

# Air-Mindedness

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**W**HAT MAKES AIRMEN different from soldiers or sailors? It has to be more than the uniform they wear or the technology they maintain and operate. The distinction is the unique perspective they bring to the art of warfare—an attribute we loosely define as air-mindedness. It might have been easier to gain consensus on a definition 15 years ago, when the Air Force was occupied principally in strategic operations in defense of the nation. However, since then the Air Force has been almost exclusively engaged in theater-specific operations, such as Northern and Southern Watch, Allied Force, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom. These operations and the global constructs of space and cyberspace began to reshape how Airmen perceive their contributions and cast new questions about what Airmen bring to the fight.

In his work *The Command of the Air*, Giulio Douhet wrote, “As long as man remained tied to the surface of the earth, his activities had to be adapted to the conditions imposed by that surface. . . . By virtue of this new weapon [the airplane], the repercussions of war are no longer limited by the farthest artillery range of surface guns, but can be directly felt for hundreds and hundreds of miles over all the lands and seas of nations at war.”<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to identify the unique contributions that airpower brings to surface warfare, Gen Henry H. “Hap” Arnold termed the Airman’s “particular expertise and . . . distinctive point of view . . . ‘air-mindedness.’”<sup>2</sup>

Air-mindedness should not be confused with airpower doctrine and its implementation, such as centralized control and decentralized execution. Like esprit de corps, it binds Airmen together and guides their actions. However, again like esprit de corps, it is diffi-

cult to define. Learned airpower scholars continue to debate the definition of air-mindedness, and reasonable Airmen continue to disagree—not because airpower cannot be defined but because, like viewing an object through a prism, it depends upon one’s perspective.

Accordingly, air-mindedness does not have a static definition but captures nuances that change over time. In its simplest form, air-mindedness is the lens through which Airmen perceive warfare and view the battlespace. As warfare has evolved, so has the definition of air-mindedness. First and foremost, it implies an offensive mind-set. During the interwar years, air-mindedness described a strategic vision of airpower that produced the concept of daylight precision bombing in World War II. During the Cold War, it provided the rationale for nuclear deterrence, deep-strike bombers, and ballistic missiles. Air-mindedness has never been platform-centric, so it enables today’s Airmen to think first about desired effects and then about the means of attaining them. Consequently, it enables Airmen to express the concepts of space and cyberspace operations as easily as they expressed airpower concepts only a few years earlier.

Thus, Airmen are better equipped to exploit the other global commons of space and cyberspace since they view them as domains rather than as tools. The distinction is that a surface operator might ask, “How can I do my job using space or cyber?” Conversely, an Airman would ask, “How can I achieve the desired effect through space or cyber?”

Air-mindedness, however, does have certain constants. It is a global, strategic mind-set providing perspective through which the battlespace is not constrained by geography, distance, location, or time. The air-mindedness lens enables Airmen to think about conflict in

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which force-on-force and armies in the field are only one element. It implies the ability to influence the links between adversary materiel and moral strength. Although Airmen rarely claim to target the enemy's will, they perceive a direct connection between his physical capacity and desire to continue the fight.

Air-mindedness also connotes a cultural characteristic that distinguishes Airmen from their partners in the other services. The ability to range over the battlespace rapidly and with relative impunity while surface forces often struggle to advance even short distances creates the potential for conflict among the services. Additionally, the perception that Airmen operate in the relative safety of a highly technical, pristine environment while their surface partners remain in much closer proximity to the dangers of the battlefield over longer periods of time creates a divide.

Brig Gen Billy Mitchell said that airpower was "the ability to do something in the air."<sup>3</sup> That ability has sparked innovation and a cul-

ture among Airmen distinct from the surface approach to employing military force. The notion of air-mindedness probably will not find consensus among either Airmen or their surface partners. However, if it furthers the discussion, then this article has accomplished a significant objective by encouraging Airmen to examine why they believe what they believe so they may become better advocates of their profession. □

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#### Notes

1. Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans. Dino Ferrari (1942; new imprint, Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 7, 9.

2. Quoted in Air Force Doctrine Document 2, *Operations and Organization*, 3 April 2007, 2, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/service\\_pubs/afdd2.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/service_pubs/afdd2.pdf).

3. William Mitchell, *Winged Defense: The Development and Possibilities of Modern Air Power—Economic and Military* (1925; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1988), xii.

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