

# Solving the Challenges of Air Force Engagements in Irregular Warfare

Mayor (USAF) Justin DeMarco

Lt Col (USAF) Jason Hanover



**In order to position the Air Force for success in the modern security environment, while continuing to prepare for future conflict, a formal Irregular Warfare structure must be created.** The US Air Force is currently organized, trained and equipped to conduct conventional warfare and has been forced to adjust to counter irregular threats in places like Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan throughout our history. These have been predominantly reactionary adjustments at the tactical level while maintaining a strategic eye on potential future conflicts.

There is no doubt we must retain a strong conventional capability to ensure future belligerents see no weakness, however, we need to take the same strategic view of the irregular fight to avoid addressing current threats in a reactionary fashion.

Our challenge is the rise of political, religious, and ethnic extremist ideologies fueling conflicts worldwide leading to an environment that includes a mix of military and non-military threats to US national security by state and non-state actors. The absence of effective governance in states that are unable or unwilling to exercise control over their territory creates sanctuaries for terrorists, criminals, and insurgents.

Weak or failing states suffering from stagnant economies, corrupt political institutions, environmental issues, poor public health/ epidemic diseases, or multinational competition for their natural resources become hotbeds for conflict providing a nurturing environment for insurgents and transnational terrorists.<sup>1</sup> To combat this complex problem set, the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations charges the joint force, in concert with other elements of national power, to conduct integrated actions in multiple domains concurrently to engage any adversary and help control any situation in support of strategic objectives. The challenge facing the Air Force is the fact that Irregular Warfare will become increasingly global in scale and protracted.

Our adversaries will unlikely operate under the same legal or moral restrictions as will the joint force, and they are likely to operate within and from non-

belligerent states that will limit or restrict joint force access. Further complicating the military picture, our ability to influence governments and populations is a complex and inherently political activity, no matter what methods are used. The Air Force has focused the vast majority of its resources on the tactical level of war, while the IW adversary mitigates this by placing emphasis on the strategic nature of the conflict. In these cases, tactical application of kinetic force can undermine the strategic goals of trust, security, and stability we are trying to instill; and further complicate strategic objectives by detracting from the legitimacy of the host nation we are trying to support.<sup>2</sup>

This environment demands a change to conventional thought on how to organize, train, and equip the joint force, and component forces to meet these “irregular” problem sets. We will not win the long war unless we truly internalize the radical difference between the cold war environment and one we currently face. Irregular warfare is an intellectual vice materiel fight. The Air Force’s conventional contribution to joint employment revolves around technologically advanced air, space, and cyberspace systems; in IW however, that advantage is mitigated driving a shift in thought from procurement and fielding of systems, to growing and developing personnel with specific intellectual skill sets (language skills, regional/cultural expertise, interagency expertise). While some new systems may be required to enable tactical Air Force contributions, technology is not the primary focus. We must make the commitment to embrace Clausewitz’ mandate that the military is an extension of politics. If we don’t organize, train, and equip our Air Force forces to integrate the military Instrument of Power (IOP) with diplomatic, information, economic, financial, intelligence, and legal instruments, we will not provide the strategic application of air, space, and cyberspace power to gain the synergy and focus required to effectively contribute to the joint IW fight as described below.

**“IW is a complex, ‘messy,’ and ambiguous social phenomenon that does not lend itself to clean, neat, concise, or precise definition.”<sup>3</sup>** That potent truth emerges every time an organization proposes a traditional definition of this non-traditional phenomenon. What makes IW so hard to define is the fact that it changes as you change levels of warfare. The one constant, however, is that focus of effort shifts from affecting an enemy’s military, to affecting the population in an effort to, “gain or maintain control or influence over, and the support of, that relevant population through political, psychological, and economic methods.”<sup>4</sup> This basic understanding guides strategists away from a quest to define IW, and more toward a way to focus our efforts at the different levels of war. At the strategic level, the focus is that of control and influence over a target population to prevent/end conflict while at the operational level, the focus is on planning and conducting whole-of-government campaigns through indirect approaches focused on securing and winning over populations while enabling partner militaries. Finally, at the tactical level, the focus is on application of existing tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP), applied for IW

effects vice conventional conflict.<sup>5</sup> To fine-tune such an amorphous concept, the IW Joint Operating Concept defines IW ends as: friendly political authority and influence over a host population are secured and adversary control, influence, and support are denied. It continues by defining IW ways as the conduct of protracted regional and global campaigns against state and non-state adversaries to subvert, coerce, attrite, and exhaust adversaries rather than defeating them through direct conventional military confrontation. Specific activities include: insurgency/counterinsurgency (COIN), unconventional warfare (UW), counterterrorism (CT), foreign internal defense (FID), stabilization, security, transition, and reconstruction operations (SSTRO), strategic communications, psychological operations (PSYOP), information operations (IO), civil-military operations (CMO), intelligence/counterintelligence activities, and law enforcement activities (focused on countering irregular adversaries). The means to these ends are a fully integrated US and partner-state conventional and nonconventional force. How then does the Air Force organize to meet this challenge?

**To maximize our IW contribution, the Air Force has to go back to its roots, modify current thought, and restructure to facilitate success.** Since its inception, the Air Force has used the term “Strategic” to describe our contribution to joint warfare, whether strategic bombing, or strategic (nuclear) deterrence. This term needs to change in our cultural vernacular from describing a service specific niche to defining our contribution to the joint/interagency fight. Our political leaders have clearly expressed the necessity to improve our capability in the Irregular Warfare environment and embracing this as a strategic task will bring us in line with guidance laid out by our elected officials. As a service, we need to develop a top down IW structure that facilitates execution of strategic, operational, and tactical levels of warfare and positions air, space, and cyberspace power to achieve the goals set forth by the President. A critical step to accomplish this is to establish a Major Command (MAJCOM) tasked to lead the Air Force’s IW contribution. Establishing an “IW MAJCOM” responsible for a Strategic IW plan and authorized to guide operational application will enable the Air Force to appropriately posture itself to achieve Air Force-specific joint IW objectives rather than being postured as the force called upon to enable other components to execute theirs. We are currently reactionary, answering the call of other components to deliver troops, gather intelligence, MEDEVAC wounded, and so forth. By dedicating a segment of our force focused specifically on IW, and use general-purpose assets to meet our objectives, we free up the rest of the force to continue to organize, train, and equip as they have done in the past to address conventional and strategic contingencies. Such a move has the potential of enabling the other MAJCOMs to focus on those individually unique core competencies that collectively make them the greatest force in the world. An IW command would provide the necessary leadership expertise to organize, train, and equip in accordance with those distinctive tasks relative to irregular warfare. The US Special Operations Command has an Air Force MAJCOM

component so the question of redundancy will most certainly surface in any discussion regarding a separate IW command. Per the IW Joint Operations Center, SOCOM requires additional General Purpose Forces (GPF) to mitigate successfully any IW engagements. However, this requirement does not fall within the AF Special Operations Command's charter.

According to the JOC, GPF must be ready to: provide support to distributed IW operations; conduct and support multiple COIN operations on a global scale; conduct and support counterterrorism on a global scale; build partner nation security force capacity on a global scale; provide interim military government or perform civil administration functions; and create alternative Command and Control (C2) mechanisms for conducting and supporting IW.<sup>6</sup> There is no existing Air Force entity built to weave all these GPF requirements into a service level, strategic vision. The idea the SOCOM should lead the IW effort is problematic because they would end up filling that role at the peril of relinquishing those characteristics that define them as Special Operations. They risk becoming too large and too exposed to retain the ability to conduct their nine core tasks with rapid, flexible, agile, and lethal results.

The major argument against this idea stems from the daunting task of standing up yet another MAJCOM, on the heels of Global Strike Command, and finding the manpower to staff it. However, if we look at our current structure, there are existing headquarters at the Numbered Air Force (NAF) level in particular, that can be restructured and repurposed to fill this critical need. The organic IW forces, which will "move" over to an IW MAJCOM/NAF will lighten the load on existing NAFs and allow for a slight reshuffle of Wings in order to free up an existing headquarters staff to transform itself into the IW leadership beneficial to Air Force requirements and objectives. Even though this is a question outside the scope of the article, it has bearing on how the AF's IW MAJCOM operates.

**A fully functioning MAJCOM would form the foundation for the Air Force's IW effort, leveraging capabilities across the GPF rather than structured to carry the entire fight.** At the strategic level, an interagency approach is critical to integrating all the IOP into an effective strategy. Each directorate should have appropriate embedded partners. For example, the synergy achieved when the Defense Department, National Security Agency, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, State Department, US Agency for International Development, non-governmental organizations and our think tank partners collaborate, will certainly produce results far greater than any one organization could achieve on its own. Maintaining a global focus, this structure would posture COCOM Air Component planning cells to engage effectively the Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP) deliberation process relative to the use of airpower. A centralized command structure able to synchronize theater efforts with the broader national execution plan, across domains, would benefit the

Air Force and the COCOMs. At the tactical level, the conversation turns to organic forces, Wing structure, and mission sets. Applying the same principles as we did at the strategic level, organic forces would not be able to bear the burden of the entire IW fight, but they would form the core, or the cadre, of IW tacticians that will lead GPF teams in the execution of IW tasks.

At the tactical level, the exact mix of wing and supporting units required for the IW mission must remain flexible and recognize there are no two IW contingencies that are alike. However, whatever the structure looks like, that structure will form the core of field operating units across the globe. For example, it is critical to establish GPF aviation advisory squadrons, chartered to be culturally aware and educated, and tactically proficient enough to lead a diverse team of aircrews, pulled from across the Air Force, to help train, host, and partner with another nation's forces. Members of these squadrons would not be the primary advisors, those come from across the GPF, they would, however, be the team leaders who have the tools to operate effectively in their given cultural environment. Similarly, each Air Force function exported to global partners must possess certified language and culture experts as well as individuals who are well versed in the principles and doctrine of IW. In fact, the primary focus of these forces has to revolve around thorough cultural and language training with a basic knowledge of their functional area (i.e. civil engineering, security forces, communications, logistics, etc). This allows the GPF experts in each area, who are organized, trained, and equipped by their functional leadership, to fall in under the direction and guidance of highly trained cultural experts. This concept is not new to the Air Force., However, a refined and protracted concentration on language and cultural immersion is necessary to achieve the objectives of an IW MAJCOM. Additionally, a formal IW structure provides a path and professional development/promotion potential that grows career IW experts; personnel who enter the IW fight knowing they are not limiting career progression, but that committing to their IW AFSC, and making a career out of it, can lead to Flag Officer levels. Continuing to pile on more requirements as we gain a better understanding of the complexities of IW, has the potential of driving diversification to such the point that we lose the core specialty skills we spend so much time and money creating. An IW MAJCOM, with subunits organized, trained, and equipped to excel in the complex, global environment can form the core of our IW contribution while allowing GPF to maintain focus on potential future conventional threats.

**Creation of an Air Force IW MAJCOM has the potential to mitigate many of the problems plaguing the Air Force in today's fight.** In recent years, the Air Force has concentrated doctrinally on the tactical concept of Asymmetric Warfare, and focusing on the procurement of fifth generation fighter aircraft. The concept has its merits, as it allows the Air Force to mass firepower without necessarily having to mass systems, and leverages technology and superior firepower in place of engaging the enemy with a massive force. We may achieve

the desired effect with one B-2 bomber today that it took a formation of 200 B-17s to achieve in 1944. The concentration on these conventional methodologies (100-meter target) is obviously a necessity to America's national security, but as we are currently in an irregular war, it has to be balanced with an equal focus on our 25-meter target.

In an IW environment, an insurgent or guerrilla seeks to negate an opponent's asymmetric advantage at every level. Mao Tse Tung described this methodology in *"On Guerrilla Warfare."* He said, "When the enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue." Following these tactics, Mao's forces were able to exhaust and ultimately defeat a much more powerful force. Like modern insurgents from the Viet Cong to Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Mao's guerrillas lived among the people. They attacked at the time and place of their choosing and forced the host nation government and coalition forces to live in secure compounds and outposts.

The insurgents succeeded in separating the good guys from the population and attempted to force them to respond to attacks in a heavy-handed fashion, often causing civilian casualties and pushing the population farther away while destroying the legitimacy of the host nation government. They understood tactical sacrifice for strategic gain. In this environment, kinetic air power can sometimes cause more harm than good when bombs destroy property or kill innocents. US Army General Stanley McChrystal clearly understands this. In recognition of the adversaries' tactics, General McChrystal placed severe restrictions on Close Air Support missions in Afghanistan essentially disengaging a large portion of the Air Force's inherent contribution. With a strategic, well thought out approach, Air Force Airmen can reengage in a more strategic way. Airlift for example supports every logical line of operations including combat, IO, humanitarian, restoring essential services, governance, economic development and transportation.<sup>7</sup> The most manpower-intensive strategic objective in IW, particularly for COIN and CT is building host/partner nation capability. Currently, only one squadron, the 6th Special Operations Squadron has this as a charter. There are a number of ad hoc organizations, composed of Airmen from MAJCOMs across the Air Force thrown together in an attempt to train Afghan and Iraqi airmen as well as many other partner nations. This has caused an extremely high operational tempo, thrown the assignment system out of synch, and has everyone reeling from the effects. If the Air Force had a methodical, thought out plan to execute a focused IW competency with its own command structure, the Air Force may realize solutions for functional manpower and capability shortcomings. We are nine years into an irregular fight. What's more, it is evident the US will be engaged in this fight for the foreseeable future. It is not too late to examine and implement alternative structures to address IW contingencies.

## **Notes**

1. page 11 Pp 2.c IW JOC 1.0 11 Sept 07
2. page 18 Pp 3.b IW JOC 1.0 11 Sept 07
3. page 6 Pp 2.a IW JOC 1.0 11 Sept 07
4. page 9 Pp 2.a IW JOC 1.0 11 Sept 07
5. page 6 Pp 2.a IW JOC 1.0 11 Sept 07
6. page 23 Pp 4.b IW JOC 1.0 11 Sept 07
7. Army FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency <sup>1</sup>

	<p><b>Major Justin D. DeMarco</b> is a staff officer in the Special Operations &amp; Personnel Recovery Division at Headquarter, US Air Force in the Pentagon. He is a 2009 graduate of the US Army's Command &amp; General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Lt Col Jason Hanover is the commander of the 71st Rescue Squadron at Moody AFB Georgia. He is a 2005 graduate of Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and a 2006 graduate of Joint Forces Staff College. The views &amp; opinions expressed here are solely those of the authors and may not represent the views and policies of the US Air Force or the Department of Defense.<sup>2</sup></p>
	<p><b>Lieutenant Colonel Jason Hanover</b> is currently The Washington Institute's National Defense Fellow. Prior to the fellowship, he commanded the 71st Rescue Squadron at Moody Air Force Base in Georgia. Lt Col Hanover is a command pilot who spent 11 years in special operations flying the MC-130H Combat Talon II and serving as a staff officer with Joint Special Operations Command. His experience includes missions in support of Plan Columbia, Operation Joint Guardian, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, numerous noncombatant evacuation orders, and Combined-Joint Task Force Horn of Africa. Lt Colonel Hanover is a 2005 graduate of Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and a 2006 graduate of Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk Va.</p>