In early 1996, a band of action officers at Air Force headquarters decided that it was time to make a few waves. Their objective was not trivial. These officers—members of the Plans and Operations directorate—elected to protest a blueprint prepared by Army Gen. J.H. Binford Peay III, head of US Central Command, for fighting a major war in Southwest Asia.

At issue was the general’s “strategic concept” for his theater, put forth in a paper used as the basis for more-detailed war plans. USCENTCOM circulated a draft, and when the USAF officers read it, they were incensed. They saw that CENTCOM had propounded a war scenario that closely resembled Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait and threat of an attack on Saudi Arabia. Amazingly, however, Peay postulated that airpower would be less effective than it was in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Rather than assuming that technological advances over five years had strengthened airpower, he assumed the opposite—that airpower’s contribution would fall below the Desert Storm standard. This was a shock to the officers. In the wake of USAF’s Gulf War successes, the Air Force had, if anything, become even more confident that airpower could be used in a dramatically expanded way—to slow, halt, and perhaps even defeat an enemy before allied ground troops could arrive on scene. In many instances, argued the officers, an air campaign could bring aggression to a decisive halt, where the enemy no longer has the capability to advance and his strategic options are exhausted.

The paper made it clear that Peay disagreed with this notion, to put it mildly.

In his concept of how the next war would unfold, aircraft battered invading forces for a couple of days. But then, for reasons unstated, the Air Force stopped the attack, husbanded resources, and largely held its fire for weeks. In the interval, Army troops deployed to the region, prepared for battle, moved into position, and then launched a counteroffensive—all with massive air support.

“Boots on the Ground”

Peay’s message was none too subtle: The principal business of war—inflicting decisive defeat on the enemy—could be carried out only by land forces—“boots on the ground”—not air forces.

The Air Staff officers delivered a message of their own, filing a formal notice of “nonconcurrence” with CENTCOM’s paper. With this action, the Air Force gave its first clear signal that it would no longer accept the traditional view that it should act, at all times, as a support arm of US surface forces. The officers argued that, in many cases, airpower would be the best instrument for carrying out the main thrust of a war, especially in light of the US public’s sensitivity to the loss of soldiers under ambiguous circumstances in far-off places.

Though bureaucratic politics forced the Air Force to withdraw the protest, Peay was compelled to write an air campaign into his strategic concept. It was presented as an alternative to—or “excursion” from—his basic plan, which contin-
ued to use a major land engagement as its basic organizing principle. The Air Staff officers maintained that CENTCOM plans needlessly put US soldiers and Marines at risk and continued to chip away in what has become a long-running contest of service visions.

Such actions once were considered audacious, but they have multiplied and diversified in recent years, fueling a revival of sorts within the Air Force itself. Joint war plans in the two principal theaters—Southwest Asia and the Korean Peninsula—haven’t changed much; in the view of Air Force partisans, they continue to devote too much scarce airlift to hauling ground troops to the fight and not enough to supporting the application of airpower. However, the Air Force has made some strides in the world of strategy and doctrine.

One instance of this came recently from the highest Pentagon levels. The Defense Department’s 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review for the first time put the Pentagon on record as supporting a vigorous “halt phase” of war, which the Air Force believes will require the application of significant airpower.

The final QDR report declared the US must be “able to rapidly defeat initial enemy advances short of their objectives in two theaters in close succession, one followed almost immediately by the other. Maintaining this capability is absolutely critical to the United States’ ability to seize the initiative in both theaters and to minimize the amount of territory we and our allies must regain from the enemies.”

In this initial stage, immense force from the air would be brought to bear against an enemy’s invading troops and centers of power. The goal would be to stop an attack even before Army or Marine forces could reach the war zone in great number.

The earliest and still main proponent of this concept, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Charles D. Link, was the USAF Chief of Staff’s point man on the QDR. In Link’s view, the employment of airpower early and decisively shapes up as the most effective way to prosecute a war in modern times.

**Horse and Horseman**

“Too much of our military is still focused on the enemy’s will and trying to find ways to break his will,” Link explained, “when, in fact, what we have the capacity to do, if we just understand it, is to take away his means of exercising his will. If I can kill his horse, I don’t care if he likes to ride.”

In Link’s view, airpower provides not only the most effective military instrument but also the most ethical, in that it holds out the most promise of saving lives—on both sides.

Not long after the QDR delivered its approving verdict on exploiting the halt phase, Link summed up the situation with these words: “If one has the capacity to find, fix, and attrit enemy military capabilities from the air, then one owes it to the nation to develop and exploit that capability.”

A decisive halt, airpower proponents believe, could provide a “culminating point” at which the theater commander has a number of options to further disable the enemy regime, ranging from a ground offensive to continuation of the air campaign.

Not even airpower’s strongest advocates see the matter in absolute terms. They freely acknowledge the strengths of airpower do not make ground or naval forces irrelevant or necessarily make airpower the preferred solution in all cases. “When airmen talk about the use of airpower being ‘low risk,’ they’re not saying ‘no risk,’” Link said in a recent interview. “It’s a relative thing, and so you have to look at airpower options as just those—options.”

Airpower options might also save money, proponents say. During the QDR deliberations, Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, then Air Force Chief of Staff, raised the politically contentious prospect that the defense budget may not be able to provide enough forces to prosecute two nearly simultaneous Major Regional Conflicts, as called for in national strategy, unless the US made heavy early use of airpower and took many of its ground forces from the Army National Guard and Army Reserve.

Fogleman said, “Clearly, the possibility exists that, while you’re engaged somewhere in the world, some other adversary can decide to take advantage of that. So the issue in my mind is, do you try to sustain an entire second MRC’s worth of forces and capabilities, and do you do that, say, only in the active force? Do you do it with active and Guard types of forces?”

Trying not to rock the boat too much, Fogleman avoided saying it was the Army to whom he was referring. If the combat troops in the active Army were not needed for weeks or even months after the Air Force and Navy launch an extended halt phase, perhaps more ground forces could be put in the Guard and Reserves, his thinking went. The Army was not taken with the idea, given that combat missions are regarded as the lifeblood of the active component.
Despite Fogleman’s reticence, the message came through clearly at the Pentagon: Not only did Defense Secretary William S. Cohen include an endorsement for a decisive halt phase in the QDR’s newly reworked defense strategy but he also, through his senior deputies, launched a serious effort to change the way the Army leadership uses its Guard and Reserve forces.

Thumbs Up for JV 2010

The Air Force sees Joint Vision 2010, the “conceptual template” for future combat laid out by Army Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as a warfighting construct in which it can make the most of its strengths.


The service vision goes on to lay out the key capabilities and characteristics of the future Air Force: air and space superiority, global attack, rapid global mobility, precision engagement, information superiority, and agile combat support.

The bureaucratic battle goes on, with periodic clashes of service visions. In September, the Air Force scored a victory in the struggle to get policy-makers to recognize airpower’s potential. The director of the Joint Staff, Vice Adm. Dennis C. Blair, supported the Air Force’s position on the creation of a joint doctrine for countering air and missile threats. All three other services were expected to protest Blair’s decision—which supports the notion of an air defense commander with the ability to go after targets theater-wide—at the level of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in a formal tank session.

Many defense experts think the airpower medium has the ability to give adversaries great pause even when used in a more limited context. The Navy, for its part, tends to embrace this view enthusiastically and puts it in the context of providing presence in world hot spots.

Retired Adm. Leighton W. Smith Jr., a former NATO commander, spoke about this matter last summer at a Washington, D.C., conference titled, “Dueling Doctrines and the New American Way of War.” Smith served as commander of NATO south forces and headed the initial Implementation Force assembled to enforce the peace in Bosnia after the 1995 Dayton peace accords. Smith recalled, “The fact of the matter is that we put together one hell of an effective air operation.” To Smith, the payoff of airpower’s effectiveness was that when he issued threats, they were believed. “Airpower has a great persuasive force,” he told the audience.

The Counterattack

The Air Force’s new vision of warfare and of the role that it should play in future conflict has provoked frequent attacks. The main challenge comes from the Army, supported by the Marine Corps. These services argue with mounting intensity that what will matter most in future conflicts is boots on the ground, not advanced aircraft and precision guided weapons.

The Army conceives of itself as “the force of decision.” In its “Army Vision 2010” paper, the service argues that land power makes permanent “the otherwise transitory advantages achieved by air and naval forces.”

Within the Army, officers feel they have a special mission to bring America’s wars to a successful termination—a role that, in their view, is not shared by the other services. Thus, ground-force partisans believe that everything else, including airpower, should be made subordinate to the requirements of success in the land battle and that airpower’s role is to support them.

Furthermore, the Army and Marine Corps, with considerable support from some officials within the Pentagon, emphasize a need to prepare less for Major Theater War and more for Smaller-Scale Contingencies and for Military Operations Other Than War.

Army leaders contend that increased demand for these operations on the lower end of the spectrum of crisis suggests that missions should be rethought with more emphasis given to the troops carrying rifles. Air Force proponents, for their part, maintain that these missions, though important, are lesser in nature and should be subordinated to the demands of theater war. The objective of US military forces is full spectrum dominance, not marginal advantage, they say.


In Van Riper’s vision of the future, the greatest US security problems...
will arise not chiefly from some heavily armed regional aggressor but rather from nontraditional and irregular forces such as terrorists, drug traffickers, and organized crime forces. In judging the best way to cope with these problems, he says, the US should emphasize the likelihood of Smaller-Scale Contingencies, forcible entry operations, urban warfare, peacekeeping missions, and the like. As a result, he concludes, the emphasis should be on training and equipping Marines and soldiers for ground operations.

“Airpower can do a lot, but it can't do it all,” Van Riper said in a paper presented at the Dueling Doctrines conference. “Those who wear the ‘muddy boots’ cannot be forgotten in your deliberations. They will still be necessary in the 21st Century.”

Friction Forever

Scales’ view, though it differs from Van Riper’s in some important respects, echoes the Marine’s skepticism of the utility of airpower and high technology as a sufficient answer to the wars of the not-too-distant future. He—and Van Riper—argues that there has been no fundamental change in the nature of war, that “friction” will still bedevil actual operations, that high-technology solutions have potentially great weaknesses, and that imposing the will of the US on an adversary requires, ultimately, troops on the ground to close with the enemy and destroy him in decisive battle.

These commentators and others dispute Link’s tendency to downplay the importance of breaking the enemy’s will to fight—that is, the Air Force general’s belief that one should try to “kill the horse” rather than go after the rider.

Critics argue that a variety of factors might make it difficult or even impossible to find, much less to destroy, “the horse.” Stationing mobile missile launchers in residential areas or employing low-technology modes of communication immune to electronic jamming or interception, continue to pose serious targeting challenges, they contend.

In addition, they say, an enterprising adversary can continue to cause problems for US forces even after his strategic targets apparently have been decimated. The critics note that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was able to suppress rebellions to his north and south even after taking a fearful pounding in the Gulf War. “It’s not the horse that’s going to kill me,” said one US military officer. “It’s the enemy.”

The OODA Loop

The late Col. John R. Boyd, a leading Air Force intellectual who retired in the 1970s, frequently stated that he saw enormous potential in airpower but saw no need to limit war to a single medium. Boyd, a leader of the military reform movement in the 1970s and 1980s, was renowned for his elaboration of the “OODA Loop”—Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act—a concept for anticipating and crippling an enemy in a fast-paced battle. For Boyd, destroying an adversary’s will to fight was essential to ending the war, and understanding and undermining an enemy’s “critical nodes” with rapid-fire attacks was one important facet of that effort.

While last year’s QDR bolstered the Air Force view of warfighting doctrine, it also trimmed some of the forces that service leaders believe are key to its ability to dominate the skies in future conflicts.

The review cut procurement of the F-22 air superiority fighter from 438 to 339 aircraft, chopped the buy of the Joint Strike Fighter from 2,978 to 2,852 aircraft, and reinforced an earlier decision to cap B-2 stealth bombers at 21.

The National Defense Panel, formed to conduct a review of the Pentagon’s QDR, seemed, in its December 1997 findings, uninspired by the potential of airpower and questioned the cost, quantities, and future warfighting effectiveness not only of the Air Force’s F-22 fighter but also of the multiservice Joint Strike Fighter and Navy F/A-18E/F without suggesting more attractive alternatives.

Air Force officials felt uneasy about the NDP’s failure even to mention the halt phase; the final NDP report contained not a word about the issue. Chairman Philip A. Odeen explained that the panel “didn’t feel [it] could endorse that particular approach because we don’t think it has been demonstrated yet.”

For all the Air Force’s popularity with the public and its modest behind-the-scenes successes in the Pentagon’s interservice war of words, its leaders acknowledge that the service has a long way to go before it can meet its true potential. To make its vision a reality, USAF will have to deal with a number of major challenges. Airpower experts differ about which are most critical for the Air Force to meet in the near and long term. Here, however, are some of the issues frequently mentioned:

Control of the USAF budget.

Last year the Office of the Secretary of Defense gave the Air Force an additional $1 billion for its Fiscal

An Iraqi hardened shelter destroyed during the Gulf War. Giving airpower a larger role in US war plans has not won overwhelming endorsement. The National Defense Panel report was particularly unenthusiastic.
While satellite capabilities have several potentially hostile nations, the intel community has attained intelligence and level of understanding taken a toll on the quality of intelligence to compensate for the inherent limitations in sensors. "You have to have good intel to have a good air campaign—or any other campaign for that matter," says Deptula, now commander of a joint task force enforcing the no-fly zone in northern Iraq.

**Doctrine Averse Attitudes.** Getting Air Force officers to actually read and understand official USAF doctrine poses a major challenge. Retired Air Force Col. Rich Meeboer, the senior planner who challenged the CENTCOM commander’s concept paper in 1996, warns that Army officers, who “live and die on doctrine,” dominate the joint world.

The Air Force “can’t effectively compete” in the world of joint experimentation and shrinking budgets unless it can point to a piece of paper that clearly lays out how USAF intends to fight wars. The view of Meeboer, now a defense consultant in Virginia, may surprise those who believe dollars or politics are all that stand in the way of Air Force success. However, he says that as Congress and the Pentagon place increasing emphasis on joint solutions it is the doctrine-rich Army that stands to gain most.

**Influence on Capitol Hill.** These days, say defense analysts, it’s not enough to have a good story. A service must have influential friends to give voice to and fund its vision of warfare.

The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps have formidable allies in all the right committees of Congress, while the Air Force, the youngest and least traditional of the military services, relies mostly on friends in industry to press lawmakers for selected modernization funding. As many see it, the service needs more advocates in Congress who can articulate its many priorities and the vision that unifies these parts.

**Intra-Air Force Schism.** Over the past 18 months, reports were emanating from the Defense Department that officers in the Air Staff’s Air and Space Operations directorate and Plans and Programs directorate were playing tug-of-war over control of planning for major initiatives, like preparations for the next QDR in 2001.

Recently the two directorates took a major step to settle the discord, signing an agreement to split up the work and establish a working group to oversee planning for upcoming DoD reviews. The two directorates are now working “very diligently” to strengthen their ties, said one USAF officer, “because there was such a schism.” While only time will tell, there appears to be growing recognition that the Air Force cannot stand for much in the joint environment when it fails to keep an eye on central objectives.

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