

Twenty-First-Century Air Warfare and the Invisible War

Strategic Agility

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America's *Air Force: A Call to the Future*, released in July 2014, asserts that *the Air Force's ability to continue to adapt and respond faster than our potential adversaries is the greatest challenge we face over the next 30 years.*

Meeting that challenge will require honest, recurring self-critique, and a willingness to embrace meaningful, perhaps even uncomfortable change. To their great credit, our Airmen—adaptive and resilient—are bridging the widening gap between the dynamic 21st-century environment and our 20th-century bureaucracy. Their initiative and perseverance allow us to succeed in our mission despite sluggish process and cumbersome structure that can engender rigid thinking and stifle the creativity and innovative spirit we seek to champion. *We must commit to changing those things that stand between us and our ability to rapidly adapt.*¹ (emphasis in original)

Who will be our next enemy? Whom will we fight in the next 20–30 years, and how can we be ready? Perhaps even more importantly, how can we prepare the force to deter these fights? To meet its own strategy and the demands of an uncertain global environment, the Air Force must increase its strategic agility. Fundamentally, the service must remain prepared for today's fight yet also ready itself for future conflicts. The Air Force must synchronize these two time horizons and assure that its forces are capable of meeting a myriad of future threats. One step toward realizing greater strategic agility would involve establishing a Warfighter Integration and Innovation Branch (WI2B). However, to understand why this organizational change is necessary, we must first consider the current state of the Air Force.

Recapitalization

We need strategic vision to anticipate global changes in the upcoming decades so the Air Force can maintain a capability and performance advantage in personnel, training, and equipment. Even as we fight today's wars, the necessity of recapitalizing has never been more profound. The average age of our fighter fleet is 30 years, and most of our tankers and bombers are senior citizens.² The recapitalization efforts of Gen Mark Welsh, chief of staff of the Air Force, are similar to those of Gen Wilbur Creech in the 1970s, when he corrected what he called a “slippery

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slope” in combat capability.³ Within five years, the service was procuring new aircraft, had established Red Flag, and had developed the Air Combat Maneuvering and Instrumentation system to train personnel for more complex missions.⁴ Although no one could predict exactly how the world would change (and how Iraq would transition from ally to adversary), General Creech’s foresight postured the Air Force for overwhelming success in Operation Desert Storm nearly 15 years later. The Air Force must have large, long-term, high-priority acquisition programs such as the F-35, the Long-Range Strike Bomber, and others to ensure that the United States is prepared for the future “10-year enemy,” which may even be a near-peer adversary.

Predicting the Future

Today’s enemy may be our future adversary as well, but history has shown that our predictions of the future have proven notoriously wrong. For example, in 2011 Secretary of Defense Robert Gates pointed out that “when it comes to predicting the nature and location of our next military engagements, since Vietnam, our record has been perfect. We have never once gotten it right, from the *Mayaguez* to Grenada, Panama, Somalia, the Balkans, Haiti, Kuwait, Iraq, and more—we had no idea a year before any of these missions that we would be so engaged.”⁵ Even Gen James Mattis, former commander of US Central Command and a true scholar of the profession of arms, in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, observed, “I think, as we look toward the future, I have been a horrible prophet. I have never fought anywhere I expected to in all my years.”⁶

Today’s world is radically different than the one 30 years ago when many current senior military leaders first entered service. If we accept that fact, as many of them have, then we must also acknowledge that our organization, planning, and processes should change radically if we wish to adapt. As a well-known cliché warns us, “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

As an organization, the Air Force is often unable to react in a timely manner to events that occur in this increasingly unpredictable world. According to Air Force colonel John Boyd, the key to assuring victory lies in maintaining a shorter observe-orient-decide-act (OODA) loop than the adversary’s. Our acquisition processes, however, reflect an organizational lethargy that prevents us from keeping pace with global conditions.⁷ Although the Air Force is currently addressing these issues with a revised strategy, planning, and programming process, the service’s organizational structure remains a concern.

The Effect of Operational Inflexibility on Strategic Agility

Of the three levels of war, the operational level is responsible for the integration of tactical-level missions to attain strategic objectives.⁸ Simply put, it determines what will be affected, in what capacity, and with what resources.⁹ As the execution mechanism of the joint force air component commander or combined force air component commander, the air and space operations center (AOC) is the air component

of the operational level of war.¹⁰ The operational level is the most relevant of the three in terms of reacting to today's enemy.

Issues at that level are most apparent when one observes the amount of deliberate planning versus crisis action planning in Africa Command, European Command, and Central Command over the past four years. The observed crisis action planning processes in recent years confirm a systemic problem: the current Air Force structure lacks flexibility, agility, and integration between the different levels of war. The result, cast in an organizational structure designed decades ago, defines the current Air Force strategic agility problem. The Air Force Posture Statement for fiscal year 2015 expressed the need to review the present structure: "The evolving complexity and potentially quick onset of warfare means that future conflicts will be a 'come as you are' fight."¹¹ History has shown that the Air Force cannot rely solely on preparing for a presumed future adversary and assume that it is prepared for the actual enemy that its forces will fight or need to deter. To comprehend this issue and support the establishment of the WI2B, the service must conduct additional analysis of current war-fighter integration at the tactical and operational levels.

War-Fighter Integration

The mission of the US Air Force Warfare Center (USAFWC) is to "ensure deployed forces are well trained and well equipped to conduct integrated combat operations . . . across all levels of war."¹² As an umbrella organization, the USAFWC includes approximately 11,000 personnel among several subordinate units, one of which is the US Air Force Weapons School (USAFWS). The Air Force places great emphasis on developing highly qualified tactical-level talent in the form of graduates from the USAFWS. These weapons officers are the subject-matter experts, senior instructors, lead tacticians, and critical thinkers of war-fighting units across the Air Force. The duties of squadron weapons officers include "assess[ing] unit combat capability to accomplish anticipated missions . . .; identify[ing] deficiencies in training, equipment, support or tactics, which preclude optimum mission accomplishment; identify[ing] unit initiatives that may have MAJCOM [major command]-wide or cross MAJCOM applications; recommend[ing] improvements for unit operations; [and] identify[ing] problem areas requiring corrective action above unit level."¹³ The current organizational structure dictates that unit weapons officers funnel inputs to the parent MAJCOM; unfortunately, this action alone doesn't fully empower those officers to carry out their duties because the MAJCOM functions as a force-providing organization—not a war-fighting organization.

Another USAFWC unit, the 505th Command and Control Wing, is unique in that it is the sole Air Force wing dedicated to the operational level of war. This wing is responsible for operational-level exercises such as Blue Flag and Virtual Flag; it also retains a unit at Nellis AFB, Nevada. The latter simulates functions of an AOC to support tactical training during Red Flag exercises.¹⁴

As the epitome of Air Force war-fighter integration across all levels of war, the USAFWC surprisingly lacks an organization to bridge the gap between the tactical and operational levels of war. Under the current Air Force training construct, units

refine tactical-level execution by simulating operational-level processes with many flawed assumptions. This disconnect can lead to developing and refining artificial tactics that may have limited operational application at the expense of time and resources. Conversely, when AOCs conduct exercises, they simulate tactical-level units and execution with similarly flawed assumptions. The entire training regime appears to contradict the “train like you fight, fight like you train” mantra because units at these two levels of war have no opportunity to train together. Consequently, when crisis action planning is initiated, organizational inflexibility inhibits optimized application of technological capability and resources. This lack of agility affects theaterwide war-fighter integration and resource optimization to support the joint force commander. This is today. Tomorrow will be worse if we take no action.

Warfighter Integration and Innovation Branch

That said, how does the Air Force evolve and increase its strategic agility? Fundamentally, it needs to create another OODA loop, one capable of responding to today’s enemy while the current, larger structure ensures that we are preparing for the future adversary. The keystone of this rapidly responsive process is the proposed WI2B. As a true paradigm shift, the WI2B should not be synchronized, aligned, or otherwise structured with current Air Force organizational constructs. Only then will the synergistic effects of this new structure be realized. This approach is the key to executing both twenty-first-century airpower and exponentially improving strategic agility.

The WI2B should be physically located at the USAFWC for two primary reasons: (1) all weapons officers spend some time at Nellis, where the USAFWC is located, so throughout the USAFWS course, they could easily be exposed to the branch, its people, and processes for integration and innovation; and (2) the WI2B aligns with the current USAFWC mission statement and priorities by allowing the USAFWC to remain abreast of operational-level issues and future plans, yet stay grounded and supportive of the tactical level by focusing on today’s conflicts. The WI2B would create a much-needed bridge between the tactical and operational levels of warfare. As a focal point, the branch would have cross-organizational reach to remove the numerous information stovepipes in the current structure.¹⁵ The WI2B should have direct contact with all relevant combatant command and MAJCOM staffs, all AOCs, developmental and operational test units, the USAFWS curriculum, Red Flag, Green Flag, and all wing weapons officers in the combat air forces. Such contact alone would enhance both training realism and tactical application. More importantly, the cross-organizational structure would tear down communication barriers from the 13 regional and functional worldwide AOCs and provide a venue to facilitate timely integration of operational-level processes and developments that are necessary to produce strategic agility.

Innovation from the War Fighter

General Welsh has emphasized that “we must begin designing agility into capability development.” He further asserts that “those who operate the systems in the field continue to discover uses that designers never imagined. We must strengthen this feedback loop, and rapidly validate operating concepts developed in the field.”¹⁶ The WI2B can further aid this vision by providing an avenue for small-scale, tactical-level innovation that has operational effects. It is not enough that the tactical level has a means not only to not *think* innovatively but also to *act* innovatively. Airmen are the Air Force’s greatest resource, but they are not being optimized to facilitate this vision. This critical element is also absent from the current Air Force war-fighting construct. Additionally, an overwhelming part of that overlooked war-fighter talent pool is the millennial generation that Col S. Clinton Hinote and Col Timothy J. Sundvall describe in their “Leading Millennials” article published in the January–February 2015 edition of *Air and Space Power Journal*.¹⁷ Currently, multiple Air Force instructions and forms exist for the war fighter to recommend changes to tactics and procedures. All of these processes have in common the fact that they are all reactive and have no innovative component—this is also their greatest limitation.

The astute reader may point to “urgent operational need” and “joint urgent operational need” requests, but these are valid only after the war fighter has already deployed and become involved in the conflict in which the need is identified.¹⁸ Again, these are reactive, not innovative. A “joint emergent operational need” is similar to a joint urgent operational need but doesn’t require someone’s presence in an actual conflict. However, they are forwarded through the Joint Staff and thus must have a joint requirement to be considered valid.¹⁹ The WI2B could easily solve this deficiency by the nature of its cross-domain construct.

Conclusion

The overwhelming weight of effort toward game-changing technology will continue to be limited by an inflexible organizational structure charged with applying this technology. To utilize its twenty-first-century technological advantage, the Air Force must similarly evolve its twentieth-century organizational structure. The proposed WI2B would increase the service’s flexibility and adaptability between tactical- and operational-level units globally by proactively creating a rapidly responsive cross-domain OODA loop and thereby attain strategic agility. Doing so will ensure that the Air Force is prepared for both today’s and tomorrow’s enemy. ✪

Notes

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14. "505th Command and Control Wing Fact Sheets," 505th Command and Control Wing, accessed 8 July 2015, <http://www.505ccw.acc.af.mil/library/factsheets/index.asp>.
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