

## Keep Pressing the Advantage

**A**S IT recovers from budget-induced summertime groundings, the Air Force remains extraordinarily capable. This is the force the nation paid for.

This force was not cheap, it was not built overnight, and its advantages do not last long without continued investment. As Will Rogers once said, “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

The Air Force in late August released a “Global Vigilance, Global Reach, Global Power For America” paper. This document lays out many of the ways airpower has benefitted the nation in months and decades past. The paper should be required reading for all who would allow USAF’s capabilities to wither on the vine, for it also sounds an alert about the future.

“The 21st century is a time of unusual volatility due to the spread of advanced technology,” the paper notes. The nation rarely knows where it will fight in the future, so it must be prepared and ready for a wide range of contingencies. This requires “a flexible, precise, and lethal force that is capable of rapidly responding anywhere ... to protect and advance America’s interests.”

Flexibility and lethality are only possible if the Air Force continues to attract quality airmen, train them to be the world’s best, and acquire and maintain top-notch equipment. Airpower advocates hold these truths to be self-evident, but others need to be reminded.

“This force must be deliberately planned for and appropriately and consistently funded,” USAF’s paper reads. Today’s Air Force is the smallest in history, but will likely have to shrink even more to meet future budget targets. “A smaller, highly capable Air Force is clearly preferable to a larger one of lesser quality,” the paper says.

The Air Force’s missions have not fundamentally changed from when the service became independent in 1947. The core missions 66 years ago were: Air Superiority, Air Reconnaissance, Airlift, Strategic Air Force, and Coordination of Air Defense. While most of these missions have broadened, the originals are all recognizable.

“What has radically changed is how the Air Force performs these missions,” wrote Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, Chief of Staff, in a message accompanying the

document. The modern versions of these missions are integrated, in constant use, and—as the paper makes plain—perishable capabilities.

**Air and Space Superiority:** The Air Force ensures US forces are free from aerial attack and have the freedom to maneuver and operate at will. No American ground troop has been killed by an enemy air attack since two soldiers died April 15, 1953, on a remote island in what is today North Korea.

The ability to maintain air, space, and cyber superiority “will become progressively more difficult as sophisticated technologies continue to proliferate,”

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the paper notes. Beyond equipment, air dominance requires trained and ready forces with “a well-honed combat edge.”

**Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance:** In 2012, ISR airmen “provided critical adversary awareness and targeting intelligence to US and coalition forces” in more than 250 battles. They helped identify more than 100 enemy weapons caches and explosive devices and had many other successes.

In the future, “gaining and maintaining an ISR advantage will become increasingly difficult” as future battlefields will be well-defended. Iraq and Afghanistan offered permissive environments for slow, unprotected ISR aircraft like Predators and Reapers. USAF therefore must “focus primarily on enhancing its ISR capabilities for operations in contested environments.”

**Rapid Global Mobility:** USAF’s tanker and airlift forces are in constant action. In 2012 alone, mobility airmen performed 1,300 airdrops to supply dispersed forces, primarily on the ground in Afghanistan. An Air Force transport takes off for a mission every 90 seconds, around the clock, on average.

With the final C-17 delivered to the Air Force just last month, USAF must look ahead. “We anticipate a future that requires ... rapid global mobility to remote, austere, and distributed locations in contested environments,” the paper reads. The need for greater range, better fuel efficiency, and larger load capacities will guide future investment.

**Global Strike:** The Air Force validates its ability to threaten and destroy targets constantly, through continual training, regular exercises, and frequent combat operations. Nuclear forces provide a credible deterrent, while airmen operating aircraft as diverse as MQ-1 remotely piloted aircraft, A-10 attack aircraft, and B-1 bombers take on enemy forces in Afghanistan.

The paper notes enemies “are hardening and burying key weapons and command and control facilities.” In response, USAF will “maintain its ability to neutralize such targets so that America’s military credibility will remain uncontested [and] potential adversaries will not be emboldened.”

**Command and Control:** Reliable, resilient, and interoperable C2 networks are the backbone of modern US military power. Today, worldwide communication can be secure and instantaneous, enabling everything from theaterwide operations to direct links between ground forces and their air support.

These systems are huge and tempting targets. US networks are under constant threat from cyber weapons, anti-satellite systems, electromagnetic jamming, and even kinetic attack and sabotage. The threats get more sophisticated all the time.

As the paper makes clear, USAF’s advantages are not birthrights. They require constant work and investment. USAF is so capable that many in the general public, government, and the other services take airpower for granted.

Airpower investment is sometimes derided as “overmatch”—needlessly building upon an already safe advantage. When it comes to wartime capability, there is no such thing. Airpower is America’s asymmetric advantage.

With reliable funding and long-term guidance, the Air Force will provide unparalleled top cover for the nation and its troops. But the US could inadvertently find itself with parity in the air if it does not keep pressing its advantages. One can look back to Vietnam, Korea, or World War II to see the true cost of parity: death and destruction.

Or, as Welsh summarized in a video introducing the paper, “Airpower: Without it, you lose.” ■