflicts. The USMC recognized that aviation units, like ground units, had to learn a different style of warfare and adopt new tactics to prosecute small wars effectively. The execution of this new style of warfare can be seen in French operations during the 1960s.

Several important airpower lessons are provided by the French experiences in Vietnam and Algeria. Airpower was key to the French ability to remain engaged in Vietnam as long as it did. The French use of airpower for helicopter evacuation and airlift/air drop operations provided a vital force multiplier. Direct action also played a role in Vietnam but terrain and the insurgent reaction often thwarted its effectiveness. The Viet Minh developed several countermeasures to French air forces. Camouflage, close-in fighting and night movement helped to shield their forces from French air. Nevertheless, the French army and air forces conducted an aggressive campaign that still provided essential support to their ground forces. Despite the ultimate defeat of the French in Vietnam, many airpower lessons were applied to France's counterinsurgency efforts in Algeria.

The French air forces along with the army saturated Algeria and were able to gain control of the country and move to hot spots with speed, ease, and mass. Despite some failures in applying sound counterinsurgency principles, there are many positive aspects of the French military effort in Algeria, specifically their airpower initiatives. Helicopters were used for troop lift and gunships provided firepower and mobility to French forces. Further, the use of T-6, P-47, and A-1 aircraft for their long loiter time, substantial firepower, easy maintenance and ability to use unimproved airfields, provided an excellent counterinsurgency capability. Finally, airpower provided a constant presence in Algeria whether as armed reconnaissance, mobility assets, or psychological operations platforms. The French experience in Vietnam and Algeria provided important lessons for other nations in the 1960s and 1970s.

Significant aviation lessons also occurred during U.S. advisory missions in Vietnam and Latin America. In Vietnam, the United States failed to learn from European experience in small wars and their own Philippine experience. Specifically, the U.S. military was convinced that conventional doctrine could be effective in counterinsurgency. The reason for this belief was that the U.S. became involved in the Greek and Philippine conflicts after they had taken on a conventional form. Despite the fact that the insurgents in both nations made critical mistakes by

attempting to mass in conventional formations, the Americans saw direct action against insurgent forces as the primary effort. The reality that intelligence collection, reconnaissance, transportation and resupply were the most important airpower functions in the Philippines and other small wars was ignored by the U.S. who continued to focus on conventional firepower against enemy forces. As a result, the USAF entered South Vietnam with conventional doctrine when irregular warfare doctrine was clearly needed. What is worse is that the U.S. exported their mindset to the South Vietnamese and made them as ineffective as the U.S. military. Moreover, the eventual Americanization of the war effort served to undermine the ability of the indigenous government to build legitimacy amongst its people. The U.S. was not without examples of effective counterinsurgency in general or effective airpower operations in particular. The United States and its military simply failed to learn from those experiences.

The U.S. performance in Latin America was better in that they learned several important lessons for advising foreign governments on airpower. The small war experiences in Latin America demonstrated three important challenges. First, building effective air forces in small, poor nations is expensive and time consuming. Next, the challenge of building a professional military force free of corruption and heavy-handed tactics is also an important lesson. Finally, the need to build a force for irregular war out of a force focused on conventional war was another lesson learned. It is from these conflicts that the USAF should turn for a vision of future air operations.

AIRPOWER IN FUTURE SMALL WARS

We must in our advocacy [for airpower] emphasize contribution over attribution.¹²

In a 2007 article, USAF Major General Allen Peck correctly argued that airmen must not only “have knowledge of airpower capabilities in [irregular warfare], but also they must articulate airpower concepts as well as educate the joint and coalition communities on the weapons and skills that airpower brings to the fight.”¹³ Peck goes on to articulate the “asymmetric advantages” that airpower brings to small wars. Specifically, he highlights precision strike, information/cyber operations, intelligence/surveillance/reconnaissance (ISR), foreign internal defense, and mobility as key advantages. Ironically, these airpower activities are the same ones cited in the new Army/Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual (FM3-24) as “important force multipliers for U.S., multinational, and host-nation forces fighting an insurgency.”¹⁴ General Peck’s piece is one that advocates for increased knowledge of airpower capabilities for small wars. Other works provide a highly parochial view of airpower in small wars.

In recent articles, attempts have been made to disguise contempt for army ground force COIN doctrine with a desire to produce a “genuinely joint approach” to COIN.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the institution these authors defend has a long history of discounting the study of small wars. As a result, they attempt to blame the army for U.S. COIN difficulties and criticize “boots-on-the-ground zealots” for their lack of airpower savvy. Further, some would argue that the army discounts airpower because it is biased toward ground power. This assessment is inaccurate but effectively shifts blame away from the USAF who has failed to effectively address the small war challenge for over 40 years. Additionally, many would advocate an “air-minded” view of warfare and believe airpower has more effect in the irregular battle-space than reality supports.¹⁶

Moreover, there is little in the way of airpower recommendations other than highlighting the same tried and true airpower capabilities discussed in the SWM and FM3-24. Another issue often overlooked is the fact that airmen provided as little advice for stabilizing Iraq as any other service following the “shock and awe” phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. In other words, the Air Force as an institution had little to no doctrine and few educated leaders to contribute solid COIN advice to national leadership. Thankfully, General Peck acknowledges this need for more COIN education and is advocating for education followed by small war airpower advocacy. What many air-centric thinkers fail to understand is that airpower has never been decisive in any war, big or small. Moreover, “counterinsurgency is inherently land-centric because it is about populations, and populations live on the land.”¹⁷ The ability to influence, assist, make friends, and protect from 15,000 feet or higher is nearly impossible. Airpower capabilities can help, but they cannot replace human beings in resolving differences. The bottom-line is that there is a widely held view that the USAF is indifferent to small wars unless funding or roles and missions are impacted.

The U.S. has a rich history in the prosecution of small wars. Unfortunately, most USAF officers have never been afforded the opportunity to understand the nature of these conflicts. The USAF version of joint airpower is USAF centric with some naval aviation acknowledged if it contributes to the execution of the air tasking order and a USAF run air campaign. Army aviation is never discussed and marine air is always discounted as being tied to the ground fight. The fact of the matter is, small wars are ground fights and all theater aviation assets should be focused on the winning of that fight. This is not to say that the “airman’s perspective” should be discounted, rather, that perspective should be focused on the support of the army or marines wherever and whenever needed rather than on independent air operations alone.

The USAF’s preferred way of war has resulted in doctrine that limits the way its personnel view the contributions of their service. What the USAF needs most today is a theory of air and space power that includes all USAF disciplines and embraces a range of military operations. In other words, a USAF mindset change is needed to transition from a conventional air force to one better suited for small wars. In order to achieve this mindset change, the USAF must ensure their personnel have the experience, education, and force structure to effectively prosecute small wars.¹⁸

The USAF must examine its culture and the means with which it prefers to go to war. This culture is characterized by a love of technology, particularly combat aircraft. The belief that air power can provide war winning capability has sustained the Air Force since World War Two. Stealth technology coupled with precision guided munitions serves to fortify that belief. The search for aircraft that fly higher, faster, farther is illustrative of the USAF’s continued quest to justify its service autonomy by developing capabilities other than those for supporting other services.¹⁹ This culture creates a bias toward air-to-air combat, strategic strike capabilities, and conventional war at the expense of all other endeavors. This bias manifests itself in USAF education and doctrine that ultimately limits the potential Air Force contribution to Department of Defense thinking regarding other missions and thus, limits its contribution to the nation.²⁰

In the 21st Century, the contingency operation has become the USAF’s primary means of protecting and projecting U.S. interests.²¹ The most frequent military mission of the 21st

Century will not be major combat operations but operations in all other areas of the conflict spectrum. The challenge for the USAF is to remake itself into a service that provides robust capabilities across the range of military operations. Such a theory should include Poyner's view of the USAF of the future that "provides service to the nation: *the application of long-range, short notice, strategic influence*. Many of the non-traditional taskings the Air Force has been involved in recently (e.g. humanitarian relief, peacekeeping and peacemaking, counternarcotics, etc.) nestle quite well under the framework of projecting influence." [emphasis in original]²² One example of a vital USAF tool of influence is airlift. However, "delivering supplies is seen as a means to an end, not as an independent end in itself. So, even where logistical efforts are more substantial than the combat operations, it is the combat operations that will be most remembered for lessons learned."²³ This bias is one that must be eliminated through renewed educational efforts.²⁴

The goal of USAF professional military education (PME) should be to provide officers the foundation to make intelligent decisions across the entire spectrum of conflict. Given the direction U.S. foreign policy is heading, USAF PME institutions must more thoroughly examine the history of U.S. experiences with constabulary, nation building and counterinsurgency operations. Without emphasis on learning small wars, the USAF runs the risk of marginalizing its capabilities at best and becoming irrelevant at worst. By educating our officers, we plant seeds that will one day provide a force that is organized, trained and equipped to be as decisive in small wars as it is in major combat operations.²⁵

The literature suggests airlift, ISR and close air support capabilities are most appropriate for fighting these types of conflicts yet the AF still places more emphasis on capabilities for major combat operations.

The Air Force should expect sustained heavy demands for the following sorts of capabilities: Surveillance platforms, operators and analysts; language-qualified personnel—to help train and advise host-country forces, interact with others in-country, and analyze the intelligence "take" from HUMINT and communications intelligence (COMINT) sources; security police and other force protection assets; base operating support personnel and equipment to provide vital functions, such as communications, housing, and transportation at a wide range of locations; heliborne insertion and extraction capabilities; humanitarian relief assets, including engineers, doctors and dentists, public health specialists, tactical airlift aircraft, and crews. From time to time, USAF units will be called upon to attack terrorist targets (to include stocks of CBRN weapons) directly.²⁶

To make a stronger contribution to the nation, the USAF must focus on the kinds of capabilities needed to support special operations, military police and civil affairs forces. There is no doubt the USAF has the technological capability to fulfill these new missions, the biggest challenge will be overcoming the dominant service culture against employing these new capabilities as the primary contribution. The challenge for the USAF as a service is to acknowledge that airlift, special operations, unmanned vehicles, space platforms and information operations may become more critical to fighting terrorism than fighters or bombers. Large standing conventional combat forces should be realigned. Swapping combat air forces with air mobility assets from the guard/reserve may be a viable course of action. Combat air forces should provide a hedge alongside nuclear forces against a future peer competitor. Just as nuclear forces are able to increase their capability in a crisis, conventional forces must be flexible enough to surge for the large conventional conflict. The USAF should be careful not to focus so much on a peer

competitor that doesn't exist in a war they might fight in the future and focus more on the war they're fighting today.²⁷

CONCLUSION

The USAF is like a football team that comes out scoring touchdowns in the first quarter only to lose its tremendous lead by the fourth.²⁸

The effectiveness of airpower in small wars is dependent upon the political strategy executed by the counterinsurgent nation. Certainly, airpower plays an important role in all military operations and innovation has often occurred. However, the air arm is no more effective than the land or sea instrument if the required political effort is not present as well.

Nevertheless, small wars from the post-World War II period established some principal areas where airpower is most effective. In the first place, airpower will serve in a supporting role to ground forces. Second, combat sorties will be less important than support sorties. Finally, air platforms must provide flexibility performing multiple roles. Armed reconnaissance or helicopters used for mobility and as gunships are but two examples. Most of the nations mentioned in this paper learned these principals for airpower in small wars. The United States, unfortunately, did not. Possibly due to a fear of losing service independence or an honest belief that conventional tactics could be effective across the spectrum of conflict, the United States in general and the U.S. Air Force in particular remained steadfast against applying the tactics successfully used in the small wars of recent history. As the 2003 supplement to the USMC SWM states,

The increased likelihood of protracted operations in small wars contrasts with warfighting concepts that anticipate smaller, lighter, technologically empowered forces conducting rapid and decisive operations. Persistence may very well be more important than speed in small wars, where resolve and the tangible commitment of boots on the ground are more important commodities than raw firepower. This politically constrained application of force is the primary reason for the term "small" war.²⁹

Currently, the primary focus of the USAF is to conduct force on force engagements. The majority of thought is directed toward reducing the kill chain and the ability to more effectively strike an enemy. These battlefield operations are necessary but may not represent the primary needs of the nation. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently said, "services must examine their culture critically, if we are to have the capabilities relevant and necessary to overcome the most likely threats America will face in years to come."³⁰ For the USAF, a larger force of ISR and airlift assets, long credited as vital to the prosecution of small wars, may be the capability essential for the type of operations the service will be conducting in the future. During the cold war, the USAF maintained numerous bomber and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) bases in preparation to fight a nuclear war. When the Soviet threat evaporated, U.S. leaders chose to retain a limited nuclear capability as a hedge against a nuclear-armed opponent while the vast majority of the armed forces' technology and organizational structure focused on conventional warfare. As a result, the USAF retained only three nuclear bomber bases and three ICBM bases. Just as the USAF realigned its nuclear and conventional force structure in favor of conventional forces, the service must now tailor its conventional forces for both big wars and small.³¹

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NOTES

¹ Robert Tabor. *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare* (Washington DC: Potomac Books Inc, 2002), 20

² Wray R. Johnson. *Vietnam and American Doctrine for Small Wars* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001), 36

³ Ibid, 37

⁴ USMC *Small Wars Manual* (1940), 2

⁵ Ibid, 18

⁶ Ibid, 27

⁷ Draft 2003 USMC *Small Wars Manual* supplement, 6

⁸ Ibid, 5

⁹ Brian M. Jenkins. "The Unchangeable War." *RAND* (September 1972), 10

¹⁰ James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson. *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 136

¹¹ This tactic is the forerunner of the armed predator concept currently used by US forces today in Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹² Norton A. Schwartz. "Letter to the Editor." *Air Force Magazine*, (March 2007), 5

¹³ Allen G. Peck. "Airpower's Crucial Role in Irregular Warfare." (*Air & Space Power Journal*, Summer 2007), 11

¹⁴ U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps. *Field Manual (FM) 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Pamphlet (MCWP) 3-33.5, Counterinsurgency* (December 2006), E-1

¹⁵ See Charles J. Dunlap, Jr. *Shortchanging the Joint Fight? An airman's Assessment of FM 3-24 and the Case for Developing Truly Joint COIN Doctrine* (Air University Monograph, 2008)

¹⁶ Most USAF officers think in largely conventional terms. Their weapon systems were designed for conventional warfare and their education and training focuses predominantly on conventional warfare.

¹⁷ James S. Corum. "On Airpower, Land Power, and Counterinsurgency: Getting Doctrine Right." (*Joint Force Quarterly*, 2nd quarter 2008), 94

¹⁸ The CSAF, General Schwartz, is attempting to move the service in this direction. The increase in armed UAVs and the recommendation to provide light fighters to allies engaged in COIN efforts are two excellent examples of this endeavor.

¹⁹ Pape describes the USAF desire for autonomy. Robert A. Pape. *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 327. Builder describes the USAF pursuit of means over ends. Carl H. Builder. *The Icarus Syndrome: The Role of Air Power Theory in the Evolution and Fate of the U.S. Air Force* (New Brunswick (USA) and London (UK): Transaction Publishers, 1994), 205

²⁰ "If the mission of the air force is to remain centered on air power, then air power must somehow be defined as more than force, airplanes or pilots: Air power must be more than force because the problems of the world must increasingly be addressed by the military with more than force. Air power must be more than airplanes because the power to be projected through the third dimension is also increasingly derived from critical space and ground support systems. Air power must be more than pilots because the power to be projected through the third dimension can often be more effectively derived from self-guided missiles, remotely-piloted vehicles, and unmanned platforms. Air power must be defined as more than combat, since the nature of conflict is changing worldwide. Regular warfare between nations is becoming less attractive, while irregular warfare between factions—ignoring national boundaries—is becoming more so." Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome*, 262

²¹ A. Timothy Warnock. *Short of War. Major USAF Contingency Operations* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), xxix

²² D. Robert Poyner. "Childhood's End: A Personal View of the Future of Airpower and the Air Force." (*Air Power Journal*, Summer 1996), 116

²³ Donald J. Mrozek. "The Limits of Innovation: Aspects of Air Power in Vietnam." *Air University Review* (January/February 1985), 61

²⁴ Preceding paragraph adapted from Andrew S. Kovich. "USAF Relevance in the 21st Century: A First Quarter Team in a Four Quarter Game." (Montgomery: Air Command and Staff College, 2005), 30

²⁵ Preceding paragraph adapted from Kovich ACSC paper, 31. It should be noted that ACSC currently provides more focus on COIN than when the author attended the school in 2004-2005.

²⁶ Taken from Kovich ACSC paper. Quote from Ochmanek, David. *Military Operations Against Terrorist Groups Abroad: Implications for the United States Air Force*. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003), 34

²⁷ Preceding paragraph adapted from Kovich ACSC paper, 35-36

²⁸ Andrew S. Kovich. "USAF Relevance in the 21st Century: A First Quarter Team in a Four Quarter Game." *Military Review* (July-August 2006), 43

²⁹ Draft 2003 USMC Small Wars Manual supplement, 6

³⁰ Robert M. Gates. Text from speech delivered to Air War College, Monday, 21 April 2008

³¹ Adapted from Kovich *Military Review* and ACSC papers