

Culture Clash

Bomber Nuclear Operations in a Post–Cold War World

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A global power requires a conventional bomber force that is aggressive, creative, and decisive. It also requires a nuclear bomber force that provides flawless, positive control of weapons and follows procedure to the letter.

When I joined my first operational unit, after initial qualification training in the B-52, the remnants of Strategic Air Command (SAC) were still prevalent. Older crew members spoke longingly about Mother SAC, hoping that somehow the command would rise again.

Air Combat Command (ACC) had just combined the bombers of SAC and the fighters of Tactical Air Command (TAC). At the time, it was doubtful that one could find two more divergent cultures in the Air Force. SAC represented the force built by Gen Curtis LeMay to deter the Soviet Union. TAC represented the Air Force that would support the Army in a conventional conflict.

Each culture's flight crews disdained the other. TAC warriors saw SAC as a regimented organization that could not improvise. SAC warriors saw TAC as a fraternity of cowboys. Neither understood how the other became the way they were—and probably did not care to understand.

Regardless of who was correct, the bomber community generally accepted that TAC had won the philosophical debate. Therefore, we worked diligently to change the culture to correspond to the new ACC. Training emphasized the conventional mission. The Air Force established a weapons school for the B-52, B-1, and, finally, the

B-2. While these weapons schools continued to teach nuclear weapons, they migrated to a more conventional curriculum.

ACC welcomed these changes, which led to the successful combat debut of the B-2 during the war in Kosovo, during which it “accounted for only 1 percent of all NATO sorties, [yet] the aircraft’s all-weather, precision capability allowed it to deliver 11 percent of the munitions used in the air campaign.”¹ Kosovo proved that a bomber could lead the fight—even into the most heavily defended areas.

The B-2 again led the initial air strikes in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. More importantly, the B-1 and B-52 have continued the fight by providing close air support (CAS) to US and coalition forces. Korea taught us that bombers do not do CAS. The invention of munitions guided by the global positioning system enabled us to change that doctrine. However, we cannot attribute effective bomber CAS solely to technology but must acknowledge a change in bomber culture that is now successful and complete.

Unfortunately, the changes were not all positive. The inadvertent flight of a half-dozen nuclear-tipped cruise missiles from Minot AFB, North Dakota, to Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, in 2007 demonstrated, from a nuclear perspective, just how wrong the change in bomber culture had gone. The regimented culture that produced nuclear warriors who did not deviate from the plan was in place for a reason. TAC trained creative warriors who made decisions on the fly, but SAC created warriors who had no greater responsibility than the sure control

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of nuclear weapons, and who carried out decisions made for them by the president.

Now, the Air Force is faced with the prospect of rebuilding the nuclear bomber culture. Yet, it must do so without destroying the valuable conventional culture engendered in the bomber community since the end of the Cold War.

Complicating matters, the bomber fleet underwent significant downsizing, going from 10 B-52 wings in 1989 to two by 1994. Despite the introduction of the B-1 and B-2, the net loss amounted to approximately 100 bombers.²

The larger bomber force structure of the Cold War era created flexible options for the Air Force. The nuclear and conventional B-52 wings could focus exclusively on their respective missions, thus creating distinct cultures between their crews. The conventional B-52 crew members subsequently helped lead the post-Cold War change in bomber culture. In essence, fewer bombers now means fewer options for the Air Force as it tries to revive the nuclear culture.

One solution would involve retaining dual-role bomber wings but somehow increasing the emphasis on nuclear training—not an attractive option. Establishing a culture that is both creative and regimented would prove difficult. A better option would call for creating nuclear and conventional wings, which would entail bringing the B-52H attrition reserve online until a new bomber can be built. In addition, the Air Force should reexamine requirements for nuclear deterrence.

Because a global power must have the ability to deter, it needs a credible force of nuclear bombers. By the same token, because it must quickly project power around the globe, it needs a capable force of conventional bombers. Ultimately, the Air Force must create the force structure to allow the United States the flexibility to do both. In the meantime, we must devise a solution that will rebuild the nuclear bomber culture without destroying the valuable conventional bomber culture we worked so hard to create. ✪

Notes

1. Margaret DePalma, “History of the 509th Bomb Wing,” 26 July 2007, <http://www.whiteman.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123062208> (accessed 24 September 2009).

2. See “B-52 Timeline,” Boeing, http://www.boeing.com/defense-space/military/b52-strat/b52_50th/timeline.htm (accessed 24 September 2009). For the numbers of B-52s produced, see “Boeing B-52

Stratofortress Intercontinental Strategic Bomber,” *Aerospaceweb.org*, <http://www.aerospaceweb.org/aircraft/bomber/b52> (accessed 24 September 2009). See also *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “List of B-52 Units of the United States Air Force,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_B-52_Units_of_the_United_States_Air_Force (accessed 24 September 2009).

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