

Lessons from Modern Warfare

What the Conflicts of the Post–Cold War Years Should Have Taught Us

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In late spring of 2012, the US Joint Staff released a substantial interim study aimed at extracting the most useful teachings offered by the collective combat experiences of the preceding decade. This study was produced in response to a tasking issued the previous October by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, GEN Martin Dempsey, USA, for the organization's Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis (JCOA) Division to "make sure we actually learn the lessons from the last decade of war." The JCOA study identified 11 "strategic themes" its authors deemed most important among the many emanating from the "enduring lessons" of the preceding 10 years of conflict.¹

As the first serious attempt by any individual or group to make coherent sense of the combined record of US combat experience in recent years, the study represents a commendable step toward offering a cross-cutting synthesis of that experience and its practical import for military professionals in all walks of life. Yet, because of its focus solely on the US combat record, and all but exclusively on the nation's counterinsurgency (COIN) encounters of the past decade, it offers little more than the most modest beginnings of what is actually needed by way of a more comprehensive stocktaking of the world's main conflicts since the Cold War ended. In his foreword to the assessment, Lt Gen George Flynn, USMC, director for joint force development (J-7) on the Joint Staff, declared that the study was informed by inputs from 46 prior analyses

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covering “a wide variety of military operations,” ranging from the three-week major combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2003 to future regional and global challenges at all levels of the conflict spectrum.² Despite that fleeting upfront assertion toward all-inclusiveness, however, what actually followed was solely consideration of US COIN operations in Iraq and Afghanistan since major combat in both countries ended in mid-2003.

To its credit, the JCOA study highlights the manifold failures of US defense leaders, both military and civilian, to have adapted quickly and effectively to the new COIN reality. More specifically, it grapples frankly with the US defense establishment’s failure to understand the true nature of its operating environments after major combat ended in Iraq and Afghanistan, its initial fixation on a conventional-war paradigm in the face of newly emergent COIN challenges, its slowness to grasp the importance of effective strategic communication in quest of legitimacy (what the study rightly calls “the battle of the narrative”), and its early mismanagement of the important transitions from major combat to COIN. After acknowledging these key failings, however, the study turns almost instantly to narrow implementation concerns over relatively small-bore challenges at the margins of US combat involvement since 2003. Rather than seeking first to arrive at a more profound and all-inclusive understanding of what has distinguished the broader record of global combat in recent years, it instead proposes mostly procedural recommendations for here-and-now “ways ahead” for dealing with largely low-level problems identified in the study.³ Among its expressed concerns in this regard are the need for better integration between special operations forces (SOF) and conventional general-purpose forces, more open and transparent interagency coordination, greater harmony in coalition operations, improved host-nation partnering, and better responses to the state use of proxies, such as Iran’s support to insurgent forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and the emergence of “super-empowered threats” made possible by nonstate actors exploiting modern technology.⁴

This narrow COIN-centric focus of the study is reasonable enough as far as it goes, considering that the nation’s most acute combat-related headaches throughout the past decade have been almost exclusively COIN-related in the absence of a more overarching US national strategy and with scant discussion of the actual pertinence of COIN to our most vital strategic interests. However, the JCOA recommendations amount

to little more than a “how-to” manual for enabling the US services to cope more effectively in future COIN engagements at a time when any such engagements will, in all likelihood, represent only one of many types of challenges they will face across the conflict spectrum in years to come. As such, they have avoided addressing the most likely demands of the twenty-first century’s second decade and beyond.

The discussion that follows reaches substantially beyond the JCOA study’s assigned charter by taking a more expansive and higher-level view of the core strategic teachings of the main conflicts that have occurred worldwide throughout the post–Cold War era, starting with the first Persian Gulf War of 1991. It aims, in particular, to correct the study’s most significant failure in not having recognized and duly appreciated what one informed observer called the “asymmetric [US] advantages that were truly game-changing in both Iraq and Afghanistan,” most notably, “the integration of persistent sensors on the ground, at sea, in the air, and in space with precise and lethal force application options in the form of remotely piloted and manned aircraft in airspace untouchable by our adversaries.”⁵ Beyond that, by exploring the broader sweep of major armed conflicts, not just by US forces but by other significant players throughout the past two decades, the ensuing discussion seeks pertinent conclusions at a higher level of aggregation from the more diverse spectrum of combat experiences that have unfolded around the world since the Cold War.

Throughout those two eventful decades, the United States and its allies have, in fact, engaged not just in two concurrent COIN wars, but in *six* major exercises in force employment offering instructive value. The first, Operation Desert Storm (ODS) in early 1991, was a limited and ultimately successful coercive campaign to compel Saddam Hussein to withdraw his occupying troops from Kuwait. The second, Operation Deliberate Force in the summer of 1995, was likewise a limited and ultimately successful coercive effort against Serbian human rights violations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The third, Operation Allied Force, NATO’s 78-day air war for Kosovo in 1999, was yet another successful coercive response to continued human-rights abuses by Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

In the aftermath of those three limited and purely coercive precedents, the major combat phases of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001 and OIF against

Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist dictatorship in 2003 were substantially different. They sought, and eventually achieved, the complete takedown of the regimes being fought. Once those two campaigns devolved into more slow-motion wars of attrition against the internal resistance movements that subsequently arose in each country, however, they transitioned into COIN efforts aimed at ensuring the establishment of needed domestic conditions allowing the emergence of stable successor regimes. The ultimate outcomes of these last two costly efforts, less now in the case of Iraq and ever more so in the case of Afghanistan, remain to be fully determined. Finally, for more than seven months from mid-March through the end of October 2011, the United States and NATO, first in the brief US-led Operation Odyssey Dawn and then in the more prolonged NATO-led Operation Unified Protector, engaged in a successful air-only campaign conducted by a coalition of 14 NATO members and four additional partner nations to prevent Libyan dictator Moammar Gaddafi from committing atrocities against domestic rebel forces and innocent civilians during the civil war that had erupted earlier that year.

In addition to these US and allied combat involvements, India conducted a little-known but consequential 74-day counteroffensive in the Himalayas in 1999 to drive out more than a thousand Pakistani troops who had surreptitiously occupied a portion of Indian-controlled Kashmir. This so-called Kargil War was largely overlooked in the West because it occurred more or less concurrently with NATO's more attention-getting Kosovo campaign in the Balkans. But it too offers an illuminating case study in post-Cold War high-intensity warfare. Finally, Israel conducted two coercive wars in Lebanon and Gaza in 2006 and 2008–09, respectively, each aimed at bringing a halt to intolerable armed provocations against Israeli civilians by the radical Islamist movements that dominate those areas, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.⁶

If one considers OEF and OIF as two separate campaigns, each having had an initial major combat phase followed by a more protracted COIN phase, these examples add up to a total of 11 significant combat encounters since the Cold War's end that lend themselves to useful dissection and analysis. There is enough of both cross-cutting consistency and uniqueness in these cumulative experiences, moreover, to yield a rich menu of insights into recurrent global patterns of force employment over the past two decades. When it comes to the many pitfalls that abound in seeking definitive generalizations from such events, however,

one must honor a cautionary note offered by the British military historian Sir Michael Howard, who wrote in 1991 that “history, whatever its value in educating the judgment, teaches no ‘lessons,’ and professional historians will be as skeptical of those who claim that it does as professional doctors are of their colleagues who peddle patent medicines guaranteeing instant cures. Historians may claim to teach lessons, and often they teach very wisely. But ‘history’ as such does not.”⁷

With that point duly noted, the following assessment offers a dozen generalizations from the combined record of force employment worldwide starting in 1991 that have clear implications for future decision makers regarding core questions of strategy and force development choice. In their breadth of coverage, level of analysis, and express focus on big-picture considerations, these conclusions look well beyond the more process-oriented findings—all US-specific and narrowly COIN-related—highlighted in the JCOA study. Because the majority of the world’s conflicts since the Cold War have been dominated by air operations, the first six of the conclusions outlined are inescapably air-centric in nature. However, the ensuing review is not intended principally as a treatise on airpower, but rather on the more all-embracing lessons suggested by the overall pattern of post-Cold War global conflicts. In the case of US experiences, all have entailed indispensable joint and combined force involvement to varying degrees.⁸ Some lessons, notably those featuring the most high-technology air warfare applications, are relatively recent and, as such, can be said to be unique to the post-Cold War era. The remainder, in contrast, are more timeless and constitute long-known, proven lessons US leaders should have remembered.⁹

Airpower Will Inevitably Be Pivotal in Future Wars

This is by far the most preeminent unifying theme to emerge from the collective global combat experiences of the past two decades. Although it may sound so obvious as to seem almost truistic, it nonetheless bears highlighting as the most abiding feature of global conflict since Operation Desert Storm. During that epochal campaign, coalition airpower was the *only* significant contributor to joint and combined combat operations against the Iraqi army for 38 straight days until a four-day air-aided land offensive was unleashed to finish the job against what were by then severely degraded Iraqi ground troops.¹⁰ Even more so during

both Operations Deliberate Force and Allied Force in the Balkans in 1995 and 1999, allied airpower was likewise the sole force element that played any active combat role.¹¹ Similarly, during the major combat phase of OEF in Afghanistan from early October through December 2001, allied airpower, facilitated solely by some 300 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operators and coalition SOF troops, allowed the indigenous Afghan Northern Alliance to drive out the ruling Taliban who supported al-Qaeda's presence in the country with no allied conventional ground involvement.¹² Finally, Operations Odyssey Dawn and Unified Protector conducted over Libya by the United States and NATO in 2011 were air-only engagements by actual prior design, with the enabling United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973 having expressly ruled out any allied ground combat involvement. Pres. Barack Obama repeated that ruling a day later by declaring categorically that "the United States is not going to deploy ground troops into Libya."¹³

Unlike Desert Storm a dozen years before, the air and ground offensives in OIF were unleashed roughly concurrently in March 2003. However, the air component of US Central Command (CENTCOM), thanks to its unblinking overhead intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capability, assured allied ground commanders their unprotected flanks were secure. That contribution, along with the relentless precision bombing of fielded Iraqi ground forces independently of land component action, was indispensable to the unimpeded ground race from Kuwait to the outskirts of Baghdad within days and to regime collapse in just three weeks. The air portion of the campaign actually began in a gradual and unannounced way as early as the summer of 2002 when US and British aircraft patrolling the southern no-fly zone over Iraq first began systematically picking apart the Iraqi integrated air defense system (IADS) by attacking fiber-optic cable nodes that connected its command centers, radars, and weapons. Once full-scale combat operations began in earnest, the resultant availability of air superiority over southern Iraq obviated the need for allied aircrews to conduct precursor defense-suppression operations and freed them to concentrate almost immediately on the Republican Guard.¹⁴

During the more protracted COIN phases of OIF and OEF, CENTCOM's air component took a backseat to allied ground troops as the predominant force element. Even then, however, airpower remained both indispensable and central to the war effort through its mostly nonkinetic

but still key enabling contributions by way of armed overwatch, on-call close air support, inter- and intra-theater mobility, medical evacuation, and ISR. For example, in both countries, the constant overhead presence of US aircraft armed with precision weapons made it infeasible for enemy insurgents to concentrate, thus limiting the threat they could pose to coalition forces. Such a presence has been especially helpful in Afghanistan, where NATO forces over time have evolved a strategy entailing numerous small units scattered about the countryside in isolated outposts. Without omnipresent airpower to provide resupply, ISR, and on-call strike, those outposts would not be viable, preventing allied forces from securing large parts of the country.¹⁵

Likewise in India's earlier 1999 Kargil War, what began as an attempt by the Indian army to go it alone soon encountered enough enemy resistance that it was obliged to call on India's air force for help once difficulties mounted.¹⁶ Because both the ground and air players in India's Kargil campaign figured prominently in driving out the invaders, it is hard to say which was the more decisive force element. That question in this particular case is comparable to asking which blade in a pair of scissors is more responsible for cutting the paper. Against nearly a quarter of a million artillery rounds fired by Indian army units, India's air force only dropped around 500 general-purpose munitions and fewer than a dozen laser-guided bombs (LGB). So the army was clearly predominant from a simple weight-of-effort perspective. However, the air contribution was disproportionately effective in its interdiction and psychological roles by cutting off enemy resupply, preventing any evacuation of enemy wounded, and demoralizing the intruders.

The future naturally remains uncertain regarding what the next test of strength for the United States and its allies may entail. In the remote event the nation should ever need to defend Taiwan against Chinese military action, US airpower will be not just pivotal, but predominant because of the open-ocean arena in which such conflict would take place. The associated tyranny of distance would place a unique premium on long-range strike capabilities to counter China's increasingly sophisticated offensive and defensive force posture in the region.¹⁷ Yet, even in the most land-centric future challenges at the opposite end of the conflict spectrum, the ISR, mobility, and strike offerings of airpower will remain indispensable ingredients in the pursuit of joint and combined force success. For example, at the same time the widely acclaimed surge

of US troop strength in Iraq in 2007 saw a 20-percent increase in the number of US ground combatants fielded to the war zone, it also saw a far-less-heralded 1,000-percent increase in the average daily weight of air-delivered ordnance dropped on insurgent targets as an integral part of GEN David Petraeus's COIN strategy for the campaign.¹⁸ In a similar vein, the persistent predominance of US airpower as an asymmetric advantage at all levels of conflict was amply borne out by the intercepted radio complaint of a senior Taliban commander in Afghanistan that the opposing US "tanks and armor are not a big deal. The planes are the killers. I can handle everything but the jet fighters."¹⁹ We can conclude with total confidence that airpower will inevitably figure centrally, albeit to varying degrees depending on the circumstances, in any conflicts during the next decade and beyond.²⁰

Airpower Alone Can Sometimes Achieve Desired Goals

Not only will air operations figure importantly in any wars in the decade to come, at least two combat experiences since the Cold War have shown they can achieve desired objectives essentially singlehandedly if conditions are right. To be sure, no responsible airman has ever proclaimed such a capability will be borne out in every case or as something that airpower's future development should strive for as its ultimate performance standard. Yet, based on the facts, one can say unequivocally that allied airpower singlehandedly achieved NATO goals in both Operation Allied Force over Serbia in 1999 and the successive Operations Odyssey Dawn and Unified Protector over Libya in 2011.

In the first case, for all of its shortcomings by way of excessive gradualism and irresolution, NATO's air war for Kosovo represented the first time ever when airpower coerced an enemy leader to yield with no supporting land involvement. Heated arguments later ensued between some airmen and land warriors over the extent to which Milosevic feared a possible NATO ground invasion and whether this was the main consideration behind his decision to accept NATO demands. Perhaps most notably in this regard, the overall commander of Operation Allied Force, GEN Wesley Clark, himself later claimed in his memoirs that by mid-May, "NATO had gone about as far as possible with the air strikes" and that in the end, it had been the prospect of a NATO ground intervention

that, “*in particular*, pushed Milosevic to concede” (emphasis added).²¹ This imputed ground threat, however, had no basis whatsoever by way of actual allied preparations for an invasion. Milosevic knew that. He also knew NATO’s precision bombing of key infrastructure targets in Belgrade could continue indefinitely. In fact, allied airpower was the only force element that actually figured in the campaign from start to finish.²² To that extent, one can honestly say that for the first time in history, the use of airpower alone forced the wholesale withdrawal of an enemy force from disputed terrain. British military historian John Keegan, long an avowed doubter of airpower, freely admitted that the looming settlement represented “a victory for airpower and airpower alone.”²³ In accepting that revelation, he added he felt “rather as a creationist Christian being shown his first dinosaur bone.”²⁴ NATO’s air-only achievement roundly repudiated a declaration made just the year before by former Army chief of staff GEN Gordon Sullivan that “we are now out of the era—if we were ever in it—of airpower being able to cause someone to do something.”²⁵

Similarly, US and NATO air operations against Gaddafi’s regime in 2011 aided indigenous rebel forces in successfully resisting the predations of that regime against innocent civilians during the Libyan civil war. In that campaign as well, airpower proved decisive in actually toppling the regime and facilitating Gaddafi’s death without any allied ground combat involvement, even though regime collapse was never an avowed objective of NATO’s campaign. Unlike most major combat operations conducted by the United States and its allies and partners throughout the past two decades, this offensive not only began with a determined US effort to neutralize Libya’s IADS, but sought further “to produce an immediate impact on the ground.”²⁶ French Air Force Rafale and Mirage 2000 fighters destroyed several government armored vehicles in the outskirts of Benghazi on 19 March during opening attacks to head off an imminent threat of beleaguered rebel forces being massacred by Gaddafi’s army. There were unconfirmed reports that small teams of British Special Air Service and Special Boat Service SOF troops offered covert help to allied airstrikes by conducting on-the-ground target location, identification, and designation.²⁷ However, any such involvement would have entailed an infinitesimal ground presence at best, rendering the Libyan campaign, like NATO’s air war for Kosovo a dozen years before, yet another joint and combined offensive in which airpower

alone achieved desired campaign goals.²⁸ As an asymmetrical NATO advantage, allied airpower forced the Libyan army into dismounted formations that could not mass, thereby enabling rebel forces ultimately to consummate the final defeat. To that extent, friendly ground involvement was indeed an essential contributor to the campaign's overall course and outcome. Nevertheless, NATO airpower in Operation Unified Protector enabled the desired outcome without the need to commit any NATO ground troops to the fighting.

Campaign planners in no way can routinely *count* on airpower alone being the decisive force element in major operations. Yet in future show-downs featuring such permissive circumstances as those in the Balkans and in Libya, the air weapon has now become so precise and effective that it offers every promise of yielding a welcome situation in which friendly ground troops will no longer need to go head to head in large numbers at the outset against well-armed opposing forces and suffer needless casualties as a result.²⁹

A Ground Input Will Usually Enhance Airpower's Potential

Although modern airpower has demonstrated the ability to effect desired combat outcomes by itself in *some* circumstances, repeated examples during the past two decades have shown that a ground component to joint and combined strategy is bound to make airpower more effective, even if friendly ground troops are not actually committed to combat in the end. In the case of Operation Desert Storm, the logic behind this point was best expressed by the British national contingent commander, Air Chief Marshal Sir Patrick Hine of the Royal Air Force (RAF). He was asked afterwards whether he felt the coalition's impending air offensive might well have had the desired effect on Saddam Hussein without any need for serious ground fighting. When pressed on that very question by CENTCOM commander GEN H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Hine replied: "Was it sensible to rely on that? Frankly, while I was confident that allied airpower would prove very effective, if not decisive, I felt that the risks of going to war with . . . an adverse ground force ratio were too high. . . . So I favored further reinforcement."³⁰ By the same token, when asked whether he had hoped that the Iraqis would cave in before a coalition ground offensive was necessary, CENTCOM's air commander,

Lt Gen Charles Horner, replied, “Of course. I’m an airman.”³¹ But he placed little stock in the likelihood of such an outcome and also was a determined supporter of the ground contribution to the campaign plan.

In the more telling case of Kosovo, when allied airpower indeed *did* prove to have been the sole force element committed to the fight, former Air Force chief of staff Gen Merrill McPeak reflected afterward that the Clinton administration and NATO having ruled out any combat involvement of ground forces from the start was

a major blunder. I know of no airman, not a single one, who welcomed that development. Nobody said, “Hey, finally, our own private war. Just what we’ve always wanted!” It certainly would have been smarter to retain all the options. . . . Signaling to Belgrade our extreme reluctance to fight on the ground made it less likely that the bombing would succeed, exploring the limits of airpower as a military and diplomatic instrument.³²

In a similar vein, the RAF’s chief of staff later faulted NATO’s decision to rule out a ground option as “a strategic mistake” that allowed Serb forces to forgo preparing defensive positions, hide their tanks and artillery to make maximum use of deception against air attacks, and conduct their ethnic cleansing of Kosovo with impunity.³³

As for the concern voiced by many over the likelihood of sustaining intolerable friendly losses if NATO chose to back up its air offensive with a serious ground threat, there would most likely have been no need for the alliance to actually *commit* troops to combat in the end. By simply being there, a substantial forward presence of NATO troops along the Albanian and Macedonian borders would have made the Serbs more easily targetable by airpower. Because of the absence of such a ground threat, the air war had almost no effect on the Serbian Third Army’s campaign of ethnic cleansing, and the number of Serbian tanks destroyed by NATO air attacks in the end was strategically inconsequential.

To expand on this point, NATO initially claimed that it had disabled 150 of the estimated 400 Serbian tanks in Kosovo. General Clark later scaled back that number to 110 after determining that many tanks assumed to have been destroyed had, in fact, been decoys the Serbian army had skillfully fielded in large numbers. A subsequent assessment concluded that “only a handful” of enemy tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery pieces could be determined to have been catastrophically damaged by air attacks.³⁴ The marginality of the tank issue to what ultimately mattered in Operation Allied Force was most convincingly

explained by Brig Gen Daniel Leaf, commander of the 31st Air Expeditionary Wing at Aviano Air Base, Italy, when he declared in the immediate aftermath of the cease-fire that “counting tanks is irrelevant. The fact is they withdrew, and while they took tanks with them, they returned to a country whose military infrastructure has been ruined. They’re not going to be doing anything with those forces for a long time.”³⁵

Still, a combat-ready NATO ground presence might have aided the air war and helped deter, or at least lessen, the ethnic cleansing by giving the Third Army a more serious threat to worry about. It might also have allowed a swifter end to the campaign. This suggests an important corrective to the seemingly unending argument between airmen and land warriors over the relative merits of airpower versus boots on the ground. Although Kosovo confirmed that friendly ground troops no longer need to be committed to early combat in every case, it also confirmed that airpower, in most cases, cannot perform to its fullest without the presence of a credible ground component to the campaign strategy—even if only as a passive shaper of desired enemy behavior.

Likewise in Operation Deliberate Force, which also was successfully conducted solely by allied airpower, a combination of other factors played an important, if more indirect, role in driving Serbia’s leaders to the negotiating table. Those additional factors included the growing possibility of a Croatian ground attack against Serbian forces. Without question, it was NATO’s precision bombing—with *no* complaints of inadvertent civilian casualties—that figured most centrally in bringing about the Dayton Accords that ratified an end to Serbia’s hostilities against Bosnia-Herzegovina. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, who negotiated the accords, later wrote that while it had taken the outrage of the Serbian shelling of innocent civilians in Sarajevo to force NATO to launch its air offensive in the first place, the carefully measured but effective bombing made a “huge difference” in producing an acceptable outcome.³⁶ Yet at the same time, the mounting possibility of Croatian ground involvement against the Serbs as the campaign unfolded almost certainly helped allied airpower in eventually convincing Milosevic to cease his human rights abuses and to accede to a negotiated settlement in Dayton not long thereafter.

Finally on this point, the major combat phase of OEF in Afghanistan was, as noted above, also almost entirely an air war in terms of US combat involvement.³⁷ Yet, in that instance as well, it took the supporting

participation of small teams of CIA paramilitary operators and coalition SOF troops on the ground working in close harmony with indigenous Afghan Northern Alliance forces, both empowered by US aerial strike operations, to dislodge the Taliban. The decisive role played by US airpower in that initial phase of CENTCOM's Afghan campaign could not have achieved its ultimate goal without the indispensable enabling contribution of friendly ground troops in enough numbers and with enough combat prowess to leverage the air input to the fullest in consummating the assigned mission.

Airpower Won't Always Be Preeminent in Joint Warfare

Without question, the 12 intervening years between the first Persian Gulf War of 1991 and the three weeks of major combat in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 were truly a triumphal time for US airpower. By the end of that period, the nation's air weapon had finally matured in its ability to deliver the sort of outcome-determining results airpower pioneers had long promised. The years since that unbroken chain of successes, however, have entailed a different kind of fighting and, accordingly, a less front-and-center role for airpower. Since early 2003, the sort of high-end challenges presented by the first Gulf war and by the two subsequent Balkan campaigns have been displaced, at least until recently, by lower-intensity COIN operations in which air attacks have taken a decided backseat to ground engagements as the most visible force activity.

In the eyes of some, the nation's most recent COIN involvements have cast air operations—or at least kinetic air operations—in a seemingly permanent subordinate role.³⁸ If we take a longer view, however, and think about airpower not just in terms of how it is being used *today*, but in the broader sweep of time in which its payoff will be delivered, one will quickly see how its relevance is neither universal nor unchanging. Rather, it is wholly dependent on the particular circumstances of a situation. Put more directly, kinetic airpower can range from being singlehandedly decisive to being largely irrelevant to a combat challenge, depending on operational exigencies of the moment. Because its relative import, like that of all other force elements, is directly related to a

joint force commander's most immediate needs, airpower need not disappoint when it is not the main producer of desired combat results.

Indeed, the idea that airpower should be able to determine war outcomes by itself is as absurd a notion as it would be if applied to any other force element.³⁹ Worse yet, it is an asserted belief airpower critics have falsely ascribed to airmen by suggesting they have somehow uncritically bought into the early views of the Italian general Giulio Douhet, who famously—and wrongly—claimed in the first serious treatise on airpower, published in 1921, that the dawning age of military aviation had made it both “necessary—and *sufficient*—to be in a position in case of war to conquer the command of the air” (emphasis added).⁴⁰ In like manner, critics have charged airpower advocates essentially with guilt by association in pointing to the Air Force's continued institutional adulation of US Army Air Service Brig Gen William “Billy” Mitchell, who, in his roughly concurrent public activism on behalf of airpower, was a no less passionate believer in the preeminence of the air weapon over all other instruments of warfare.⁴¹ No responsible senior Air Force leader has ever given official voice to such overdrawn claims. Yet by spotlighting Douhet and Mitchell and their exaggerated forecasts of what the airplane could do singlehandedly in war and ascribing those forecasts without foundation to today's airmen, parochial ground-force proponents have adroitly kept alive the contrived issue of whether airpower can win wars independently of other forces. As a result, airmen have allowed themselves to be cast into losing positions in doctrinal debates by not sufficiently countering false intimations from others that they believe in the promise of airpower in *all* circumstances of conflict that it can only make good on with fullest effectiveness in *some*.

Granted, although kinetic air employment on a large and sustained scale has been temporarily overshadowed in today's COIN engagements by the greater cost in casualties and effort required by more-ground-centric activities, there will surely be future challenges that again test the nation's air assets to the fullest extent of their deterrent and combat potential. Notwithstanding the natural tendency of Americans to fixate on the here and now to the exclusion of all else, there is an infinite amount of future waiting to present new threats of a different order. Accordingly, whether airpower should be regarded as “supported by” or “supporting of” other force elements is not a question that can ever have an unchanging answer. On the contrary, context will rule in every case,

with the answer invariably hinging on the predominant circumstances of combat at any given moment.

The Major Combat Roles of Air and Land Power Have Been Reversed

Another revelation that has emerged from US post–Cold War combat experiences has been that when it comes to major conventional warfare against modern mechanized opponents like the former Iraqi army or North Korea today, the classic roles of airpower and land power have changed places. In this role reversal, *ground forces* have now come to do most of the shaping and fixing of enemy forces, with *airpower* now doing most of the actual killing of those forces. This apparent change has stemmed, first and foremost, from airpower’s around-the-clock, all-weather, precision standoff attack capability. It has been made possible by accurate munitions in large numbers, electro-optical and infrared sensors in targeting pods, synthetic aperture radars, and ground moving-target indicators.⁴²

This newly emergent changed relationship between air- and ground-delivered firepower was first showcased during Desert Storm’s Battle of al-Khafji, when coalition air assets singlehandedly shredded two advancing Iraqi armored divisions by means of precision night standoff attacks. Those attacks put enemy armies on notice that they could no longer count on a night sanctuary. They further served notice that any attempt by enemy land forces to move en masse, whether in daytime or at night, would ensure a prompt and deadly aerial response. In so doing, precision attack laid the groundwork for a new role of airpower that entailed saving friendly lives by substituting for ground forces. More generally, the ability of the air war to wear down a well-endowed enemy army in ODS to a point where allied ground troops could achieve a virtually bloodless win in just a hundred hours of fighting made for an unprecedented achievement in the history of warfare.

This changed phenomenon of joint warfare in the past two decades is not simply a matter of the notional “hammer” of friendly airpower smashing enemy forces against the “anvil” of friendly ground power. Rather, as one former Army colonel explained, it more entails “a case of ground power flushing the enemy, allowing airpower to maul his forces, with ground power finishing the fight against the remnants and control-

ling the ground dimension in the aftermath of combat. . . . The operational level of warfighting against large conventional enemy forces [in Desert Storm] was dominated by flexible, all-weather, precision strike airpower, enabled by ISR,” whereas “the tactical level of war and the exploitation of the operational effects of airpower were the primary domains of [allied] ground power.”⁴³ As summarized on a chart posted in the air campaign planning cell at the height of the war’s counter-land phase by the chief air operations planner, then–Lt Col David Deptula, “We are not ‘preparing’ the battlefield, we are *destroying* it.”⁴⁴

The same performance applied to Iraq’s fielded ground troops during the three-week major combat phase of OIF in early 2003. In a testament to this, CENTCOM’s air component commander, then–Lt Gen T. Michael Moseley, in his first meeting with the media toward the campaign’s end, said: “Our sensors show that the preponderance of the Republican Guard divisions that were outside of Baghdad are now dead. We’ve laid [*sic*] on these people. I find it interesting when folks say we’re ‘softening them up.’ We’re not softening them up. We’re killing them.”⁴⁵ In a later ground affirmation of this testament, a platoon leader at the leading edge of the final push to Baghdad by the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, Lt Nathaniel Fick, wrote: “For the next hundred miles, all the way to the gates of Baghdad, every palm grove hid Iraqi armor, every field an artillery battery, and every alley an anti-aircraft gun or surface-to-air missile launcher. But we never fired a shot. We saw the full effect of American airpower. Every one of those fearsome weapons was a blackened hulk.”⁴⁶

What largely has accounted for this role reversal between land and air forces in major conventional warfare is that fixed-wing airpower has, by now, shown itself to be substantially more effective than ground-warfare capabilities in creating the necessary conditions for rapid offensive success. In the most telling example of that change, throughout the three weeks of major combat in OIF, the US Army’s V Corps launched only two deep-attack attempts with a force consisting of fewer than 80 AH-64 Apache attack helicopters. The first came close to ending in disaster, and the second achieved only modest success.⁴⁷ Similarly, Army artillery units expended only 414 of their longest-range battlefield tactical missiles, primarily because of the wide-area destructive effects of that weapon’s submunitions and their certain prospects of causing unacceptable collateral damage. In marked contrast, CENTCOM’s air component during the same three weeks generated more than 20,000 strike sorties, enabled by

a force of 735 fighters and 51 heavy bombers. In all, those aircraft struck more than 15,000 target aim points in direct and effective support of the allied land campaign.⁴⁸

In light of that experience, it is fair to say that evolved airpower in its broadest sense, to include its indispensable ISR adjuncts, has fundamentally changed the way the United States and its closest partners might best fight any future large-scale engagements through its ability to carry out functions traditionally performed at greater cost and risk, and with less efficiency, by more traditional ground-force elements. Most notable in this regard is modern airpower's repeatedly demonstrated ability to neutralize an enemy's army while incurring a minimum of friendly casualties and to establish the conditions for achieving strategic goals almost from the very outset of fighting. Reduced to basics, modern airpower now allows joint force commanders both freedom *from* attack and freedom *to* attack—something fundamentally new in the last two decades.

Carrier Airpower Can Sometimes Substitute for Land-Based Fighters

In still another post–Cold War revelation, this one of singular and unique pertinence to the United States, the major combat phase of OEF in late 2001 showed convincingly for the first time that sea-based strike capabilities can, *in extremis*, effectively compensate for land-based fighters when access to forward land basing is unavailable. For a time after the nation's combat involvement in Vietnam ended in 1973, the US Navy's aircraft carriers figured mainly in an open-ocean sea-control strategy directed against opposing Soviet naval forces. For lesser contingencies, the principal purpose of the carrier battle groups was to provide a forward military "presence" for the nation. When it came to actual force employment, however, carrier airpower was used only in occasional demonstrative applications against targets located in fairly close-in areas, such as the strikes conducted against Syrian forces in Lebanon in 1983 and Operation El Dorado Canyon against Libya's Gaddafi in 1986. True enough, during the 1990s, US naval air assets also took part in ODS and in the two Balkan wars, as well as in Operation Southern Watch for a dozen years to enforce the southern no-fly zone over Iraq. Yet those, too, were fairly limited littoral operations conducted within easy reach of their targets that did not place overly onerous demands on US carrier aviation.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, however, fundamentally changed all that. For the US Navy, they created a demand for a deep-strike capability in the remotest part of Southwest Asia where the United States had *no* access for forward land-based fighter operations. True enough, US Air Force heavy bombers also played a major part in the takedown of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan by flying from the British island base of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and, in the case of the B-2, nonstop from the United States to their assigned targets and back. They dropped nearly three-quarters of all the satellite-aided joint direct attack munitions (JDAM) that were delivered throughout the campaign. Air Force F-15Es and F-16s also played a part starting 10 days later, once adequate beddown arrangements had been secured, by flying extremely long-duration (in one case more than 15 hours) and ultimately unsustainable combat sorties from available bases in the distant Persian Gulf.

Nevertheless, during the major combat phase of OEF, carrier-based fighters operating from the North Arabian Sea and supported by US Air Force and RAF tankers substituted almost entirely for what would have been a far larger percentage of land-based fighters in other circumstances. In all, six carrier battle groups participated in the initial Afghan campaign, with five on station at the same time in December 2001. They conducted around-the-clock strikes against a land-locked country whose southern border was more than an hour and a half's flying time north of the carrier operating areas. Carrier-based fighters accounted for almost 5,000 of the strike sorties flown during that period—three quarters of the total. And their carriers could have generated even more, had additional sorties been needed to meet CENTCOM's target coverage requirements. Such operations would have been unsustainable over the long haul by land-based fighters alone—given the uniquely uncongenial forward-basing arrangements in that demanding scenario—until later in the campaign.

Likewise during the major combat phase of OIF a year and a half later, although there was no potentially show-stopping shortage of land bases in neighboring countries, US carrier-based fighters still flew nearly half of the more than 20,000 strike sorties flown by coalition forces, much in the same manner as over Afghanistan the year before. Those sorties ranged at times to the northernmost reaches of Iraq on missions that lasted sometimes as long as 10 hours, with multiple inflight refuelings.

In clear testimony to the nation's continued status as the world's sole surviving superpower, no other navy in the world could have turned in such a performance.⁴⁹

To be sure, that stellar performance hinged on an active inventory of 12 deployable carriers and 10 carrier air wings, which allowed the Navy to have five carrier strike groups on station and committed to the impending war, a sixth en route to the war zone as a timely replacement for one of those five, and a seventh also forward-deployed and holding in ready reserve—an unprecedented achievement in US carrier surge experience. In the early aftermath of Iraqi Freedom's major combat phase, however, the US Department of Defense (DoD) elected to reduce the Navy's carrier force from 12 to 11 by retiring USS *John F. Kennedy* 13 years before that ship's scheduled decommissioning to help pay for global contingency operations and to reduce the federal deficit. At that time, the Navy's leadership concluded that it could still maintain the carrier surge capability demonstrated on the eve of OIF with only 11 deployable carriers and 10 air wings, but that any further cuts in carrier and air-wing strength could make such a goal unattainable as a practical option.⁵⁰ Today, that goal is challenged in the extreme by caps on discretionary spending that afflict the entire spectrum of US combat capability as a result of the budget sequestration that went into effect in early 2013. Should this oppressive state of affairs be allowed to persist for any sustained time, the vice chief of naval operations, ADM Mark Ferguson, has foreseen an impending fleet shrinkage by at least two carrier strike groups and air wings, a prospective body blow that, he warned, "will fundamentally change our Navy."⁵¹

Effects-Based Operations Outperform Simple Attrition Every Time

Another key conclusion suggested by the combat experiences of the past two decades is that striving for clearly defined and sought-after combat effects from force employment is almost certain to be more fruitful in achieving desired campaign results than merely going after some predetermined level of target destruction for its own sake. This approach first gained currency within the innermost circle of General Horner's hand-picked air campaign planners during the final preparations for ODS. It has since been codified in formal Air Force doctrine, which

defines the approach as one that “starts with the [desired] end state and objectives, determines the effects that must be created to achieve them and the means by which achievement is to be measured, [and] then matches resources to specific actions in order to create those effects.”⁵² It also has been broadly accepted throughout the joint community. For example, in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee not long after major combat in Iraq ended in 2003, the commander of US Joint Forces Command, ADM Edmund Giambastiani, remarked that “our traditional military planning and perhaps our entire approach to warfare have shifted . . . away from employing service-centric forces that must be deconflicted on the battlefield to achieve victories of attrition to a well-trained, integrated joint force that can enter the battlespace quickly and conduct decisive operations with both operational and strategic effects.”⁵³ A similar view was subsequently reflected in the Joint Staff’s doctrinal observation that “massing effects of combat power, rather than concentrating forces, can enable even numerically inferior forces to produce decisive results and minimize human losses and waste of resources.”⁵⁴

To be clear on this point, effects-based operations (EBO) could not be simpler in their essence. Reduced to basics, they are merely measures aimed at tying tactical actions to desired strategic results and undertaken to ensure military goals and combat actions aimed at achieving them are relevant to a commander’s most overarching strategic needs. They are not about inputs, such as the number of bombs dropped or targets destroyed. Rather, they are about outcomes related to desired enemy behavior. As such, they serve to remind commanders to stay focused on the results sought rather than falling into the trap of believing the most easily quantifiable inputs, such as number of sorties flown per day or tons of bombs dropped, offers a measure of anything other than simple weight of effort.⁵⁵

Effects-based operations are also often about second-order (or higher-order) rather than first-order results. A classic illustration is selectively bombing enemy assets to induce paralysis or to inhibit their use rather than attacking them just to achieve some predetermined level of destruction. For example, during Operation Desert Storm, CENTCOM’s defense suppression effort was able to neutralize Iraq’s radar-guided surface-to-air missiles (SAM) not by physically destroying them wherever they could be targeted, but rather by intimidating their operators to a point where they were deterred from emitting with their radars. That same

approach worked again during the Kosovo campaign, as well as in the SAM suppression effort during the major combat phase of OIF.

Likewise, in its attacks against Iraqi ground forces both during Desert Storm and again in 2003, allied airpower showed the potential for defeating an enemy army through *functional* effects rather than through more classic attrition. During the counter-land portion of the first Persian Gulf War, that potential was best reflected in what came to be called “tank plinking” by F-111s and F-15Es during night attacks against buried Iraqi tanks using 500-pound LGBs. That novel tactic was made possible by a long-known phenomenon of physics whereby tanks stand out on an attacking aircraft’s infrared sensor display between sunset and midnight because their rate of heat dissipation is slower than that of the surrounding desert sand—even if the tanks are buried up to their turrets in the sand.

The combat effectiveness of that attack tactic was profound. Before, the Iraqis thought they could survive the air war by digging in during the day and massing only at night. Tank plinking, however, showed that even if armies dig in, they still die. The impact on Iraqi troop behavior was to heighten the individual soldier’s sense of futility. Many Iraqi tank crews simply abandoned their positions once it became clear their tanks could be turned into death traps without warning. Viewed at the individual shooter-to-target level, tank plinking may have appeared at first glance to be only tactical. Yet as a concept of operations, it was most decidedly strategic in its consequences. By some accounts, it allowed a peak kill rate of more than 500 Iraqi tanks per night and remained in that range for several nights in a row.⁵⁶ Whatever the still-indeterminate nightly number may actually have been, however, there is no denying it was well into the hundreds. On several occasions, two F-15Es, each carrying a total of eight GBU-12 LGBs, destroyed 16 Iraqi armored vehicles on a single two-ship mission.⁵⁷ In past wars, such targets would have been largely unthreatened by aerial attacks. The overall net effect was not the attrition achieved per se, but rather its impact on the morale of Iraqi tank crews once it became clear to them that their tanks were not their friends but magnets for coalition LGBs. During the major combat phase of OIF 12 years later, this use of mass precision was actually driven by conscious effects-based thinking for the first time, as campaign planners sought specific combat results and not just some arbitrary level of destruction.

The same phenomenon was a characteristic feature of India's Kargil War in the Himalayas in 1999. Although the Indian air force did not consciously pursue effects-based operations in its targeting during that campaign, its attacks against Pakistani positions did produce important second-order results that bore heavily on Pakistan's ultimate decision to withdraw, especially toward the endgame, once LGBs were introduced. After the first LGB attack, Indian targeting pod imagery showed enemy troops abandoning their positions at the very sound of approaching Indian fighters.⁵⁸ That response on their part offered yet another tacit illustration of the cascading effects the purposeful application of precision firepower can achieve in the pursuit of campaign goals with the greatest economy of force.

Coercion Works Best with Modest Goals and Expectations

On this important point, by no means unique to the post-Cold War years but repeatedly borne out throughout them, Operation Desert Storm was so successful as a military campaign because, in considerable part, it had the limited objective of compelling Saddam Hussein to withdraw his forces that had invaded and occupied Kuwait nearly six months before. CENTCOM's strategy did not seek to bring down his regime, force him to end his suspected effort to develop weapons of mass destruction, or anything else more extravagant by way of a desired outcome. As Pres. George H. W. Bush and his national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft, later wrote presciently in this regard, "Had we gone the invasion route, the United States could still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land."⁵⁹ Likewise with Operations Deliberate Force and Allied Force in the Balkans in 1995 and 1999, NATO's airstrikes against Serbian military and infrastructure targets sought solely to get Milosevic to stop killing innocent civilians. They did not seek more ambitious goals, such as insisting he relinquish his position in the Serbian leadership.⁶⁰

Perhaps the clearest recent example in which attempted coercion did *not* succeed as initially hoped may be found in Israel's flawed campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon in July and August 2006 in response to a brazen provocation by a Hezbollah hit team against an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) border patrol on 12 July. Less than a week after the IDF's

retaliatory counteroffensive against the terrorist organization was set in motion, Israel's prime minister, Ehud Olmert, declared in a speech to the Knesset, almost as a throwaway line and with no apparent prior deliberation within his cabinet, that his government's goals included an unconditional return of the two IDF soldiers kidnapped during the raid and a crushing of Hezbollah as a viable military presence in southern Lebanon. Not surprisingly, those extravagant goals proved unattainable by *any* military means Israeli and international opinion would be likely to countenance. For that reason, they remained elusive throughout the 34 days of fighting. Once Olmert declared getting the two soldiers back as his goal, all Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah had to do to claim victory was to refuse to return them. And that he did masterfully in controlling the campaign's narrative after the fighting ended.

For his part, the IDF chief of staff, Lt Gen Dan Halutz of the Israeli Air Force, wanted to teach Nasrallah a lesson he would not forget. That was a reasonable enough intention as far as it went. Yet the Olmert government's chosen response was not fully explored in all its ramifications before being unleashed. As a result, the IDF launched headlong into its counteroffensive without having given adequate thought to the likely endgame and to a suitable strategy for completing the campaign on a high note. The price paid for that failure was high. In the end, Israel's second Lebanon war of 2006 entailed the most inconclusive combat performance by the IDF ever, in that it represented the first time in which a major regional conflict ended without a clear military victory on Israel's part.⁶¹

The single most harmful aspect of the campaign's conduct that undermined the *appearance* of Israel's combat effectiveness against Hezbollah was the asymmetry between the exorbitant goals initially declared by the prime minister and the unwillingness of his government to pay the price needed to achieve them. Not only did those goals get progressively ramped down as the campaign slogged along; they created initial public expectations that had no chance of being fulfilled. Had the declared goals been more modest and achievable *before* the campaign was fully launched, such as merely dealing Hezbollah a disproportionately painful blow in punitive response to its border provocation, Israel's second Lebanon war might have ended with greater success.

To its credit, the IDF two years later conducted a more satisfactory campaign against Hamas in the Gaza Strip that was disciplined by the

more limited and realistic objective of forcing Hamas to cease firing rockets into Israeli population centers and nothing beyond that.⁶² The Olmert government went far toward restoring Israel's image of deterrence that had been so badly tarnished by the IDF's less-effective performance in 2006. It also reaffirmed the obvious commonsense truism that coercion works best when one has overwhelming military power and the willingness to use it in pursuit of achievable goals.

For Regime Change, Planning just for the Takedown Won't Suffice

The single most costly and sobering lesson US leaders should have learned from their combat experiences of the past two decades, most notably from OIF, is that if a campaign's overarching goal is not just to coerce but to supplant an existing regime, then simply planning for successful major combat will not achieve that goal. Whether or not one believes in retrospect that going to war against Iraq was a wise policy choice in the first place, the overwhelming consensus among Americans today is that the second Bush administration's campaign plan failed utterly to anticipate and hedge adequately against the needs of post-campaign stabilization. It ignored the most fundamental principle of democratic nation-building put forward by the late Prof. Samuel Huntington at Harvard University more than four decades ago, which holds that an indispensable precondition for successful political modernization must be the establishment and nurturing of effective institutions of state governance.⁶³

Without question, toppling Hussein's regime had the welcome effect of ending not only the iron rule of an odious dictator, but also a situation that had made for a decade-long US and British presence in Southwest Asia to enforce the no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq. The flawed manner in which the Bush administration pursued that goal, however, reminded us once again that no plan, however elegant, survives initial contact with the enemy. More important, it taught us—or should have taught us—that any truly complete strategy for regime change must anticipate and duly plan against the most likely political hereafter in addition to the campaign's major combat phase.

On this important point, Frederick Kagan in 2006 spotlighted what he called “the primacy of destruction over planning for political outcomes”

that had prevailed in US military thought since the first Persian Gulf War. That focus, he wrote, led to “a continuous movement away from the political objective of war toward attention in planning to merely destroying things.” This was best reflected, he said, in the telling label “Phase IV,” which was the anticipated follow-on to the major combat phase of Iraqi Freedom, “Phase III.” That characterization treated post-war stabilization almost as an afterthought to the “decisive operations” that had come to be thought of by US planners as the main mission.⁶⁴

That approach worked more than adequately for ODS and for the two Balkan wars, which entailed limited efforts aimed at coercing desired enemy behavior but not at the more demanding goal of replacing one regime with another. However, as Kagan rightly argued, if any future combat involvement by the nation is ever again to be directed toward the difficult and costly goal of regime change, as was clearly the case in Afghanistan and Iraq, then the first concern must be determining the desired end state and then duly planning for it ahead of time. Bringing down an incumbent leadership is only a buy-in condition for achieving the ultimate goal. That means that “Phase IV,” or however one elects to label the regime replacement activity, cannot be subordinate to, or even equal to, “decisive operations.” It must *predominate* in campaign planning.

Even the Best Force Imaginable Can't Make Up for a Flawed Strategy

This important teaching, also not unique to the post-Cold War era but clearly borne out throughout it, was spotlighted most vividly in the early aftermath of NATO's air war for Kosovo. It was best summed up by ADM James Ellis, commander of Allied Forces South and US combat operations during the Kosovo campaign. In reflecting on the campaign experience, he declared in a subsequent briefing to US military leaders that *luck* played the main role in ensuring the air war's success. More to the point, he charged that NATO's leaders “called this one absolutely wrong” by relying on hope that just a few nights of bombing might lead Milosevic to accede to NATO's demands. Their failure to anticipate what might happen if they were proven wrong led directly to most of the ensuing downside consequences for the alliance over the course of the campaign. Admiral Ellis concluded that the need for consensus within NATO had resulted in an incremental war rather than more decisive

operations. He further remarked that excessive concern over avoiding collateral damage had created both sanctuaries and opportunities the enemy successfully exploited. He also suggested that the absence of a credible NATO ground threat probably made the air war last longer than necessary to achieve its goals.⁶⁵

The importance of a well-founded strategy from the very start of a joint and combined campaign was again highlighted by the rude awakening the second Bush administration experienced when its just-completed major combat phase of Iraqi Freedom mutated within days into an ugly domestic sectarian struggle and eventual insurgency. The insurgency dominated the world's headlines for four years until an appropriate strategy allowed for an eventual stabilization of daily life in that long-embattled country. That harsh lesson was borne out yet again when Israel overreached in its initial goals in Lebanon in 2006 and implemented a strategy that relied, at the outset, entirely on standoff air and artillery attacks against preselected Hezbollah targets throughout Lebanon. As the IDF's counteroffensive ground on without visible progress, its leaders knew full well air and artillery strikes alone would not bring an end to Hezbollah's retaliatory rocket fire into northern Israel. Nevertheless, there was a widely felt compulsion throughout the country to keep putting off the move to a ground counteroffensive for as long as possible out of deep-seated concern over the likelihood of incurring troop casualties in unacceptably high numbers.

The main problem with the Olmert government's chosen strategy, however, was the disparity between its initially expressed goals and the IDF's actual wherewithal for achieving them. More to the point, Israel's time-sensitive air attacks against Hezbollah's short-range rockets as they were detected and geolocated in real time were ineffectual in the absence of a concurrent and determined ground invasion to locate and destroy their hidden storage sites. Two other related problems entailed the government's not having defined more-attainable goals from the start and not having implemented more-aggressive measures thereafter to yield a more-positive result. Those two failings made it easy for Nasrallah to boast after the cease-fire went into effect that he had won a "divine victory," as he called it, just by virtue of Hezbollah's having successfully weathered Israel's attempts to beat it down.⁶⁶ In the case of Israel's subsequent war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip two years later, the Olmert government did a better job of controlling expectations. It worked especially hard to

ensure its combat operations would be as brief as possible once under way. It also took care to set more realistic and attainable goals, rejecting all temptations to seek regime change in the Gaza Strip, to disarm Hamas, or to reoccupy the area with an open-ended IDF troop presence.

The most important and enduring conclusion to be drawn from these examples is that neither the most capable air weapon nor, for that matter, *any* combination of force elements can ever be more effective than the strategy and campaign plan it is intended to serve. As Colin Gray has well observed in this regard, for airpower's inherent advantage "to secure strategic results of value, it must serve a national and . . . overall military strategy that is feasible, coherent, and politically sensible. If these basic requirements are not met, [then] airpower, no matter how impeccably applied tactically and operationally, will be employed as a waste of life, taxes, and, frankly, trust between the sharp end of [a nation's] spear and its shaft." More to the point, he insisted, a nation's overall campaign strategy can be so dysfunctional that it "cannot be rescued from defeat by a dominant airpower, no matter how that airpower is employed."⁶⁷

Mission Creep Usually Comes at a High Price

As the United States learned the hard way from its long and ultimately failed combat experience in Vietnam more than a generation ago, the high cost of what has come to be called "mission creep" is the main lesson the Israeli government should have drawn from its 34-day war against Hezbollah in 2006. Israel's forces initially struck back almost reflexively in response to Hezbollah's border provocation on 12 July, but without any clearly defined counteroffensive goals in mind. During the first week of mainly standoff air and artillery strikes against preselected targets, the Olmert government gave little systematic thought to *why* it was engaged against Hezbollah or to what it hoped to accomplish by its combat operations. Then, on the campaign's sixth day, as noted above, Prime Minister Olmert declared, almost in passing, that among his government's aims were to get the two abducted soldiers returned unconditionally and to crush Hezbollah once and for all as a viable fighting force in southern Lebanon. That declaration instantly put Olmert and the IDF's chief, General Halutz, in a de facto divergence of avowed objectives. Halutz rightly understood from the start that getting the two soldiers back was a practical impossibility using military force alone and

that any attempt to draw down Hezbollah's military presence in southern Lebanon to a point of insignificance would be far too costly to be practicable. It also gave rise to expectations among Israel's rank and file that predictably set the country up for an appearance of having lost once it failed to achieve those two goals.

Ultimately, the cease-fire brokered by the UN brought an end to Hezbollah's unrelenting rocket barrages into Israel. To that extent, the Olmert government *did* achieve something for its effort. But the IDF's combat operations did not yield an immediate return of the two soldiers as Olmert had demanded.⁶⁸ They also left Hezbollah's military organization intact to fight another day. That less than ringing outcome left Israel with a clear appearance in the eyes of many that it had promised more than it could deliver and had accordingly gone to war in vain.

In much the same way, the United States and NATO have increasingly had a comparably unhappy experience in Afghanistan throughout the past decade since the major combat phase of OEF. The administration of Pres. George W. Bush went into Afghanistan in October 2001 in the first place with the noble and limited goal of destroying al-Qaeda's base of operations and driving out the ruling Taliban who had given Osama bin Laden safe haven. After less than three months, the administration achieved that limited goal.

There also was an implied notion in the campaign plan that by bringing down the Taliban, the administration would open a path toward a democratic alternative for Afghanistan over time by establishing a successor regime under Hamid Karzai. Such an outcome, however, was never the campaign's main intent. The administration's most overarching goal was simply to smash al-Qaeda and to unseat the Taliban. After achieving that goal, it promptly lost focus on Afghanistan and turned its attention and commitment to Iraq. Once the United States appeared to have lost interest in Afghanistan, the Taliban saw a chance to regenerate from its new sanctuary in Pakistan and to make a determined bid to regain control.

As a result, what started out as a narrow and masterfully conducted US effort aimed mainly at dealing a death blow to al-Qaeda's armed presence in Afghanistan became transformed over time into a NATO-led COIN campaign in vain pursuit of democratic nation-building in that primitive tribal land. That so far fruitless shift in mission focus has given the United States its longest war ever, with still no clear resolution

in sight. The change in strategy and goals that occasioned it did not occur as a result of any studied prior leadership deliberation in Washington. Instead, by all signs, it simply occurred by its own organizational and bureaucratic momentum. Today, a decade later, a growing US consensus holds that the effort has been an abject failure and also has come at an exorbitant price. On that point, former Air Force chief of staff Gen Ronald Fogleman summed up well what matters most, when he declared flatly in April 2012 that “the American public’s patience for this war is over. It was a dream that you could take an area of the world that wasn’t a functioning country and turn it into a functioning country on the time lines required to satisfy the American public. It just wasn’t going to happen.”⁶⁹ For that grim result, we can thank uncontrolled mission creep entirely. It comes close to being at the top of the list of post-Cold War US strategic misjudgments.

We Don’t Get to Pick our Wars that Matter Most

This final conclusion drawn from the collective combat experiences of the past two decades may sound at first like yet another blinding flash of insight into the obvious. Yet, it bears remembering and honoring all the same. As far back as the days of the Prussian General Staff, Carl von Clausewitz warned of the danger of confusing the war one is in with the war one would like it to be.⁷⁰ More recently, we have been reminded how the conflict situations that defense leaders actually had to deal with were ones the scenario writers somehow forgot to include in their assumptions and predictions.

Operation Desert Storm was just the first of such examples. When Saddam Hussein was making his final covert preparations to invade and occupy Kuwait, the United States was fixated on the worst-case contingency of a head-to-head showdown against Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces in Central Europe. The nation’s fielded general-purpose forces were postured mainly to meet that demanding combat challenge. Had any serious US defense analysts predicted in July 1990 that within six months, the nation would be at war in the Persian Gulf against a different opponent in its most high-intensity combat involvement since Vietnam, they would have been dismissed by their peers as eccentrics.

Four years later, NATO’s first-ever combat experience in Europe in 1995 was triggered not by Soviet malfeasance, against which the alliance

had long planned and trained, but rather by the Balkan civil war that erupted in the early 1990s as a result of the breakup of Yugoslavia. Both Operation Deliberate Force in 1995 and the subsequent Operation Allied Force in 1999 were unanticipated reactions to a surprise post-Cold War development that eventually begged for a forceful NATO response.

One can say much the same about the remaining global conflicts of recent years. India's Kargil War, which unfolded in the Himalayas while NATO's Kosovo campaign was under way, was a totally improvised response to an unanticipated Pakistani incursion into Indian-controlled Kashmir that bordered on shock to the Indian government. For its part, OEF stemmed entirely from the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, which likewise came completely without warning. Of course, one can say that the subsequent three-week major combat phase of OIF was anything but a surprise, since the Bush administration had been planning that optional war for more than a year before the first bomb fell on Baghdad. But for sure, the sectarian turmoil and domestic insurgency that ensued in its wake and that consumed the nation for six years thereafter was most definitely something for which the administration had not planned, even though more than a few informed observers both in and out of the US government had repeatedly warned of such a result. Finally, Israel's counteroffensive against Hezbollah in 2006 was likewise an impromptu response to a surprise border provocation at a time when the IDF's attention had been focused since 2000 entirely on the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories.

In 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates admonished the US Air Force leadership harshly when he insisted on an all but total concentration of the nation's defense effort toward the demands of supporting our then-ongoing ground-centric COIN wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He contrasted those onerous demands with an alleged Air Force proclivity toward remaining "stuck in old ways of doing business," as he put it, by pursuing its fifth-generation F-22 air dominance fighter as its main force development priority.⁷¹ For his part, Gates' inclination was to regard concern about tomorrow's threats as being infected by what he dismissed airily as "next war-itis."⁷² Today, changed leadership in the Pentagon has issued new defense guidance that stresses very different priorities than those the nation has been accustomed to for the last eight years. In his cover letter promulgating that new guidance, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stressed that tomorrow's US defense posture will

fixate mainly on the Asia-Pacific region. He further declared that henceforth, the US defense enterprise will shift “from emphasis on today’s wars to preparing for future challenges.”⁷³ If that declaration can be taken at its word, it tells us that “next-war-itis” is finally back in vogue again—as well it should be.

Yet, however right-minded it may be in principle for the United States to have swung its main attention and focus to the Asia-Pacific region, the world remains a dangerous place in which challenges to the nation’s core interests can come from anywhere. On the other side of the planet, Syria has been aflame in civil war against the dictatorial regime of Bashar Assad for more than two years and most recently has been dominated by mounting instabilities that could spread beyond its borders in multiple untoward ways. Israel has understandable concern over Iran’s nuclear ambitions, along with an equally understandable determination to do something decisively about them, should worse come to worst. For their part, the radical Islamist organizations Hezbollah and Hamas have now accumulated enough short-range rockets from their Syrian and Iranian providers (more than 70,000 in all) to make life intolerable for Israel should another round of unconstrained attacks against its civilian population centers emanate from Lebanon and the Gaza Strip.

Any of these tinderboxes, along with numerous others one can imagine, could potentially lead to future US combat involvement of one sort or another anywhere in the world, irrespective of the current administration’s avowed determination to concentrate now mainly on the Asia-Pacific region. It follows from the foregoing that if the United States intends seriously to preserve its current privileged status as the world’s sole surviving military heavyweight, it will have no choice but to keep its forces capable of effective and credible employment across the entire conflict spectrum. Unlike most countries, the United States lacks the luxury of choosing either its wars of inevitability or its preferred way of fighting.⁷⁴ *That* is the ultimate bounding reality the nation faces in its security planning both for now and for the foreseeable future. As Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense David Ochmanek observed in this regard before the latest looming regional tests for the United States had fully crystallized, “We are a superpower. We have important interests in the Persian Gulf, in Europe, in Northeast Asia, and the East Asian littoral. We face challenges to those interests. So if we’re going to continue to underwrite security alliances in those regions, we can’t just focus on one part of

the world.”⁷⁵ It behooves us as well to remember that the *only* reason our enemies have turned to unconventional fourth-generation warfare is because our conventional forces, first and foremost the nation’s air weapon, dominate absolutely.⁷⁶ Accordingly, as we continue our ongoing effort to extricate ourselves cleanly from our now decade-long enmeshment in Afghanistan, we should remain no less mindful of the need to preserve and further improve our current monopoly of asymmetrical advantages against the possibility of future showdowns against more able opponents who can be counted on to test us for higher stakes in years to come. On this count, the late Amb. Robert Komer often cautioned Pentagon planners that in hedging against tomorrow’s most likely wars, they should take care not to forget about hedging also against the one we could lose.

Looking to the Future

The United States now finds itself in a situation disturbingly akin to one we faced more than a generation ago that brought the nation’s force modernization to a virtual halt while we were fixated on our war in Southeast Asia. During the eight years we were bogged down in Vietnam between 1965 and 1973, the Soviet Union, encouraged and abetted by Washington’s consuming distraction, carried out a massive and unchecked expansion of its nuclear and general purpose forces. In the realm of intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles, Moscow achieved acknowledged parity with the United States in both numbers of fielded launchers and overall force capability and quality. During the same period, the Soviets also upgraded their conventional forces opposite NATO into a daunting juggernaut overshadowing Western Europe. That development confronted Western defense planners with a threat picture that ultimately included some 50,000 main battle tanks arrayed against the North German Plain and, for a time, the introduction of third-generation MiG-23 and Su-24 combat aircraft into the Soviet air order of battle at a rate of a US fighter wing—equivalent a month. Those challenges, prompted largely by our failure to hold up our end of the more-enduring competition with the Soviet Union, imposed new and weighty demands on US combat forces across the board. It took nearly two decades of focused effort by the US defense establishment to reverse those odds.⁷⁷

Today, having been similarly drained of equipment, resources, and societal energy by nearly a decade of more recent COIN involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States finds itself facing a comparable situation in the presence of new looming challenges around the world. Iran is increasingly within reach of a credible nuclear capability, while an opaque and despotic regime in North Korea is ever closer to becoming yet another troublemaker of great potential consequence. In addition, an emerging China with both regional and global ambitions inimical to US interests has acquired an increasingly robust anti-access and area denial force posture to back them up. These are but three of the many concerns that will dominate the second decade of the twenty-first century and beyond. In light of this, US defense leaders face a far more momentous roster of competing demands for their attention than simply getting better at COIN, as the JCOA study seemed to counsel.

To be sure, the problem is not so much with our *existing* power projection capability. As Lt Gen David Deptula rightly noted shortly before retiring from the USAF in late 2010,

the United States dominates the air today. We attain air superiority by penetrating wherever we desire, denying use of airspace to our foes, and moving stealthily where and when we wish with real-time command and control. We strike with precision from a variety of platforms and bases and with a wide range of munitions. We acquire and develop comprehensive knowledge from the air, space, and cyberspace through cutting-edge [ISR]. And we move these forces and resources anywhere on the globe with robust tanker and lift fleets. These systems are synergistically linked and effective in all contingencies we currently face.⁷⁸

Rather, the problem is with the long-stalled progress of force development for continued US dominance in the face of likely *future* mission needs at the higher end of the conflict spectrum. To note just one example, the investment emphasis over the past decade on meeting the here-and-now demands of COIN and our associated heightened reliance on slow and vulnerable remotely piloted aircraft and on lighter manned ISR platforms such as the propeller-driven MC-12 have reflected a mindset that presumes we will always enjoy permissive and uncontested airspace.

In the face of the unprecedented constraints on available funding that have come to limit the DoD's freedom of investment choices, simply complaining about this predicament will never offer useful guidance by way of suggesting a workable program for force recapitalization. One promising step already at hand toward addressing that challenge is the joint Air Force and Navy Air-Sea Battle initiative aimed at negating attempts

“to prevent access to parts of the ‘global commons’—those areas of the air, sea, cyberspace, and space that no one ‘owns’ but upon which we all depend” by better leveraging the cross-service and cross-domain integration of our air and naval forces and operating routines so as to ensure US “access to places where conflict is most likely and consequential.”⁷⁹ Steadily growing anti-access and area denial challenges will make successful power projection ever more difficult in certain contested areas of the world, most notably the Persian Gulf and Western Pacific. Unifying Air Force and Navy efforts toward countering those challenges is one way of seeking near-term synergies that are both effective and affordable.

An important recent joint statement in this regard by the chief of naval operations, ADM Jonathan Greenert, and the USAF chief of staff, Gen Mark Welsh, on ways of best leveraging cross-service synergies frankly acknowledged that in light of recent draconian cuts in the nation’s defense spending, “our military will have to adjust to getting fewer dollars to protect our nation’s security interests.” They added, in an equally candid and realistic admission, that their most consuming challenge of the moment is to “improve our combined capability to assure access without expensive new investments.”⁸⁰ Just how this seemingly insurmountable feat of joint force development will be accomplished by our financially beset service leaders and their civilian superiors remains to be seen.

For the time being, perhaps the first challenge facing the US defense establishment entails finding a way of successfully leaping across the chasm of public skepticism regarding the need for immediate recapitalization of high-end combat strength in what remains by far the world’s most robust fighting force in all mission areas at a time of near-unprecedented economic crisis. To land safely on the other side, one cannot escape facing squarely the profound resource pinch the defense sector now faces—and will continue to face for the next decade and most likely beyond. Defense professionals with legitimate concern over the depth of the nation’s current security predicament must first accept that buying more of *all* needed hardware equities is simply not a realistic option. In contrast, buying such equities *only* as hedges against future high-end contingencies or, as has been the preferred trend throughout the past decade, *only* to address today’s most pressing COIN needs may be more serviceable, but it too is not a responsible approach to resource apportionment. The inescapable truth here is that the nation’s towering federal deficit and severely curtailed funds for discretionary spending as

a result of sequestration are both real, and they will only become more constraining until dealt with as a first order of business at the expense of all else that also matters. General Welsh expressed this point with uncompromising candor in a recent meeting with reporters: “We’ve entered a period from which we must first recover before we can think about what else might be possible down the road.”⁸¹

After coming to effective grips with the reality of today’s resource limitations, a useful next step might then entail exploring best ways of optimizing force-development investment choices against future needs with due appreciation of that constraint. In the face of what will clearly be a much-diminished top line on available funds for the acquisition of next-generation systems, such optimization will, in turn, mean incrementally pursuing capabilities in a manner that will offer the greatest robustness for accommodating the largest spectrum of future challenges and their relative consequentiality for the nation should they occur. One possible middle course targeted toward the long haul could entail deemphasizing the exorbitant manpower-intensive spending that characterized the bulk of the US defense effort centered on sustaining our occupying land forces in Iraq and Afghanistan throughout the past decade. Instead, the Air Force and Navy must seek a force mix that positions the nation, in the fullness of time, beyond its current middle-weight composition of power-projection assets that is ill-configured for tomorrow’s most likely demands. Today’s force consists mainly of short-range multirole fighters that are best suited for large-scale conventional campaigns in Europe, Asia, or the Middle East. Although one can never wholly discount a repeat of such classic wars of the recent past like the major combat phase of OIF, there is a far greater likelihood future US combat embroilments will more often present themselves as the sorts of lower-intensity challenges like the ones we face today in our war against Islamist extremism and as higher-stakes confrontations such as anti-access and area denial challenges over long oceanic distances—a potential showdown with China over the future of Taiwan, for example. During their impressive surge performance during the major combat phases of OEF and OIF, the US Navy’s aircraft carriers had the advantage in each case of a benign operating environment, both at sea and in the air. More challenging future scenarios may not share this welcome feature and could severely limit the carriers’ contribution to sustained power projection. To remain a pivotal player in such situations, the Navy will need to address emerging

higher-end threats to its carriers and acquire more survivable low-observable strike platforms, both manned and unmanned, if its air arm is to continue to be as relevant in the future as in the recent past.

In the meantime, as the services analyze their resource-constrained alternatives for meeting tomorrow's needs, and as their leaders work toward a force mix configured to meet future demands qualitatively different from those of the preceding three decades, it will be incumbent on them to hedge against plausible challenges at *both* the high and low ends of the conflict spectrum to the greatest extent available resources will allow. True enough, low-intensity irregular warfare of the sort addressed in the JCOA study may be the only form of combat that our nation is beset with today. It may even be one wave of the future when it comes to the likely shape of most conflicts yet to come. Yet the era of bigger wars against more capable opponents who could pose existential threats to the United States has not ended for all time. One need not specify *who* those opponents may be to argue cogently that if we fail to hedge prudently against such possibilities until the need arises, it will be too late. In a speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London three years ago, the RAF chief of staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Dalton, summed up the force-planning consequences of this observation concisely: "For the sake of our future security, Afghanistan must serve as a prism to view the future, not as a prison for our thinking. A bespoke [built-to-order] counterinsurgency force with niche capabilities will not provide . . . political decision makers with a flexible military lever of power for the mid-to-long term."⁸²

In clear testimony to this, novel tests of our strength from rising powers like China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and possibly others yet to emerge could include such sophisticated threats as improved air and missile defenses, resultant denial of access to the most heavily defended target areas, and determined efforts to hinder our freedom of operations in space and cyberspace. Even if the United States never comes to blows with China or Russia directly, we can surely count on the proliferation of their latest fighters and other high-technology weapons to countries we are more likely to confront. Against such more likely challenges at the higher end of the conflict spectrum, what will be needed—and what the nation now lacks—is a larger number of long-range ISR and strike platforms, both manned and unmanned, capable of operating across transoceanic distances and possessing the attributes needed to survive,

persist, and perform effectively in the most heavily defended airspace. By the same token, there will likely also be a need for new platforms optimized for lower-intensity warfare, such as an improved successor to the current uninhabited MQ-9 Reaper and a relatively cheap manned light attack aircraft to be operated either by the USAF or by supported host-nation air arms that would allow more affordable battlespace persistence and effectiveness than today's higher-end combat aircraft, now worn out from a decade of unrelenting COIN overuse, and tomorrow's even more costly F-35s in countering the less demanding hybrid challenges that will tend to predominate at the lower end of the future threat environment.⁸³

As for the more specific teachings offered by the global conflicts of the past two decades, three abiding considerations warrant emphasis. First, it will be important to recognize and remember the difference between those combat operations that succeeded because US and allied forces were uniquely capable and strong and those that succeeded because the adversary was comparatively weak and inept. Notably, almost all of the 11 cases of global conflict throughout the past two decades discussed above entailed substantial mismatches in opposed force capability and combat prowess. These differences must warn the United States against complacency as it considers future challenges.

Second, the United States would do well to heed a recent injunction offered by the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, Richard Haass, who wisely counseled the importance, in light of our costly combat experience of the past decade, of “resisting wars of choice where the interests at stake are less than vital and where there are alternatives to the use of force.”⁸⁴ More than 6,000 US servicemen and women lost their lives during the nation's protracted ground-dominated COIN engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003, to say nothing of the thousands more who were wounded in combat, many gravely.⁸⁵ As for the costs, both wars together are expected eventually to become the most expensive in US history, with some \$2 trillion already spent—more than half of the entire US government budget for fiscal year 2013—and with an estimated final outlay totaling from \$4 to \$6 trillion in decades yet to come when one includes long-term medical care and disability compensation, needed military equipment replenishment, and associated social and economic costs.⁸⁶ The United States cannot select the wars that most fundamentally threaten its core interests, but those over

which it *does* enjoy the luxury of choice should be approached more diffidently in the future if the costly experience of our past decade of COIN warfare offers any guide. The persistence of the sectarian violence and insurgency against the allied occupation, seemingly without end for a time, that followed the successful major combat phase of OIF in 2003 led former secretary of defense Melvin Laird, who oversaw the endgame of US involvement Vietnam, to remark more than two years later that “getting out of a war is still dicier than getting into one.”⁸⁷ With fewer dollars available to vouchsafe the nation’s security, it will be essential for the United States to forego optional and avoidable land wars in years to come and to seek smarter ways of ensuring our access to those parts of the world where unavoidable conflicts are most likely to occur.

Finally, in that respect, although the United States faces no peer competitor today, at least on the near-term horizon, or any current existential threat to its survival, it is fair to suggest that the nation is entering a less safe global environment in the decade ahead. In light of that, a worthy goal for the nation’s leaders in preparing for conflicts yet to come would be to learn from our costly and painful ground combat experiences of the past decade by relying to the greatest extent possible henceforth on our clear comparative advantages in global mobility, standoff ISR, and air-delivered precision strike capability so as to be poised whenever necessary to project US power without at the same time projecting US vulnerabilities. **SSQ**

Notes

1. *Decade of War*, vol. 1: *Enduring Lessons from the Past Decade of Operations* (Washington: DoD Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis Division, Joint Staff J-7, 15 June 2012), v, 2.

2. *Ibid.*, v.

3. In commenting on the study’s narrow fixation on tactical-level details of US COIN involvement since 2003 in general disregard of the larger strategic lessons one might draw from the full sweep of combat experience worldwide since the Cold War’s end, a former president of the National Defense University and later president of the Air Force Association wrote, “If I were asked, about half of the [study’s] eleven recommendations wouldn’t even make my Tier 3 list, let alone be in the top eleven.” Lt Gen Michael M. Dunn, USAF, retired, e-mail to author, 7 June 2012.

4. To expand on this last point, Israel’s experience with Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 and its more successful effort dealing with Hamas in the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and January 2009 put clear handwriting on the wall for a more demanding sort of low-end challenge the United States may have to contend with in the next decade and beyond. This challenge entails nonstate players with the kinds of capabilities typically associated with conventional armed

forces and operating as forward proxies for hostile powers like Iran. Such proxy arms will increasingly gain effective leverage from what has come to be called the G-RAMM threat (for guided rockets, artillery, mortars, and missiles) intended to hold civilian populations at risk, as Hezbollah and Hamas did to Israel in the Lebanon and Gaza wars. Israel's operations against the two organizations showcased a new form of asymmetric warfare that is likely to persist throughout the second decade of the twenty-first century and beyond. As one commentator aptly pointed out three years later, the first of those two experiences "was the proverbial canary in the coal mine. It suggested that a new, more deadly form of irregular conflict—known as 'irregular warfare under high-technology conditions'—may be emerging." Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., "The Pentagon's Wasting Assets," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (July/August 2009): 24.

5. Lt Gen David A. Deptula, USAF, retired, "Missing from Our Two Wars: Clear Goals, Joint Forces," *defense.aol.com*, 1 October 2012.

6. It bears noting here that Israel conducted a second counteroffensive against Hamas in November 2012, this time relying on air attacks alone, in response to a resumption of rocket fire by Hamas into populated areas of southern Israel. In that brief and successful operation, in contrast to its earlier experiences in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2008 and 2009, the Israeli government took special care to ensure that overarching political goals and diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving them would be the main determinants of IDF actions, and it treated its latest showdown with Hamas as more an armed negotiation than a war. Its response featured, for the first time ever in sustained combat, the effective use by the Israeli Air Force (IAF) of a fielded missile defense system that effectively negated nearly 90 percent of the incoming Hamas short- and medium-range rockets aimed at inhabited areas. The remarkable performance of that system, called "Iron Dome," figured centrally in inducing Hamas to accept a negotiated cease-fire arrangement after eight days of punishing precision bombing by the IAF. In addition to more than 400 short-range rockets fired by Hamas, the Iron Dome system also, for the first time, intercepted a medium-range Iranian-supplied Fajr 5 rocket headed for Tel Aviv. For a good synopsis of the system's performance throughout the eight-day Israeli counteroffensive, see Ernesto Londoño, "For Israel, Iron Dome Is a 'Miracle' Breakthrough," *Washington Post*, 3 December 2012.

7. Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 11.

8. The term *joint*, in standard military usage, refers to the cooperative involvement of two or more of a nation's armed services in a combat, peacekeeping, or humanitarian operation. *Joint and combined* refers to both multiservice and allied participation in such operations.

9. For example, the post-Cold War teachings addressed below having to do with the criticality of applying sound strategy, the importance of pursuing achievable goals, and the pitfalls of mission creep have clear antecedents in Vietnam and earlier US combat experiences. I am grateful to my CSBA colleague Andrew Krepinevich for calling my attention to this important point.

10. The most thorough and authoritative overview assessment of this experience is Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare? Air Power in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995). See also Williamson Murray, *Air War in the Persian Gulf* (Baltimore, MD: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Co. of America, 1995).

11. For the most complete account of the first Balkan war, see Col Robert C. Owen, USAF, ed., *Deliberate Force: A Case Study in Effective Air Campaigning* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2000). On the second and more significant of the two, see Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2000); and Benjamin S. Lambeth, *NATO's Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001).

12. The best account of the CIA and SOF-assisted contribution to the opening round in the Afghan campaign is Gary C. Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Presidio Press, 2005).

13. The precise language of UNSCR 1973 on this count authorized "all necessary measures" for protecting Libyan civilians under threat of attack, "while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory." UN Security Council, "Security Council Approves 'No-Fly Zone' over Libya, Authorizing 'All Necessary Measures to Protect Civilians, by a Vote of 10 in Favour with 5 Abstentions,'" SC/10200, 6498th Meeting [night], UN Department of Public Information, 17 March 2011. See also Karen DeYoung, "U.S., Allies' Jets Poised to Fly over Libya as Other Nations Mull Strategy," *Washington Post*, 19 March 2011.

14. A full chronicling and assessment of this combat experience may be found in Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The Unseen War: Allied Air Power and the Takedown of Saddam Hussein* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013).

15. I owe thanks to my former RAND colleague David Ochmanek for reminding me of this important point.

16. For the essential details regarding this rocky start of India's ultimately successful joint campaign in the Himalayas, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Airpower at 18,000': The Indian Air Force in the Kargil War* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 9–13. The best assessment of all aspects of that campaign is contained in Peter R. Lavoy, ed., *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

17. An informed assessment of why even today's US air posture would face great challenges in such a situation is presented in David A. Shlapak et al., *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2009). This analysis goes so far as to argue that "a credible case can be made that *the air war for Taiwan could essentially be over before much of the Blue* [i.e., the defending US and Taiwanese] *air force has even fired a shot*" (emphasis in original). *Ibid.*, 85, 89.

18. Richard Andres, "The New Role of Air Strike in Small Wars," *Small Wars Journal*, July 2008.

19. Quoted in Lt Gen David A. Deptula, USAF, "Air Force ISR in a Changing World: Changing Paradigms While Optimizing 'Low Density' to Meet 'High Demand,'" presentation to the Air Force Association's Global Air and Space Symposium, Los Angeles, CA, 21 November 2008.

20. As used here, *airpower* refers not just to air vehicles and systems, but also to airpower's space, information, intelligence, command and control, and cyberspace adjuncts, all of which are equally important to delivering combat effects from the third dimension. It also refers not just to US Air Force airpower, but also to the contributions of all of the services that operate and fight in and from the third dimension.

21. GEN Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 425.

22. In a similar instance of highly limited operational objectives, Israeli airpower alone successfully negated Iraq's incipient nuclear weapons manufacturing capability in 1981 when eight IAF F-16s destroyed the Osirak reactor in a well-planned surprise airstrike. For the essential details of this successful covert air attack, see Rodger W. Claire, *Raid on the Sun: Inside Israel's Secret Campaign that Denied Saddam the Bomb* (New York: Broadway Books, 1984). See also Shelomoh Nakdimon, *First Strike: The Exclusive Story of How Israel Foiled Iraq's Attempt to Get the Bomb* (New York: Summit Books, 1987).

23. Quoted in Elliott Abrams, "Just War, Just Means?" *National Review*, 28 June 1999, 16.

24. John Keegan, "Modern Weapons Hit War Wisdom," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 1999.

25. Quoted in Sean D. Naylor, "Army Panels Warn of Technology Dependence," *Defense News*, 31 August–1 September 1998.

26. Christian F. Anrig, "Allied Air Power over Libya: A Preliminary Assessment," *Air and Space Power Journal* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 89–90. The IADS takedown and establishment of a no-fly zone over the entire northern stretch of Libya from border to border featured coordinated attacks against Gaddafi's surface-to-air missile defenses by 110 ship-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles and strikes by three US Air Force B-2 stealth bombers against 45 Libyan hardened aircraft shelters. Jeremiah Gertler, *Operation Odyssey Dawn [Libya]: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 28 March 2011), 7. By the end of the campaign's third day, the overall commander of US theater operations reported that these and related attacks had "rendered Gaddafi's long-range air defenses and his air force largely ineffective." ADM Samuel Locklear, USN, press briefing, 22 March 2011.

27. "Operation Odyssey Dawn" at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/odyssey-dawn.htm>.

28. This is not to suggest, however, that NATO's air war against Gaddafi was flawlessly executed by any means. Although many today believe that the campaign was a resounding success, the performance of allied air assets, as in the earlier case of Operation Allied Force against Serbia in 1999, was in fact bedeviled by manifold deficiencies having to do with munitions availability, interoperability problems, and other organizational, equipment, and political issues that will require attention and rectifying if NATO is ever again to undertake a similar air campaign for higher stakes. For a well-informed synopsis of these deficiencies, see Maj Jason R. Greenleaf, USAF, "The Air War in Libya," *Air and Space Power Journal* 27, no. 2 (March–April 2013): 28–54.

29. Even the most outspoken land power advocates have increasingly come to understand and accept this newly emergent fact of military life. For example, retired Army major general Robert Scales, no airpower enthusiast by any means, remarked after the major combat phase of OIF ended that "the American way of war substitutes firepower for manpower. We expose as few troops as possible to close contact with the enemy. We do that by killing as many enemy as we can with precision weapons," thereby making the most of their long-distance lethality. Quoted in Dennis Cauchon, "Why U.S. Casualties Were Low," *USA Today*, 21 April 2003.

30. Air Chief Marshal Sir Patrick Hine, RAF, retired, "Air Operations in the Gulf War," in *The War in the Air 1914–1994*, ed. Alan Stephens (Canberra: RAAF Air Power Studies Centre, 1994), 307.

31. Quoted in Keaney and Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare?* 79.

32. Gen Merrill A. McPeak, USAF, retired, "The Kosovo Result: The Facts Speak for Themselves," *Armed Forces Journal International*, September 1999, 64.

33. Michael Evans, "Ground War 'Error,'" *London Times*, 24 March 2000.

34. Tim Butcher and Patrick Bishop, "NATO Admits Air Campaign Failed," *London Daily Telegraph*, 22 July 1999, 1.

35. Quoted in Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2000), 106.

36. Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: Random House, 1998), 104.

37. For a full account of that combat experience, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Air Power against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2005).

38. At least one purveyor of this outlook has gone so far as to suggest that as a result of the onset of so-called fourth-generation warfare, as exemplified by the COIN phases of OEF and OIF, "air power clearly is in real trouble" today and that, given the likelihood that the wars of the twenty-first century will continue to be "mainly of the low-intensity kind . . . there

probably is no compelling case [any longer] for independent air power at all.” Martin van Creveld, “The Rise and Fall of Air Power,” in *A History of Air Warfare*, ed. John Andreas Olsen (Washington: Potomac Books, 2010), 369–70.

39. The best recent development of this balanced and sensible view is presented in Colin S. Gray, *Airpower for Strategic Effect* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2012).

40. Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans. by Dino Ferrari (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1942), 28. A good example of such false charges was the suggestion by one airpower critic in the early aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War that some airmen had persuaded themselves that the war’s successful conclusion “proved” that the sort of air campaign that largely swung Desert Storm’s outcome was “universally applicable” and that airpower could now “decide international disputes, not simply without costly ground campaigns but even without deployment of any credible ground threat.” Jeffrey Record, “Gulf War’s Misread Lessons,” *Baltimore Sun*, 9 July 1991.

41. For more on both, see David MacIsaac, “Voices from the Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 624–47.

42. An early airing of this proposition may be found in Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 320–21. For a later treatment, see David E. Johnson, *Learning Large Lessons: The Evolving Roles of Ground Power and Air Power in the Post–Cold War Era* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2006).

43. Johnson, *Learning Large Lessons*, 115, 140.

44. Quoted in Diane T. Putney, *Airpower Advantage: Planning the Gulf War Air Campaign, 1989–1991* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2004), 356.

45. Lt Gen T. Michael Moseley, USAF, “Coalition Forces Air Component Commander Briefing, April 5, 2003,” DoD news transcript, 5 April 2003.

46. Nathaniel Fick, *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 289.

47. After that failed attempt, the Army’s vice chief of staff, GEN John Keane, pointedly asked, “Does our doctrine still make sense?” General Keane admitted that the Apache formation “ran into an [enemy] organization that was much more spread out” than had been expected and that as a result, “we are taking a look at aviation doctrine and how to use Apaches at long distances.” Quoted in “Army to Reevaluate Apache Tactics,” *Air Force Magazine*, October 2003, 15. In a similar vein, the commander of the Army’s V Corps during the campaign, LTG William Wallace, later granted that the attempted operation “did not meet the objectives that [he] had set for that attack” and that “deep operations with Apaches, unless there’s a very, very, very clear need to do it, are probably not a good idea.” Quoted in Rowan Scarborough, “General Tells How Cell Phone Foiled U.S. Attack in Iraq,” *Washington Times*, 8 May 2003; and Rick Atkinson, *In the Company of Soldiers: A Chronicle of Combat* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004), 154.

48. Jody Jacobs et al., *Enhancing Fires and Maneuver through Greater Air–Ground Joint Interdependence* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2009), 6.

49. For more on this demonstrated combat capability, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, *American Carrier Air Power at the Dawn of a New Century* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2005), 9–58.

50. Senior officers in OPNAV N78 and N81 (Office of the Chief of Naval Operations), interviews by the author, 19–20 April 2005.

51. Quoted in Sandra I. Irwin, “Aircraft Carriers: Symbols of American Power and Budget Dysfunction,” *Hook*, Spring 2013, 8.

52. Air Force Doctrine Document 2, *Operations and Organization*, 3 April 2007, 14.

53. Statement by ADM Edmund P. Giambastiani Jr., commander, US Joint Forces Command, before the House Armed Services Committee, Washington, DC, 2 October 2003.

54. Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, 11 August 2011, A-2.

55. For an early tutorial on this construct by its principal creator, see Col David A. Deptula, USAF, *Firing for Effect: Change in the Nature of Warfare* (Arlington, VA: Aerospace Education Foundation, 1995). The cursory definition of EBO presented above bears special emphasis because of an undue misrepresentation that the construct has suffered since 2008 at the hands of some senior figures in the US land-warfare community, owing mainly to its close association with airpower and the latter's repeated achievements since Desert Storm. The best-known example was the peremptory declaration in 2008 by Gen James Mattis, USMC, then-commander of US Joint Forces Command, that his command would no longer "use, sponsor, or export" the construct because it was, in his view, "fundamentally flawed" as a result of its alleged failure to show proper obeisance to the "time honored principles and terminology that our forces have tested in the crucible of battle." In more recent months, the corporate Air Force has finally begun to push back with a determined reaffirmation of the construct's validity at every opportunity. For an informed and fair discussion of this issue, which unfortunately still percolates in the US joint arena, see John T. Correll, "The Assault on EBO," *Air Force Magazine*, January 2013, 50–54.

56. See, for example, Maj Gen Jasper A. Welch Jr., USAF, retired, "Technology and Military Strategy: Looking Forward to the Uncertainty of the 1990s," paper prepared for a discussion series on airpower and the new security environment, Washington Strategy Seminar, RAND Corporation, Washington, DC, 14 November 1991, 4.

57. Maj Michael J. Bodner and Maj William M. Bruner III, USAF, "Tank Plinking," *Air Force Magazine*, October 1993, 31.

58. Pushpinder Singh, *Himalayan Eagles: History of the Indian Air Force*, vol. 3: *World Air Power* (New Delhi: Society for Aerospace Studies, 2007), 124.

59. George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 489.

60. For amplification on this point, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Air Operations in Israel's War against Hezbollah: Learning from Lebanon and Getting It Right in Gaza* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2011).

61. Israel's first Lebanon war entailed 18 costly and nonproductive years of previous occupation of the country from 1982 to 2000, during which time the IDF sustained more than 600 troop losses, almost as many as during the Six-Day War of 1967. For Israelis, the Lebanon occupation was and remains the IDF's Vietnam.

62. A fuller account of that more commendable combat experience is presented in Benjamin S. Lambeth, "Israel's War against Hamas: A Paradigm of Effective Military Learning and Adaptation," *International Security* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 81–118.

63. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

64. Frederick W. Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 358–59. Phase I entailed the initial planning for the campaign, and Phase II was the flowing of forces to the impending war zone.

65. Elaine M. Grossman, "For U.S. Commander in Kosovo, Luck Played Role in Wartime Success," *Inside the Pentagon*, 9 September 1999.

66. Speech in south Beirut by Hassan Nasrallah broadcast on *al Manar* television, 17 February 2007, cited in William M. Arkin, "Divine Victory for Whom? Air Power in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 123. It bears stressing here,

however, that viewed with the benefit of seven years' hindsight, Israel's war against Hezbollah in 2006 was by no means the strategic failure that many viewed it to have been at the time, considering that Nasrallah has remained deterred from firing rockets into Israel's northern population centers ever since. For a fuller development of this point, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, "Israel's Second Lebanon War Reconsidered," *Military and Strategic Affairs*, December 2012, 45–63.

67. Colin S. Gray, *The Airpower Advantage in Future Warfare: The Need for Strategy* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Airpower Research Institute, 2007), 15, 18, 20.

68. Only after the war ended did it become clear that the two abducted soldiers had died, either during the abduction operation or not long thereafter. Two years after the war's onset, on 16 July 2008, in a long-negotiated prearranged exchange, representatives of Hezbollah transferred coffins containing the remains of the two soldiers to Israeli security officials in return for the convicted and incarcerated terrorist murderer Samir Kuntar, four Hezbollah militants, and the bodies of around 200 other Lebanese and Palestinian militants who had previously been captured or killed in firefights with the IDF. "Regev and Goldwasser to Receive Funerals Thursday," *Haaretz Daily* (Tel Aviv), 17 July 2008.

69. Gen Ronald Fogleman, USAF, retired, in an address to an Air Force Association group in Washington, DC, 11 April 2012, as quoted in John A. Tirpak, "The Patience Reservoir," *airforce-magazine.com*, 13 April 2012. In a similar vein, a former commander of Air Combat Command suggested at about the same time that one sensible solution to the problem created by this mission creep would be for the US leadership simply to recognize the mistake made and turn the clock back to the original goal that took the nation into Afghanistan in the first place. Gen John Michael Loh, USAF, retired, "Stop Terrorists with More Airpower," letter to the editor, *Wall Street Journal*, 25 April 2012.

70. His exact formulation of this seminal point was: "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88–89.

71. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, "Remarks to Air War College," speech, Maxwell AFB, 21 April 2008.

72. Robert M. Gates, "Remarks to the Heritage Foundation," speech, Colorado Springs, 13 May 2008.

73. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington: DoD, January 2012).

74. For a thoughtful post hoc reflection on the first count, see Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

75. Quoted in Robert S. Dudley, "The Strategy's Last Stand?" *Air Force Magazine*, July 2009, 2.

76. As one of the best assessments of this burgeoning form of post–Cold War conflict has put it, fourth-generation warfare "uses all available networks—political, economic, social, and military—to convince the enemy's political decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit. . . . It does not attempt to win by defeating the enemy's forces. Instead, via the networks, it directly attacks the minds of enemy decision makers to destroy the enemy's political will." Col Thomas X. Hammes, USMC, retired, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2006), 2.

77. For a detailed review of the many Air Force and Navy initiatives in force development, concepts of operations, and training and tactics undertaken throughout those two decades, see Lambeth, *Transformation of American Air Power*, 54–102.

78. Lt Gen David A. Deptula, USAF, “Preserving America’s Air Dominance,” unpublished manuscript.

79. ADM Jonathan Greenert, USN, and Gen Mark A. Welsh III, USAF, “Breaking the Kill Chain: How to Keep America in the Game When Our Enemies Are Trying to Shut Us Out,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, 16 May 2013. For the first unclassified summary of the classified Air-Sea Battle Concept, version 9.0 dated May 2012, and the Air-Sea Battle Master Implementation Plan (FY-13) dated September 2012, see *Air-Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenges* (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air-Sea Battle Office, May 2013).

80. Greenert and Welsh, “Breaking the Kill Chain.”

81. Gen Mark A. Welsh III, USAF, statement at a Pentagon press briefing on the state of the Air Force, 24 May 2013.

82. Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Dalton, RAF, “Air Power Is Not a Niche,” *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 22 February 2010, 58.

83. For a thoughtful amplification on this last point, see Col Russell J. Smith, USAF, retired, “Common Sense at the Crossroads for Our Air Force,” *Air and Space Power Journal* 26, no. 2 (March–April 2012): 90–117. An important qualification needs to be added. Today’s F-16s and F/A-18s and tomorrow’s F-35s may indeed embody exceedingly costly overkill for most future COIN scenarios we may confront. One must remain mindful, however, of the possibility that tomorrow’s COIN environment could include high-capability SAMs that are absent from today’s COIN fight and that would render a light attack aircraft nonsurvivable. I am indebted to David Deptula for bringing this cautionary note to my attention.

84. Richard N. Haass, “The Second American Century? It’s Already Here,” *Washington Post*, 28 April 2013.

85. “Day-by-Day Fatalities in the War in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, 18 December 2011; and Shashank Bengali, “U.S. Fatalities in Afghanistan Declining,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 February 2013.

86. Linda J. Bilmes, *The Financial Legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan: How Wartime Spending Decisions Will Constrain Future National Security Budgets*, Faculty Research Working Paper 13-006 (Cambridge, MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 2013).

87. Melvin R. Laird, “Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November/December 2005): 22.