



**Airpower advocates always have, and always will, face certain occupational hazards.**

# The Billy Mitchell Syndrome

By Rebecca Grant



*Mitchell, shown standing at his 1925 court-martial, wrote that airmen “are bluffed and bulldozed so that they dare not tell the truth [about airpower], knowing full well that if they do, they will be deprived of their future career.”*

**A**irpower advocacy is part of being an airman. Air Force Doctrine Document 2 tells all USAF members, “Each of you must be articulate, knowledgeable, and unapologetic advocates.” It adds, “We must understand what it means to be an airman” and explain “what air and space power can bring to the joint fight.”

Advocacy rarely has been easy or safe. It has required reasoned articula-

tion of complex capabilities, delivered at just the right time, in the right place, to the right persons. The message has not always been welcome. Today is no different.

Advocacy has a checkered history in the Air Force and its predecessor organizations. Start with Brig. Gen. William Mitchell in the 1920s, and you see that speaking up for airpower carried risks. Richard P. Hallion, former

Air Force chief historian, has written that one result, among senior airmen, is a “tendency to not be as aggressive in arguing the airpower case as one would expect them to be.” Call it the Billy Mitchell Syndrome.

Mitchell, America’s first great air commander, was the master of airpower advocacy. (See “The Real Billy Mitchell,” February 2001, p. 64.) He saw that it was a multipronged task,

requiring work in the joint community, with allies, inside the US government, in the press, and in the public arena. His singular achievement came late in World War I, when he talked his Army superiors and Allied chiefs into letting him plan and lead a major air campaign. The September 1918 Battle of St. Mihiel was the greatest air combat event of the war. Bringing together this offensive took all of Mitchell's powers of persuasion.

Stand back for a moment and consider how things looked in summer 1918. America was not yet a great military player; the US, though it had been at the Western Front for about a year, was still very much the junior partner among the Allies. The 1.2 million Americans in Europe were still, for the most part, firing French guns, flying French aircraft, and taking their training from French and British officers. Gen. Henri-Philippe Petain, commander of all French forces, summed up the matter this way: "There is no American army as such, as its units are either in training or are amalgamated with the British and French." US airpower had a commensurately low profile.

Fortunately, Gen. John J. Pershing, the top US commander in France, longed to change all that by proving American mettle in a battle fought under US command. It turned out to be the Battle of St. Mihiel Sept. 12-16, 1918. Some 550,000 US troops fought German forces on land and in the air. (See "The St. Mihiel Salient," February 2000, p. 74.)

### Fast Talking

It was during that engagement that the world got a clear view of Mitchell's audacious airpower creed. He saw St. Mihiel as an opportunity to raise the Air Service profile in Pershing's eyes, if, he said, "we delivered the goods." To do it, Mitchell had to do some heavy persuading—and fast. He first importuned British Gen. Hugh M. Trenchard to lend him use of the RAF independent bombing force. Mitchell, a fluent French speaker, won operational control of hundreds of French fliers. Pershing also gave him full authority over virtually all US Air Service pursuit units, which enabled him to command them for air superiority and battlefield interdiction sweeps.

In short, the major Allies—Britain, France, and the United States—all trusted Mitchell to command the biggest air offensive of World War I. The

American officer knew who to convince, what to say, how to explain airpower, and when to close the deal. *That* was a true success story in airpower advocacy.

The armistice did not slow Mitchell's efforts. If anything, he became even more determined to build up America's airpower. It is instructive to note that, upon his return home in 1919, he carefully confined himself to working within the War Department and following the rules of the bureaucratic game. Only after all such measures failed did he move on to employ other tactics.

It was no secret that strong advocacy of airpower caused resentment and opposition within Army and Navy circles. Mitchell himself, in his famous September 1925 statement that sparked his court-martial, charged that airpower partisans were forced to remain silent about the sad state of air operations—or else. "The airmen themselves," he wrote, "are bluffed and bulldozed so that they dare not tell the truth in the majority of cases, knowing full well that if they do, they will be deprived of their future career, sent to the most out-of-the-way places to prevent their telling the truth, and deprived of any chance for advancement."

In 1925, Mitchell, by impugning the Army and Navy leadership, deliberately provoked a court-martial, seeing it as the best and fastest way to bring the airpower debate to a climax. Though convicted at trial and forced to retire, Mitchell continued to speak out until his death in 1936. Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, a Mitchell supporter who became Chief of the US Army Air Forces in World War II, said, "The public was on his side, he was righter than hell, and he knew it." Others questioned the wisdom of his ways, and there is little doubt that Mitchell's fate made airmen of the 1920s and 1930s think twice before speaking their minds.

### All-Out Brawls

In World War II, American air dominance helped secure victory, and advocacy returned with full force. Candid talk about airpower ran strong during the war years, of course. When the independent Air Force was created in 1947, there was no lack of outspoken partisans. Take, for example, the late 1940s, which featured a freewheeling discussion about the unification of the services and a bomber vs. carrier argument that culminated in what is now known as "the Revolt of the Ad-

mirals." That all-out Washington brawl pitted Air Force backers against Navy partisans in open conflict, and no one on either side minced words. Air Force officers gave at least as good as they got. (See "Revolt of the Admirals," May 1988, p. 62.)

Air Force officers stayed on the offensive well into the next decade. In the May 1956 issue of this magazine, for example, Gen. Otto P. Weyland, commander of Tactical Air Command, delivered an amazingly blunt assertion of the supremacy of airpower. He argued, "Airpower, as exemplified in the United States Air Force, is the fundamental military threat restraining the enemy." The general went on to say, "United States Air Force airpower is ... the decisive, dominant force assuring a continued Free World." Through the 1950s and early 1960s, Weyland, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, Gen. Nathan F. Twining, and other senior leaders spoke widely and wrote extensively about the pivotal place of airpower in the defense of the nation.

Then, in the mid-1960s, the tide began slowly to turn, and open advocacy again became increasingly difficult. A particular strand of Cold War scholarly revisionism put strategic bombing in a negative light. Assessments of armed operations ranging from the firebombing of Dresden in Germany to the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan to the Cold War preparations for massive nuclear retaliation against the Soviet Union all cast US airpower in the role of villain.

Mitchell's reputation also sank. Revisionist criticism of the famous airman grew strong in the 1960s. Writing in 1964, the influential naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison accused Mitchell of keeping the Navy "weak" in the decade before World War II. Gen. Benjamin D. Foulois, an old Air Service rival of Mitchell's who lived until 1967, left an autobiography that sullied Mitchell's image even further.

In the post-Vietnam years, a full reversal of course occurred. A bumper crop of military histories blamed America's failure in Southeast Asia largely on deficiencies of airpower. By the late 1970s and 1980s, a doctrinal reaction had elevated land power to prime position and had reassigned airpower to a supporting role, a junior partner to the Army in the AirLand Battle concept. New perceptions devalued the historic achievements of airpower—whether with regard to



**Mitchell, shown in France with his airplane, won operational control of hundreds of French fliers and virtually all US Air Service pursuit units for the Battle of St. Mihiel. He considered the huge battle an ideal opportunity to prove airpower's mettle.**

specific battles or to the persona of Billy Mitchell.

### Shortage of Mitchells

Institutionally, airmen were thrown onto the defensive. Outspoken, Mitchellessque advocacy became uncommon. A sign of the times appeared in 1982, when USAF's *Air University Review* published a controversial article by USAF Lt. Col. Timothy E. Kline. The title was, "Where Have All the Mitchells Gone?" Kline lamented what he saw as an expanding managerial culture within the Air Force that, as he perceived it, was robbing the service of its special sense of mission. According to Kline, what the Air Force lacked was not Mitchell's methods or flamboyance; it lacked his vision and his willingness to articulate it. "The Air Force," wrote Kline, "desperately needs a new Mitchell—not to do battle with the establishment but to provide a vision for airpower's future."

Inside or outside the service, it became increasingly perilous to maintain publicly that airpower had special value. A key point was reached in 1986 with passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, a law giving major new powers to the centralized "joint" establishment while sharply weakening the power of the military services. In 1990, the Air Force released its Global Reach-Global Power white paper, but Hallion, working for Secretary of the Air Force Donald B. Rice, recalled that "airmen seemed very reluctant to speak to the value of airpower in national defense."

Soon, USAF leaders were running into troubles of a kind scarcely seen in decades. The worst was the attack on Gen. Michael J. Dugan, which was perhaps the most improper political assault on an airman, or any other military figure, since the days of Mitchell. Dugan, a fighter pilot, became Chief of Staff in July 1990. On Aug. 2, barely a month later, Iraq invaded Kuwait. USAF forces rushed to the Persian Gulf as President George H.W. Bush began preparations for defense of allies and for a possible offensive against Iraqi

aggressors. In mid-September, Dugan made a trip to the Gulf and, in several sessions with reporters, offered a candid assessment of airpower's contribution in the war to come.

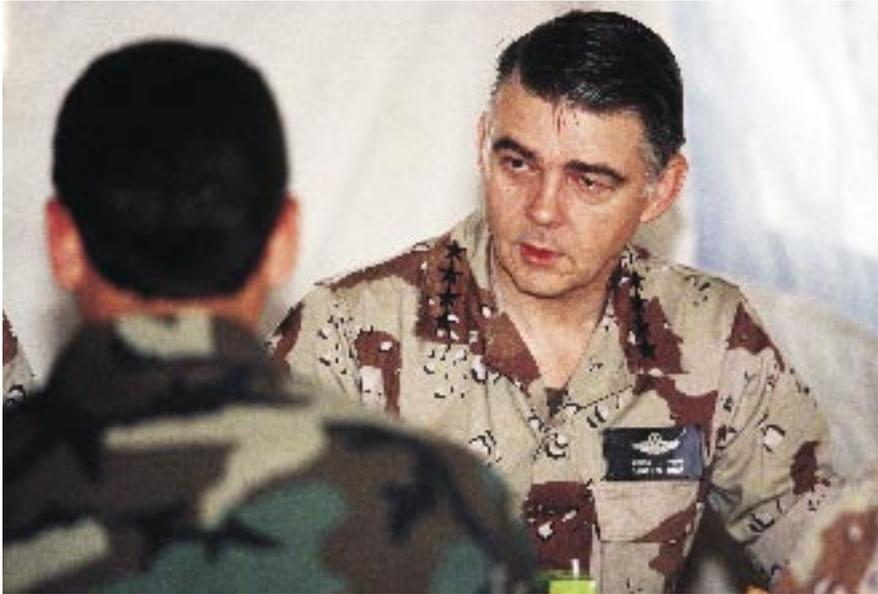
*Washington Post* reporter Rick Atkinson, who was present at Dugan's press sessions, summed up his remarks in a long Sept. 16 article in that newspaper. The Chief of Staff had strongly (and, as it turned out, accurately) portrayed airpower as an offensive option that would overwhelm Iraq's Air Force and destroy much of its Army. Air attacks, he said, would not remain limited to targets in Kuwait but would range across Iraq. "The cutting edge would be in downtown Baghdad," Dugan told Atkinson.

### Cheney's Problem

Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney found fault with Dugan's remarks and imposed a harsh penalty. The Pentagon chief demanded and got Dugan's immediate resignation, charging that the Chief "showed poor judgment at a sensitive time." There was little doubt, however, that part of the problem was that Dugan had extolled the singular capabilities of airpower. Dugan, unintentionally, had trod in the footsteps of Mitchell in asserting a claim that few understood or believed. Most galling, to some, was his suggestion that airpower could act independently of ground forces. Cheney slammed Dugan for "demeaning the contributions

**Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Air Force leaders such as Gen. Curtis LeMay (pictured), Gen. Otto Weyland, and Gen. Nathan Twining spoke out forcefully about the merits and unique capabilities of airpower for defending the nation.**





**Before the 1991 Gulf War, Gen. Michael Dugan, Air Force Chief of Staff, correctly told reporters that airpower could overwhelm the Iraqi forces and make Baghdad the “cutting edge” of the upcoming offensive.**

of other services.” Army Gen. Colin L. Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was “particularly upset by comments [suggesting] that the Air Force could win a war single-handedly,” wrote Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor in their Desert Storm book, *The Generals’ War*. In reality, Dugan never said anything of the sort.

Within months, the Gulf War had amply vindicated Dugan, as American airpower dismantled Iraqi forces so thoroughly that Army forces needed only 100 hours to rout the pulverized remnant and drive it from Kuwait. However, Washington’s nerve endings were still acutely sensitive to any claims of airpower dominance, as was soon made clear.

On March 15, 1991, Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams gathered reporters for a briefing by the new Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, about the performance of US airpower in the war. It turned out to be a prime example of the Billy Mitchell Syndrome. (See “The Keeper File: McPeak on Desert Storm,” May 2004, p. 136.)

McPeak described the war as “a success story for US and coalition air forces,” but then immediately emphasized the point that it was “a combined-arms operation in which all of the services made a very important contribution and, of course, all of our allies as well.” The Chief then told the reporters, “I hope you’ll forgive me, now, if I talk mostly about the air campaign for the rest of this time, since that’s my piece of the thing.”

Much later, after a full and rounded presentation, a reporter asked McPeak: “Is it conceivable that, by continuing the air war alone for another period, the Iraqis would have been totally defeated without a ground war?” McPeak’s response was, “My private conviction is that this is the first time in history that a field army has been defeated by airpower.”

Though McPeak’s very next words re-emphasized the joint nature of the victory, the political damage was done. McPeak’s comment was widely proclaimed in the press as yet another example of an “*airpower über alles*” mentality that supposedly runs rampant

throughout the Air Force. Members of Congress weighed in with censorious commentaries. Even years later, airmen and airpower backers would wince at the mention of McPeak’s remark. Somehow, McPeak—like Dugan before him—had traduced some iron law of jointness by accurately describing the capabilities of airpower in modern war.

### Roughed Up

In retrospect, it becomes clear that airpower’s Gulf War success did not quiet the critics but only inflamed them. By the mid-1990s, it was open season on airpower, and the officers of other services were only too ready to rough up anyone speaking out for airpower. One of these was Army Col. Douglas A. Macgregor, author of a widely cited 1997 treatise on landpower reform titled *Breaking the Phalanx*. Toward the end of the book, Macgregor unfurled his hostility. “Today’s argument,” he wrote, “that things have now changed, that precision strike and smart munitions have finally come into their own—aside from ringing with the same false hopes as the last 70 years of promises from airpower enthusiasts—is based on data of very questionable reliability.”

It was a claim stated and restated by ground-pounders and their amen chorus in the press and Congress. In 1998, Air Force Maj. Gen. Charles D. Link summed up the problem for USAF leaders. “When a soldier talks about using airpower to support troops on the ground, he’s applauded for his ‘jointness,’” said Link. “When a sailor



**Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, flanked here by Air Force Col. Alton Whitley and Saudi Brig. Gen. Abdul Aziz Al-Sudairi, commander of Joint Forces Saudi Arabia, promptly fired Dugan for his comments about airpower.**



**Gen. Merrill McPeak (standing), Dugan's successor, was criticized in an event that is now legendary in the annals of joint force political correctness. Asked late in a briefing if airpower alone could have defeated Iraq, McPeak said, "This is the first time in history that a field army has been defeated by airpower." It was immediately forgotten that McPeak had led off by extolling the joint nature of the victory.**

talks about using Air Force tankers to extend the range of naval aircraft, he's lauded for his 'jointness.' But when an airman talks about using airpower independently to kill the enemy instead of putting our troops in harm's way in the first place, he's being parochial and 'unjoint,' which is now viewed as a sin on the order of adultery."

Over the past 15 years, a succession of Pentagon civilian leaders and high-ranking officers in the joint world have turned jointness into something of a secular religion. Any claims of special military competency are reviled as "service-centric" and "unjoint." Because such charges have negative political consequences, it is not surprising that unapologetic advocacy of airpower hasn't been heard as often as in years past. (The rules, for some reason, don't seem to apply to ground power, sea power, and all other forms of military capability, which are advocated openly and boisterously.) The big debates on combat concepts and programs found airmen forced onto the defensive or keeping quiet to avoid being boxed in. Frequently, tamping down discussions about airpower was tactically astute.

Advocacy includes informing both national leaders and the public about what airpower does. Lack of information inevitably distorts debate about

defense. The *Washington Post's* William M. Arkin, a frequent but not unfair critic of the Air Force, picked up on the lack of understanding of airpower. In a recent *Armed Forces Journal* article, he marveled at how Americans—including, apparently, Army Gen. Tommy R. Franks, head of US Central Command—had no idea how effective airpower would be in Afghanistan. Arkin asked, "Could it be that Franks, CENTCOM, the Army, and Washington all lack[ed] an appreciation of airpower's potential and of the service's fundamental obedience to precision?"

### Why Do We Need One?

The advocacy vacuum has led highly placed elected officials to wonder why the Air Force even exists. Retired Air Force Gen. Russell E. Dougherty, former head of Strategic Air Command, recounted the story of preparing Gen. George S. Brown for 1973 hearings on his nomination to become the Air Force Chief of Staff. The staff, said Dougherty, drilled Brown about current issues and sent him to Capitol

Hill with "books all tabbed and filled with figures and facts." Then, said Dougherty, "the first question [Brown] got from the committee was, 'General, why do we need an Air Force?'" No one conceived that such a question would come up.

Advocacy is an art advanced by many airmen, at many levels. It begins—as it did for Mitchell—with operations. The dispatch of high-ranking air liaisons from the combined force air component commander to other components was one major example. Begun informally just prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the process is now a standard part of combat airpower practice. It's also classic Mitchell—airmen forging relationships and making sure joint commanders understood what airpower could do. At command levels, it's crucial.

Turning battlespace achievement into joint wisdom and historical record is another tough process. In the current armed forces, there is still a tendency to downplay the contributions of airpower, particularly in public settings. A case in point concerns the recent air strike that killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a top al Qaeda operative in Iraq. The ability to track and target a terrorist so precisely stems from Air Force-led intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance measures, choice of weapons, and development of tactics. While airmen were not the only ones doing the work, it was surely an occasion for pride in what airpower can do, yet official Air Force comments emphasized only teamwork, the collective nature of the fight, and so on.

No harm done, perhaps, so long as the American public and officials are fully aware of the value of air and space power and are willing to support it, but too much modesty for too long could cause problems. Mitchell unabashedly—and unapologetically—shaped the debate over airpower. Today, the task is to do the same. Proper stewardship of air and space power requires airmen not only to push the limits in combat but also to emphasize, publicly and frequently, what is special and vital about air and space power. No one else can be counted on to do it. ■

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