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COMMANDO VISION 21 A STRATEGIC VISION FOR AIR
FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

by

Michael J. Dredla, Lt Col, USAF

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Advisor: Colonel Howard B. Chambers, USAF

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

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Preface

After serving overseas as an Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) Squadron Commander and then returning to the United States and the Air War College in 1996, I was struck by the emphasis that the USAF, the joint staff, and the United States Special Operations Command were placing on developing their “visions” for the future. As an Air Force “special operator,” I felt strongly that the future posture of AFSOC should be closely linked to the USSOCOM vision. As an Air Force “blue suiter,” I felt equally compelled that AFSOC’s long range vision should be similarly linked to the USAF vision. This research project is an effort to link the two parent visions to produce a coherent, meaningful 21st Century vision for the AFSOC.

I would like to thank my faculty advisor and the USAF “SOF Chair” to Air University, Colonel Howard Chambers, for his guidance and insight in finalizing this product. My fellow SOF classmates, Lt Colonels Mike Stanley (USAF) and Sal Cambria (USA), provided invaluable insight and comments to initial drafts. Doctor Jim Mowbray, Ph.D., and air power doctrine “guru” for the Air War College provided valuable assistance in wrestling with some key doctrinal issues. Finally, Lt Col Dave Scott, Director of Long Range Planning for HQ AFSOC, played the “devil’s advocate” and provided exceptional alternative arguments that made me reevaluate and sometimes restructure major premises and conclusions of my thesis.

Abstract

Commando Vision 21 proposes the long range vision, core capabilities, missions, and force structure planning principles for the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). Given that AFSOC is both an Air Force major command as well as the air component of US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), the two strategic visions of both the USAF and USSOCCOM are compared and contrasted under the rubric of *Joint Vision 2010* and our National Security Strategy of “Engagement and Enlargement.” Using current Air Force Special Operations Forces (AFSOF) doctrine and force structure, the paper analyzes congruencies and inconsistencies with the joint and service visions and how current AFSOC long range planning is postured in support of both. Throughout the analysis, emphasis is placed on the necessity for AFSOC’s ability to contribute independent strategic specialized air power to national and theater objectives as well as to joint special operations objectives. From this assessment, implications for AFSOC are drawn, and recommendations for modifications to AFSOC strategic vision and planning are made.

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Need For An AFSOC Vision

Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the changes in the character of war, not upon those who wait to adapt themselves until after those changes occur.

—Air Marshall Giulio Douhet

The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) faces a significant challenge in charting its future course. As both an Air Force major command as well as the air component for United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), AFSOC must be responsive to the institutional visions and objectives of both. Complicating this challenge is the current focus from military leadership on developing long range visions and plans that , if necessary, break with traditional ways of thinking about military affairs under the post cold-war “new world order.”

The Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff’s *Joint Vision 2010*, the “operationally based template for the evolution of the Armed Forces,” states that “new operational concepts” will be necessary to meet future challenges.¹ The USSOCOM visionary template, *SOF Vision 2020*, calls on its components to be “organizationally innovative” and continually scrutinize present organizations and missions to be responsive to evolving non-traditional forms of conflict.² As part of implementation of the Air Force

vision for the future, the Chief of Staff has called on the entire USAF to innovatively and creatively “chart a course that will implement that vision, “Global Engagement.”³

AFSOC also recognizes the need for creative thinking in its own current *Strategic Plan* objectives that call for “tailoring doctrine to changing global scenarios” and adapting roles and program force structure to emerging mission areas.”⁴ The AFSOC commander also states the Strategic Plan is “our pledge to the Air Force vision mission and the United States Special Operations Command mission and our relationship with them.”⁵

USSOCOM planning acknowledges that any SOF service component cannot accomplish its mission without support of parent services in providing equipment, core skills training, quality personnel, and base and logistical support.⁶ Additionally, in Secretary Widnall’s and General Fogleman’s *Executive Guidance*, the long-range guidance and planning tool for Air Force leaders, the planning guidance for “Special Air Operations,” states “the Air Force and USSOCOM will continue to share responsibilities to organize, train, and equip Air Force Special Operations Forces.”⁷

Thus, with the dual challenges posed by USSOCOM and the Air Force visions, and the cognizance both the USAF and USSOCOM have over AFSOC, the ability for AFSOC to formulate its own vision is not just dependent on how AFSOC contributes special operations Airpower to the USSOCOM vision, but also turns on AFSOC’s contribution as an Air Force major command to the Air Force vision.

This paper will formulate and propose a coherent vision for AFSOC that addresses this dual challenge. It is the thesis of this paper that AFSOC’s vision and long range planning must not only take into account USSOCOM joint visionary concepts but Air

Force visionary concepts as well. Specifically, the AFSOC vision should be framed in its traditional context of providing special operations air power as part of a joint special operations team and, in an expanded context, of providing independent Air Force specialized air power when necessary in pursuit of national or theater objectives.

A fundamental, visionary premise for the *entire* USAF is that it must retain its unique ability to strategically apply air and space power globally and directly in support of national and theater objectives, when necessary, as well as at the joint component level.⁸ As will be discussed, AFSOF has a history of providing such independent capability and continues to do so today. This paper will use the following definition developed by a panel chartered by the Chief of Staff to consider such strategic applications: “The strategic application of air power is the *direct pursuit of primary or ultimate political-military objectives through aerospace power.*”⁹

The Air Force and AFSOC have a shared institutional heritage that is based on the unique application of air power and is a core consideration in defining their institutional futures. As Carl Builder, senior Airpower analyst for RAND corporation states:

The future strategic applications of air power *are* the future of the Air Force as an institution. The other services may possess and apply air power in support of their surface forces; but the Air Force is the only service conceived and dedicated to the independent, strategic applications of air power. The Air Force may apply its aerospace power in support of surface forces, but that is not its *raison d’être*.¹⁰

USSOCOM and AFSOC also have a shared institutional heritage dating to the establishment of USSOCOM in 1986 under the Goldwater-Nichols legislation. With this establishment, AFSOC doctrine and long range planning has been principally focused on its joint support role. However, a window of opportunity exists to modify that approach

and expand the vision of the command to include its strategic value as an independent force. Failing to do so could relegate AFSOC to being simply the air component of an integrated joint SOF force, just as Marine Corps Air is part of a Marine Air-Ground Task Force or Naval Air as an integral part of a Carrier Battle Group. The danger in having a joint-only view for AFSOC involves the risk of what USAF long range planning has called the “null hypothesis.” This risk is that the Air Force (or significant elements) can become extinct if they become irrelevant for reasons including different defense choices in a constrained environment, a transformation of the nature of war, the ascendancy of other services, or “the rise of jointness to the exclusion of the USAF.”¹¹ emphasis added.

This analysis will not minimize the critical role of AFSOF as an integral component of future joint special operations, but reasons that if joint SOF support becomes AFSOC’s raison d’être, then it runs the risk of extinction as an Air Force institution, and elements could be distributed into other USAF major commands and/or absorbed into Army special operations aviation.

Notes

¹ Joint Vision 2010, America’s Military: Preparing for Tomorrow, Undated, 20.

² United States Special Operations Command, *SOF Vision 2020*, 7.

³ Briefing, United States Air Force, Subject: Global Engagement, 12 November 1996 (from: Air War College LAN, w:\awcc\global1.ppt), 15, 25.

⁴ Air Force Special Operations Command, *Strategic Plan*, Hurlburt Field Florida, 1996, 25

⁵ Ibid., 3

⁶ United States Special Operations Command Pub 1, *Special Operations in Peace and War*, 25 June 1996, 1.

⁷ Ronald R. Fogleman, Chief of Staff, USAF and Sheila E. Widnall, Secretary of the Air Force, memorandum, Subject: Air Force Executive Guidance, December 1995, 16.

⁸ General Ronald R. Fogleman, Chief of Staff, US Air Force, text of address to the Air Force Association Symposium, Los Angeles, Calif., subject: Strategic Vision and Core Competencies, 18 October 1996, 3.

Notes

⁹ Report of Strategic Aerospace Warfare Study Panel, *Aerospace Power for the 21st Century: A Theory to Fly By*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air War College, 4 October 1996), iv.

¹⁰ Carl H. Builder, draft memorandum to Special Air Warfare (SAW) Panel Members, subject: Ten Messages for the Chief from One Member of the Strategic Air Warfare Panel of the Air Force 2025 Study, 25 January 1996, 3.

¹¹ Air University, *Air Force 2025*, White Paper Summaries, July 1996, 35.

Chapter 2

Creating The Vision

USAF and USSOCOM understanding of the independent, strategic value of AFSOF is lacking. For example, USAF “executive planning guidance” tasks the major commands to focus on core competencies as a baseline in formulating long range plans. Yet the only competencies and capabilities mentioned for AFSOC are in retaining an aerial fire support capability like the AC-130 and an all-weather, low-observable penetration platform for special operations forces to accomplish missions in hostile territory.¹ There is no discussion of the future role that AFSOF can play in conducting foreign internal defense, humanitarian assistance, or disaster relief operations. These occur in military operations other than war (MOOTW) and, as this paper will discuss, will continue to be a key area for the application of AFSOF.

The Air Force monograph on the exploitation of technologies that will guarantee the air and space superiority of the United States in the 21st century, *New World Vistas*, has but one short paragraph devoted to AFSOF in over 80 pages. Self-described as a “comment” on special operations, it limits its discussion to the flexibility a Vertical/Short Take-off or Landing (VSTOL) aircraft can provide in accomplishing the SOF mission.² There is no discussion of advancing or emerging technologies that might assist AFSOF forces in the future in conducting specialized aerial delivery or fire power operations.

The Air Force's in-depth assessment to generate ideas and concepts for the view of the future, *USAF 2025*, does address in some detail the role of joint SOF, but fails (with one exception to be described later) to explore alternative concepts for the independent employment of AFSOF.³

USSOCOM strategic vision and planning, as well, fail to address the contribution AFSOF can independently make to strategic and theater objectives. Although written as a joint SOF vision, *SOF Vision 2020* has no specific comments on the value of specialized air power in enabling the joint SOF team to accomplish its mission. It too fails to address any independent application.

USSOCOM Pub 1, *Special Operations in Peace and War*, which contains "the fundamental principles that guide Special Operations Forces (SOF),"⁴ has no discussion on the independent capabilities of AFSOF. Reasserting the convention found often in SOF literature that "SOF are inherently joint,"⁵ the document reinforces for the reader that SOF are the most "purple" of all military forces. It describes the application of AFSOF only in its joint support role. It provides numerous historical applications of AFSOF, but these examples are strictly as part of a joint special operations force. Later, this paper will describe various examples of where AFSOF has operated independently in its history.

Construct Of The Vision

To overcome this lack of understanding of the independent, strategic value of AFSOF, and for AFSOC to develop a vision with independent and joint elements that is relevant to both the USSOCOM and USAF visions, it is important to ask the questions,

“what are the fundamental purposes of the parent USSOCOM and USAF visions?” and, in constructing an air power vision for AFSOF, “what are the key elements of a vision?”

In response to the first question, USSOCOM states that its *SOF Vision 2020* is “our link to the National Military Strategy and Joint Vision 2010” and “provides a long range strategy for SOF missions, force structure, equipment and capabilities.”⁶

The USAF vision, *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force*, “flows from the national security strategy,” is “grounded” in the context of Joint Vision 2010, and is “an effort to develop a comprehensive vision to shape the nation’s Air Force during the first quarter of the 21st century.”⁷

Thus, in developing the AFSOC vision, continuity must be maintained from the national security strategy, to Joint Vision 2010 and relevant elements from both the USSOCOM and USAF visions.

In defining the elements of the AFSOF vision, this author uses a construct developed by Carl Builder in his treatise on USAF air power theory, *The Icarus Syndrome*. Builder suggests the following elements are essential for a vision involving the application of air power:⁸

First, the vision must establish a “unifying thread” in all tasks to be performed. By relating the AFSOF vision to fundamental principals of the national security strategy, *Joint Vision 2010*, and the USSOCOM/USAF visions, this paper will develop a thread that leads to core competencies and capabilities necessary for future mission accomplishment. The baseline for these future competencies also requires an assessment of current joint and USAF SOF doctrine.

Second, Builder asserts, “the focus should be on air power as a tool at the operational or theater level of war.” This means that visionary application of air power should be addressed in the context of meeting joint and independent objectives at the operational and theater-level. For AFSOF, the vision developed in this paper will address both elements.

Third, “Air Force heritage should be mined.” As an example, Builder refers to the work of General George Kenny in the WWII Pacific where air power was used as an “integrated whole.” An example for AFSOF in this vein could be the “Jungle Jim” employment of special operations air power in the Vietnam era, where AFSOF was used independently to train host nation air forces and for counterinsurgency operations...as well as other joint SOF operations.⁹ Thus, the historical and doctrinal baseline for AFSOF should be used to explore the range of air applications.

Finally, “jointness, properly interpreted, should be exploited.” For AFSOF this means that its contribution to the joint SOF team remains fundamental and should be exploited. However, “properly interpreted” indicates that applications in direct support of other joint forces should be considered as well.

Thus, using the elements described by Builder and applied to special operations air power, the AFSOF vision should do the following:

- Describe the joint and independent utility of AFSOF air power rooted in doctrine and history.
- Be linked to national strategy and *Joint Vision 2010* through the individual USSOCOM and USAF visions.
- Have a strategic, long range context that addresses future competencies, capabilities, mission, and force structure.

The remainder of this paper examines these elements with the purpose of developing a cohesive, comprehensive vision for AFSOC.

Notes

¹ Fogleman and Widnall., 16.

² USAF Scientific Advisory Board, *New World Vistas: Air and Space Power for the 21st Century (Summary Volume)*, 15 October 1995.

³ Air University, *Air Force 2025*, Executive Summary, June 1996.

⁴ United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Pub 1, *Special Operations in Peace and War*, foreword.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-29.

⁶ *SOF Vision 2020*, foreword.

⁷ Department of the Air Force, *GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force*, preface.

⁸ Carl H. Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome*, The Role of the Air Power Theory in the Evolution and Fate of the US Air Force (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers, 1994), 9.

⁹ Lt Col David J. Dean, *The Air Force Role in Low Intensity Conflict* (Maxwell AFB, Ala., Air University Press, October 1986), 88-89.

Chapter 3

Joint SOF/AFSOF Doctrine And Force Structure

This chapter begins the construct of the vision by examining baseline doctrine and force structure for AFSOF. The purpose in doing so is to derive the core competencies and capabilities necessary for the first elements of the vision as well as to provide a point of departure for innovative thinking as AFSOF enters the next century.

Doctrine As An Engine Of Change

A problem in the development of doctrine can be that it is reactive to change and developed in a historical context only after new ways are tried or new technologies are applied. This limits the value of doctrine in being creative or innovative and has been a problem at times for SOF. Major General William Garrison, former commander of the Joint Special Operations Command and the JFK Special Warfare Center, describes this problem and the rightful relationship of doctrine and current capabilities to future planning:

Doctrine drives the force to evolve rationally to meet future challenges...[the] historically derived portion of doctrine is combined with anticipated technological advances and our best guess of what future requirements and operational environments will be. The result is a description of how we see the force operating in the future. This concept of how, and under what conditions, we will soon be operating is used to define organizational and materiel requirements. Thus, doctrine delineates our future capabilities and operational concepts. [And further] we stand at

a critical point, a period in which SOF doctrine has been reactive, and move toward a period in which change is once again evolutionary, anticipated, accommodated, and driven by clear, systematically implemented doctrine.¹

In developing the AFSOF vision beginning with an examination of SOF doctrine, it's important to ensure that doctrine doesn't keep visionary thinking in a "box," but functions as a baseline point of departure and is an "engine" of change.

Joint SOF Doctrine

Joint Pub 3-05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations*, describes key elements of special operations as follows:

Operations conducted by specially organized, trained and equipped military and paramilitary forces to achieve military, political, economic or psychological objectives by unconventional military means in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas. These operations are conducted during peacetime competition, conflict, and war... Political-military considerations frequently shape special operations, requiring clandestine, covert or low visibility techniques and oversight at the national level²

Further, joint doctrine describes the principal SOF missions. Paraphrased, these five principal missions are as follows:³

- Direct Action - Short duration strikes and other small scale offensive actions
- Special Reconnaissance Low visibility and or covert reconnaissance and surveillance actions conducted by SOF.
- Foreign Internal Defense The training, advising, and assisting of host nation military and paramilitary forces.
- Unconventional Warfare Guerrilla warfare and other low visibility, covert operations such as subversion, sabotage, or evasion and escape.
- Counterterrorism—Predominantly offensive measures taken to preempt or resolve terrorist incidents abroad.

In recent years, given the emphasis in national security planning on counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the USSOCOM mission has expanded to include Counterproliferation (CP) described as "actions taken to locate,

identify, seize, destroy, render safe, transport, capture, or recover weapons of mass destruction.”⁴ Additionally, although not yet reflected in joint doctrine, USSOCOM has assumed civil affairs, psychological operations, and information warfare as additional “principal missions.”⁵

Joint doctrine also describes five collateral activities, Security Assistance (SA), Humanitarian Assistance (HA), Antiterrorism (AT), Counterdrug (CD), and Personnel Recovery (PR), for which SOF are not principally equipped to conduct but given their inherent capabilities, “may be selectively tasked to participate.”⁶

With regards to AFSOF, Joint Pub 3-05 focuses principally on AFSOF support to joint SOF forces. It mentions the capability of AFSOF to train, assist, and advise the Air Forces of other nations in foreign internal defense (FID).⁷ But joint SOF doctrine provides no focus or discussion on national or theater value of such capability or other AFSOF missions with independent, strategic value. That focus is found to some extent, however, in AFSOF doctrine, the subject of the next section.

Air Force Doctrine Document 35 Special Operations

To support principal and collateral special operations activities (other than PSYOP and Information Warfare),* Air Force SOF must “be capable of operating in hostile airspace, at all altitudes, under conditions of minimum visibility.”⁸ They require basic competencies that can be described as follows:⁹

- Aerial Mobility and Tanker Support referred to in later AFSOC planning documents as “Provide Mobility in Denied Territory,” this is the ability to infiltrate, exfiltrate, and resupply special operations forces operating in denied areas.
- Surgical Firepower referred to in later AFSOC planning documents as “Force Application,” this is the ability (normally associated with the AC-130 Gunship) to

deliver precise fire power in conjunction with other SOF or, in independent action.

- Advisory Support referred to in later planning as “Aviation Foreign Internal Defense,” (FID) this is the ability to train, assist, and advise other host nation air forces.

These core competencies are the principal focus of AFSOF, regardless of the joint SOF mission being supported AFSOF doctrine also notes its forces must be culturally and linguistically trained in order to effectively interact with host nation forces throughout the world.¹⁰ Although AFSOF usually conducts operations that are “joint in nature” and must remain “technologically versatile,” AFDD 35 only briefly mentions the need for certain units to conduct independent aviation FID at a level of technology “compatible with host nation’s resources and capabilities.”¹¹ It gives no specific examples or details of key tenets of aviation FID operations.

Other than the brief description of the need for independent application of AFSOF in FID, the document describes all remaining mission characteristics in terms of joint SOF and does not describe potential independent contributions of AFSOF to national or theater objectives. It states that AFSOF must maintain both joint support and independent capability but gives no independent examples.¹²

This is somewhat surprising since AFSOF has provided independent value to national objectives and theater joint force commanders directly and frequently in the years leading to AFDD 35. Some examples, related to the appropriate competency, are as follows:¹³

- As the Joint Force Commander’s combat search and rescue force for Operations Desert Shield, Provide Comfort, and Provide Relief, Provide Promise, Deny Flight, and Joint Endeavor.
- Aerial Mobility and Tanker Support.

- As pathfinder force for the initial strike package to destroy early warning radar sites thus opening a “gap” for the initial air wave in Desert Storm.
- Surgical Firepower.
- Providing AC-130 armed reconnaissance and fire support directly to coalition ground forces in Desert Storm’s “battle for Khafji..”
- Providing independent humanitarian air relief supply in Bosnia.
- Aerial Mobility and Tanker Support.
- Conducting emergency evacuation operations of Americans in Liberia.
- Aerial Mobility and Tanker Support.
- Providing training teams of host nation air forces in SOUTHCOM, CENTCOM, and PACOM areas of responsibility.
- Advisory Support.

In summary, a separate focus on the independent application of AFSOF is missing from current joint SOF and AFSOF doctrine as a fundamental application of special operations air power. Although these capabilities are alluded to, they are by no means considered as important as AFSOF’s role as part of a joint SOF team—even though AFSOF is often tasked to operate independently This doctrinal limitation had caused some imbalance in current AFSOF force structure in that the force is predominantly postured to conduct joint SOF missions. The next section discusses that structure and resulting imbalance.

Current Force Structure

AFSOC today is principally a “joint in nature” force with a large operational wing in Florida, a training wing in New Mexico, reserve component units in Florida and Pennsylvania, and small overseas operational groups in the Pacific (Okinawa) and Europe (England).¹⁴ It also has a special operations school dedicated to “educate United States military personnel in the missions and functions of special operations in the evolving world threat.”¹⁵

The overseas groups are principally oriented to the core capabilities of providing special operations aerial mobility and tanker support for theater SOF during war, contingency operations, or peacetime training events.

The CONUS operational wing is comprised of the majority of the AFSOF assets to include most of the rotary and fixed wing SOF aerial mobility and tanker force, all force application assets (AC-130s), and the only squadron dedicated to aviation FID.

Over the last decade, as AFSOF worldwide assets have increased, there has been a tendency to concentrate the resulting capabilities in Florida and correspondingly decrease capability in the overseas theaters. This is principally due to increased demands USSOCOM has placed on the requirement for its CONUS forces to be prepared to conduct missions of “national - level” importance if called upon.¹⁶

The dilemma for AFSOC has been that as CONUS requirements have increased, so has the demand in overseas theaters for SOF to increasingly participate in a broader range of operations since “CINCs and U.S. ambassadors now fully realize SOF’s utility to support their regional and country objectives.”¹⁷ This has forced AFSOF to increase overseas operations tempo correspondingly in support of these ventures. For example, from FY 91 through FY 95, total SOF employment events in various countries increased 118%. In the same period, SOF went from operating in 92 countries around the world to 137.¹⁸

AFSOC has recognized the increasing stress on its worldwide force caused by increasing CONUS and overseas demands. In a three year staffing effort (FY92-95) to alleviate this imbalance entitled *Commando Vision* (after which this paper is named), AFSOC embarked on an attempt to create a west coast wing that would provide

additional regional orientation to the Pacific while maintaining the necessary CONUS capability to respond to national command authority and SOUTHCOM missions.¹⁹ An essential element of this concept, and one of the reasons it was put on indefinite hold, is that overseas AFSOC groups would have become supported by aircraft on *rotation* from the east and west coast SOF wings respectively vice being *assigned* to the groups. It proved difficult to convince the overseas CINCs to support yet a further decrement in AFSOF theater-assigned forces. The death-knell of *Commando Vision* was when our Ambassador to Japan complained to Washington that a reduction in AFSOF in the Pacific would be counter-productive to US objectives in the region.²⁰

Summary

This chapter has described the principal SOF missions and the doctrinal core competencies that AFSOF provides in conducting those missions. It has also described the limitations of joint doctrine, especially in the lack of attention to the independent value of AFSOF to national or operational objectives, even though AFSOF has routinely conducted independent operations. Finally, the chapter described the effort by AFSOC to restructure its force posture to meet emerging demands. Using current doctrine and force structure as a point of departure, the next step in developing the vision is to assess the parent strategy and visions that will shape the key tenets of the AFSOC vision.

Notes

¹ Major General William F. Garrison, “The USSOCOM View of Doctrine as an Engine of Change,” in Richard H. Schultz, Jr., et al., eds., *Special Operations Forces: Roles and Missions in the Aftermath of the Cold War* (United States Special Operations Command, 1995), 173-174.

² Joint Pub 3-05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations*, 28 October 1992, GL-20.

³ *Ibid.*, II-2 - II-12.

Notes

⁴ USSOCOM Pub1, 3-3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Joint Pub 3-05, II-13.

⁷ Ibid., C-4.

In developing the AFSOF vision, this paper does not address the limited, specialized role that AFSOF has with regards to Psychological Operations or Information warfare. Analysis of these missions would require detailed assessments of competencies and emerging mission areas beyond those of the AFSOF doctrinal principal missions and is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸ Air Force Doctrine Document 35, *Special Operations*, 16 January 1995, para 2.6.

⁹ Ibid., 2.1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.4.

¹¹ Ibid., 2.6.2.

¹² Ibid., Chap. 1 and 2.

¹³ Colonel Howard Chambers, USAF, AFSOC Director of Operations during the period discussed, interviewed by author 10 Dec 96.

¹⁴ United States Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Forces: 1996 Posture Statement*, (Washington, DC, 1996), 40.

¹⁵ USAF Special Operations School, *Catalog for Fiscal Year 97*, Hurlburt Field, Florida, 5.

¹⁶ Chambers, Interview.

¹⁷ USSOCOM, 1996 *Posture Statement*, 9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 9.

¹⁹ Briefing, Air Force Special Operations Command, subject: Commando Vision, 1995 (reprinted for author 11 October 1996).

²⁰ Chambers, Interview.

Chapter 4

The Overarching Strategy And Visions

In this discussion of the national security strategy and the parent joint and service visions affecting AFSOF, the text will be highlighted with key tenets or principals that are germane to the construct of the AFSOF vision.

National Security Strategy

President Clinton's *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* posits three essential goals for the US military that imply preparedness to operate across a full spectrum of operations:¹

1. Enhance our security with forces ready to fight and win
2. Support our economic revitalization
3. Promote democracy abroad

The strategy stresses the “preventive diplomacy” role for the military with emphasis on the necessary interaction through overseas military presence between US and foreign militaries.

Of essential “tasks” the military must perform under the strategy, joint SOF doctrine has shown that SOF can play a role in all: deterring and defeating aggression, providing a credible overseas presence, countering weapons of mass destruction, contributing to multilateral peace operations, and combating terrorism and drug trafficking.²

Specifically, the role of SOF under this construct is given three purposes in the Secretary of Defense's Report to President and Congress:³

- Expand *range of options* available to decision makers confronting crises and conflicts below the threshold of war such as terrorism, insurgency, and sabotage. [underlining added].
- Act as *force multipliers* in support of conventional forces engaged in major conflicts.[underlining added].
- Expand national capabilities to react to situations requiring exceptional sensitivity, including *non-combatant missions such as humanitarian assistance, security assistance, and peace operations*. [underlining added].

SOF thus provides the nation with a range of flexible options from the ability to strategically penetrate and strike from CONUS to conducting sensitive missions of national importance, to participating as a force multiplier for joint commanders in war and military operations other than war (MOOTW), and to conducting what USCINCSOC has called the “warrior-diplomat” role through the conduct of noncombat humanitarian or training missions in the furtherance of national objectives.

The SECDEF also stresses SOF themes for the future which include:⁴

- Maximum flexibility.
- *Unorthodox approaches* and unconventional techniques that bring flexible thinking and innovation in addressing unconventional security threats. [underlining added].
- Investing in science and technology to maintain technical superiority.
- Stressing SOF for *forward basing*, quick deployment, and adaptability to regional contingencies. *The regional orientation of SOF is an essential ingredient of success*. [Underlining added].
- Continue to *integrate SOF with conventional forces* in order to enhance support to principal customers. [underlining added].
- Design force structure to reflect the mix of SOF missions. “The linguistic, cultural, and political needs of the *training and advisory mission* will increase as the regional security environment becomes more complex.” [underlining added].

Joint Vision 2010

“Joint Vision 2010 is the conceptual template for how America’s Armed Forces will channel the vitality and innovation of our people and leverage technological opportunities to achieve new levels of effectiveness in joint warfighting.”⁵

It is also the basis for focusing the strengths of the services and projects current technological trends that will shape the future war fighting environment:⁶

- Increasing *precision of weapons* and their means of delivery.[underlining added]
- Increasing menu of weapons effects from traditional lethality to nonlethal technologies.
- Increased *stealth for offensive forces and invisibility of friendly forces*. [underlining added].
- Improvements in information systems integration from sensors to shooters which may permit a “dominant battlespace awareness.”

Joint Vision 2010 further asserts these four trends will require information supremacy and new concepts of operations in military operations that focus on dominant maneuver, precision engagement, full dimension protection, and focused logistics.

The vision states these four new operational concepts will provide “*full spectrum dominance*” in that they “will enable us to dominate the full range of military operations from humanitarian assistance, through peace operations, up to and into the highest intensity conflict.”⁷[underlining added]

Furthermore, “to ensure we accomplish these tasks, *power projection*, enabled by *overseas presence*, will likely remain the fundamental strategic concept of our future force.”⁸[Underlining added]

SOF Vision 2020

USSOCOM's vision for the future, *SOF Vision 2020*, "provides a long-range strategy for SOF equipment, missions, force structure and capabilities into and beyond 2020."⁹

Built upon *Joint Vision 2010* concepts, the SOF vision states "SOF will be *regionally oriented—culturally, linguistically, and politically*—while remaining a rapidly deployable, agile, joint force with capabilities ranging from *humanitarian assistance to precision surgical strikes*."¹⁰[underlining added]

The vision postulates that "advances in technology will enable new forms of warfare" and that SOF must be prepared to respond "*asymmetrically*, to both traditional and non-traditional forms of conflict."¹¹[underlining added]

A key for successful implementation of long range strategies will be for SOF to focus on core capabilities. SOF must be designed and fielded "so they can be employed with ease in an interagency, joint, and combined operating environment."¹²

SOF Vision 2020 reinforces the SECDEF view of the future and asserts that SOF is a key, independent contributor to the national security strategy and is "well suited for peacetime engagement with regionally and culturally oriented forces."¹³

The vision asserts SOF has proven to be an asset in high demand by theater CINCs who have increased their use due to their regional orientation, especially in peacetime operations. SOF has proven adept and flexible in assuming new roles and missions such as countering the terrorist threat and countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).¹⁴

SOF will provide, “a faster, smaller, better educated force... to *enhance conventional capability*.”¹⁵[underlining added]

The USSOCOM vision provides SOF’s “defining” characteristics for the future[underlining added]:¹⁶

- Sized/trained/equipped to engage across the technological and operational continuums.
- Regionally focused: culturally, linguistically, and politically.
- Rapidly deployable/surgical strike capable to achieve combat, logistical, and information dominance on a limited scale.
- Flexible/agile joint forces which can develop and execute necessary unconventional, audacious, and high pay-off courses of action.

As a key element, SOF “Warrior-Diplomats” will “. . . *influence, advise, train, and interact with foreign forces and populations*. This influence will act as a deterrent to potential adversaries by establishing a *legitimate presence* with host governments” and enables the US to “dominate a limited time and space faster and smarter than any potential adversary.”¹⁷[underlining added]

Additionally, “SOF will give the geographic CINC established connections in any potential crisis area, to rapidly deploy and to provide those unique capabilities that quickly and decisively neutralize the threat.”¹⁸

The FID mission provides the “vital culturally attuned *link to coalition forces*.”¹⁹ Through “*training and education*”²⁰ SOF will maintain a language, political, and cultural orientation that is a key ingredient to mission success [underlining added].

Global Engagement

The USAF vision for the 21st Century, *Global Engagement* (GE), addresses the “entire Air Force”²¹—and thus includes AFSOC. As a result of tremendous technological

advances, the global information explosion, and in anticipation over the next 20 years of reduced overseas basing, the USAF has defined six core competencies designed to “provide a bridge between doctrine and the acquisition and programming process...[and provide] strategic focus for the vision.”²² These six core competencies are “Air and Space Superiority, Global Attack, Rapid Global Mobility, Precision Engagement, Information Superiority, and Agile Combat Support.”²³

Due to anticipated technological advances, some traditional Air Force missions will be shaped much differently. For example, a key supporting study to GE, *USAF 2025*, asserts that in the area of close air support (CAS), it is anticipated that “*every air asset that is capable of ground attack will be capable of performing the CAS mission.*”²⁴[underlining added]

With regard to interdiction, given the increasing precision of weaponry “variable lethality will permit the option of killing, delaying, deterring, or breaking targets.”²⁵

With the pursuit of high leverage technologies in areas such as global reconnaissance, surveillance, targeting systems, global area strike systems, and uninhabited air vehicles, the concept of Air Force “presence” will take on new meaning. This combination of globally mobile air and space sensor, strike, and command and control systems will provide the USAF with “dominant battlespace knowledge” and “awareness.”...the modern view of Air Force presence.

The USAF will become more “expeditionary” in nature and with decreased overseas basing combined with an increasingly global mobile force will expand the concept of an *Air Expeditionary Force*” (AEF) as a core capability.²⁶[underlining added]

The extreme AEF view has been described by Jeffrey Barnett as a CONUS Joint Forces Air Component Command (JFACC), on call to all the CINCs, in which centralized control and execution of air and space operations are conducted by the USAF in support of the joint theater commander.²⁷ This is surprisingly analogous to the national joint SOF capability, described previously, that is also on-call to support theater CINCs.

Even though *Global Engagement* addresses the entire Air Force, it slights specialized air power as a strategic/independent contributor to USAF and fails to address the strategic value of specialized air power in MOOTW, a key AF/SOF operating environment.

However, *USAF 2025* does discuss the need for two specific types of *joint* specialized forces that are analogous to the CONUS-based commando-strike forces and the forward presence “warrior-diplomats” of *SOF Vision 2020*.

According to *USAF 2025*, the first type of special force needed must be able to conduct *strategic strike* missions for the potential purposes of WMD neutralization, high value target (HVT) engagement, or high value asset (HVA) recovery.²⁸ In terms of USAF support to such a force, *USAF 2025* postulates the need for stealth “airlift..”

In terms of the “warrior-diplomat” role, *USAF 2025* does not mention AF/SOF per se, but calls for what is termed a “*security assistance force (SAF)*.”..”a small, rugged, and specialized composite [joint] force dedicated to operating in the physical and psychological territory of peacespace. “Based on the notion you can’t kill your way to victory in an insurgency, this approach seeks to co-opt potential adversaries and improve their living conditions.”²⁹[underlining added]

The *USAF 2025* study combines the two types of forces into what it terms the joint SORE (Special Operations Regional Engagement) force... the SOF warrior of 2025. The SORE warrior will have *highly developed cross cultural skills, blend well into any operating environment, be adept at helping others help themselves, and be well trained in the nature of small wars.*³⁰[paraphrased, underlining added].

The study further examines the role of air power in such a force and states:³¹

There is a critical air power component to SORE that the Air Force must prepare itself to meet. Many first- and second-wave entities will face threats to their internal security that may require the proper use of air power. The fledgling air forces of these entities will require assistance in developing adequate tactics, procedures, maintenance, supply, and other support systems *within their own technological limitations.*[underlining added]

As a corollary, *USAF 2025* cautions the USAF must *not become too fixated on information based technologies and high technology solutions.* The USAF still must deal with 80% of the world's population that will still live in "pre-industrialized and marginally industrialized societies" which will be a significant challenge in the context of global engagement.³²[underlining added].

There are significant force structure implications for the air component of the SORE force since they will often work with host nation air forces in an advising and observer role:

It is only necessary for SORE operators to be familiar with the overall characteristics of aircraft flown in the regional area of responsibility. It is not necessary for them to be qualified in all aircraft in the region. Subsequently, SORE aviation units need only *possess aircraft that closely resemble the characteristics of aviation platforms in that geographic area.*³³ [underlining added].

The significant advantage in fielding such a force from the perspective of preventive diplomacy is that the USAF can better relate, on a personal level, to the many lower-

technology countries. Interpersonal relationships will develop as ancillary to normal diplomatic initiatives. SORE is thus preventative in nature. Additionally, since SORE forces are routinely forward deployed, they provide an *initial physical presence* that can facilitate the rapid transition from non-combat to combat, should contingency operations be required.³⁴[underlining added].

Summary

This chapter has highlighted key tenets of the national security strategy and the parent joint and service visions that are germane to the construct of the AFSOF vision. Keeping these tenets in mind, the paper now turns to existing AFSOC strategic planning documents to assess how well they support the construct of this vision.

Notes

¹ The White House, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, (Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), i.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ Department of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, Part IV: Defense Components, Chapter 22: Special Operations Forces, 199-204, March 1996, 199.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵ *Joint Vision 2010*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ *SOF Vision 2020*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6,7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14,15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

Notes

²¹ Global Engagement, 1.

²² Ibid.,9.

²³ Ibid.,10-16.

²⁴ *Air Force 2025*, White Paper Summaries, 27.

²⁵ Ibid., 26.

²⁶ General Ronald R. Fogleman, Chief of Staff, US Air Force, text of address to the Air Force Association Symposium, 7.

²⁷ Jeffrey R. Barnett, *Future War, An Assessment of Aerospace Campaigns in 2010* (Maxwell AFB, Ala., Air University Press, March 1994), xxii.

²⁸ *Air Force 2025*, White Paper Summaries, 29.

²⁹ Ibid.,23.

³⁰ Ibid., 28-29.

³¹ Sandra R. Bignell et al., “Surfing the First and Second Waves in 2025: A SOF Strategy for Regional Engagement — 2025 Connecticut Yankee in King Authur’s Court?” in *Air Force 2025*, Air University, July 1996, viii.

³² *Air Force 2025*, White Paper Summaries, 8.

³³ Bignell et al., 12.

³⁴ Ibid., 14.

Chapter 5

Current Afsoc Strategic Long Range Planning

AFSOC Strategic Plan

Advertised as a vision for the future, the *AFSOC Strategic Plan* proposes to articulate how AFSOF gives the theater or task force commander the “right ingredient” for successful mission accomplishment.¹ As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this paper, it is supposed to provide the “pledge” to the Air Force vision and mission and the USSOCOM mission. But, it fails to do both.

It does not have elements of a vision. It does not discuss core competencies or anticipated changes in doctrine and, furthermore, does not address future force structure planning principals as a step to long range planning and mission area plans.

Although it does “mine” AFSOF heritage in a lengthy section devoted to the history of Air Commandos, it falls short of its commitment to the USAF vision by failing to describe the independent value AFSOF air power has brought in history or can bring to the nation in the future. It defines the Air Commando identity in only the joint SOF context, “We work with the finest soldiers, sailors, and airmen in the United States as a joint warfighting team. Together we are the best special operations force in the world.”²

Under goals and objectives it discusses in broad terms the need to improve readiness, to keep highly qualified and motivated people, and to expand the horizons of the command...but offers no new horizons. Although it states the goal of tailoring doctrine to changing global scenarios or adapting roles and program force structure to emerging mission areas, there are no capstone AFSOC documents or supplements to the *Strategic Plan* that do this.

Mission Area Plans

The set of planning documents nearest to laying out a true vision and strategic plan for AFSOC is the *Modernization Plan* which is broken down into distinct “Mission Area Plans” (Map’s). Derived as a result of strategy-to-task analysis, the Maps, as long range plans that look at the AFSOC force for the next decade, reinforce the importance of the thread from the national strategy to SOF doctrinal missions.

The current Map’s also provide very broad governing principles for future capabilities such as readiness, quality of people, and technological superiority.³ But, they do not propose innovative *future* force capabilities.

The Map’s are well grounded on the current *competencies* (described previously) of AFSOF doctrine. Accordingly, three separate mission area assessments and plans are developed for those principal, historical competencies: providing mobility in denied territory (aerial mobility and tanker support), force application (fire support), and aviation foreign internal defense (advisory support).

In this MAP, force application (FA) is defined as the ability to “bring aerospace power [e.g. using AC-130s] to bear directly against surface targets.”⁴ AFSOF FA can be

used in conducting missions of close air support, convoy escort, interdiction, surgical strike, landing zone preparation, and armed reconnaissance.⁵

The MAP links FA to an AFSOF *platform*, and makes no distinction as to when these missions are conducted independently in support of national or joint force commander objectives versus as part of a joint SOF mission. It does not address future capabilities in evolving MOOTW environments such as peace operations, non-combatant evacuation, or high value target recovery (e.g. personnel, equipment, WMD)

This oversight is important to note because, as discussed under the USAF vision and plans, many conventional assets will be able to perform many of the missions that AC-130s do today due to technological improvements, such as precision weapon delivery, high technology fighters, or uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs). Joint SOF guidance recognizes this premise:

At the same time, conventional forces now have the capability to conduct relatively surgical strikes against operational and strategic targets with precision weapons, a former SOF specialty. Therefore, correspondingly decreased SOF effort should be devoted to maintaining such a capability.⁶

Despite this guidance, the FA MAP assumes a follow-on Gunship-like aircraft is required past 2010 to provide today's capability and asserts that AFSOC must fund the R&D of "the next generation SO force application system (MA-X).⁷ The MAP leaves the unanswered question, what are the mission areas requiring such a capability if the future conventional USAF can take on many of the historical AC-130 tasks? The proposed AFSOC vision will endeavor to address this question.

Provide Mobility in Denied Territory (PMDT)

The PMDT MAP defines this mission area as requiring AFSOF to provide stealthy infiltration, exfiltration, resupply, SOF helicopter refueling, and transport of high value cargo (people, equipment) in support of joint SOF missions.⁸

This Map's mission area assessment reinforces current concepts of stealthy penetrating transports using low level penetration tactics and emission control. It asserts that future AFSOF force structure is required to augment and eventually replace the existing heavy lift helicopter and airlift force.

It proposes continuing the acquisition of the medium lift CV-22 VSTOL aircraft with an initial operating capability in approximately FY2000. It also proposes a long range, near-VSTOL, heavy-lift, low-observable aircraft to replace MC-130 Combat Talons in FY 2010+ (MC-X).⁹

The MAP links neatly through AFSOC doctrinal competencies necessary to support parent visions. Thus, the MAP describes the capability necessary to support the "commando strike" tenet of *SOF Vision 2020* and the "global mobility" and "precision engagement" competencies of *Global Engagement*.

A shortfall, however, is that this capability is discussed strictly in the context of support to joint SOF and not in potential applications of independent support to theater joint force commander or national objectives.

Aviation Foreign Internal Defense (AVFID)

This is the only AFSOC MAP that takes both an independent and joint view of how AFSOF can contribute to national and theater objectives. This mission area is recognized

as critical to “strengthen coalition relationships and foster democratic ideals among America’s friends and allies worldwide.”¹⁰ It is a “low cost” way to maintain global presence and influence future political and military policies in other nations. It also states:

Significant military downsizing and overseas force reductions translate into a severely reduced ability to project power beyond our borders, which, in turn, increases the strategic importance of assisting foreign partners. Reduced US overseas presence and fewer forces to project into emergency situations places greater reliance on coalition arrangements and on increased preparedness and reliability on the part of coalition partners in the event of regional crisis or war. FID directly supports US National Defense Strategy by helping foreign friends and allies plan and execute military operations supporting internal defense and development programs.¹¹[emphasis added].

This MAP also emphasizes the importance of forward presence, exchange training, and mobile training teams under the auspices of an AVFID program. It describes how AVFID emphasizes activities designed to encourage host nation solutions to internal threats. In a nicely written strategy-to-task linkage it lays out clear strategic objectives for AVFID:¹²

- Maintain forward presence
- Maintain viable relationships
- Develop host nation self-sufficiency

Its fundamental operational concept involves AFSOC, as the USSOCOM proponent for AVFID, maintaining an AVFID cadre responsible for global oversight of AVFID operations. It recognizes that other AFSOF, though not principally tasked to conduct AVFID, can help out. “Virtually all AFSOC forces have inherent capabilities to assist foreign aviation units in various aspects of aviation planning and employment.”¹³

A shortfall of the MAP is that it fails to address the essential language, cultural, and political awareness capability necessary for AVFID forces to be regionally and culturally focused and effective. This paper has previously described how the requirement for this capability is described in AFSOF doctrine and in the USSOCOM and USAF visions.

Summary

This chapter has described AFSOC strategic and long-range planning documentation to date, and has highlighted strengths and weaknesses of these documents vis-à-vis the parent strategy and visions. This concludes the assessment of key strategy, vision, and planning documents. The paper now turns to synthesizing the results of this assessment into a proposed vision (to include future capabilities and force structure principals) for AFSOC.

Notes

¹ Air Force Special Operations Command, *Strategic Plan*, 1.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ Air Force Special Operations Command, Directorate of Plans, Programs, and Acquisition Management, *Air Force Modernization Plan*, Mission Area Plan, “Force Application,” 3 October 1995, 2-11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ USSOCOM Pub 1, p1-5.

⁷ Air Force Special Operations Command, Directorate of Plans, Programs, and Acquisition Management, *Air Force Modernization Plan*, Mission Area Plan, “Force Application,” 3 October 1995, 18.

⁸ Air Force Special Operations Command, Directorate of Plans, Programs, and Acquisition Management, *Air Force Modernization Plan*, Mission Area Plan, “Provide Mobility in Denied Territory,” 3 October 1995, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-22.

¹⁰ Air Force Special Operations Command, Directorate of Plans, Programs, and Acquisition Management, *Air Force Modernization Plan*, Mission Area Plan, “Aviation Foreign Internal Defense (FID),” 3 October 1995, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Notes

¹³ Ibid., 14.

Chapter 6

Proposed AFSOC Vision, Capabilities, And Force Structure

Themes for the Vision

This paper has articulated a need for an AFSOC vision that includes core competencies and how to apply those competencies in innovative ways to future joint and independent applications of AFSOF Airpower. The vision must be rooted in a sense of history and experience but not be boxed in by doctrine or current force structure.

The vision must link the national security strategy, *Joint Vision 2010*, and both the USAF and USSOCOM visions for the future. Specifically, the vision must exploit and build on the core competencies of providing mobility in denied territory, force application, and aviation foreign internal defense to pave the way for a force structure that ranges in capability from “commando strike” to “warrior diplomat” and thus help provide joint force commanders and the NCA “full spectrum dominance.” As stated by a former USCINCSOC, the future force “must remain capable of fighting a well-equipped nation-state, but flexible enough to operate in both domains of high intensity conflict and “fourth generation warfare.”¹ To provide this flexibility and, as a result of highlights from the preceding assessments, this author sees four crucial force criteria that form the “pillars” of a vision for AFSOC:

(1) AFSOC must have force elements that provide integral air component support to national level, rapidly deployable, agile, precise SOF strike operations from CONUS. This complements the USAF competencies of rapid global mobility and global attack and the *SOF Vision 2020* competencies of rapid deployability and surgical strike.

(2) AFSOC must have force elements that are forward postured from CONUS in order to complement and integrate with conventional theater forces either independently or as part of a joint SOF team. This complements the Air Force competencies of global mobility and precision engagement and the *SOF Vision 2020* competencies of flexibility, agility, and being equipped to operate across the operational continuum. This pillar recognizes that AFSOF can contribute air power directly to meet national or theater commander objectives as well as those of the joint SOF commander.

(3) AFSOF must have force elements that are regionally oriented, culturally attuned, linguistically skilled, and forward deployed to conduct nation assistance operations. This complements the Air Force competencies of precision engagement by providing a visible USAF forward presence, and a tailored force focused appropriately to respond to peacetime operations. This complements the *SOF Vision 2020* competency of a regionally focused, and culturally/linguistically, and politically attuned force. This pillar recognizes that AFSOF can play a direct, strategic role in preventive diplomacy in the conduct of nation assistance operations.

(4) The entire force must have a doctrinal and experiential outlook that ensures future doctrinal and force structure changes are proactive in anticipation of future needs vice reactive or simply warmed-over concepts using improved technologies.

This pillar recognizes that:

(1) USAF technological improvements in precision strike and sensor systems that are forecast under Global Engagement and USAF 2025 will reduce the need for AFSOF to place the same amount of emphasis on traditional AC-130 “Force Application” or “Providing Mobility in Denied Territory” in support of joint Direct Action and Special Reconnaissance missions. Conventional sensor and precision weapons technologies will improve so significantly that the need for SOF to conduct these missions *in conventional conflict* will be reduced.

(2) Given this USAF future capability to assume missions previously in the SOF domain, some emerging missions requiring the specialized application of air power, for which the conventional USAF is not ideally suited, could be assumed by AFSOF.

(3) Elements of the AFSOF must remain “low-tech” to deal with the majority of host nation air forces that are not on the same technological plane as the USAF.

These pillars, derived from a synthesis of parent strategy and visions, form the basis for the future vision of Air Force Special Operations Command. This paper now turns to implications of these pillars for specific AFSOF capabilities and the force structure necessary to achieve this vision.

Capabilities and Force Structure

Global Commando Strike Capability

As a fundamental, critical capability, AFSOF must continue to provide the air component for CONUS-based, joint precision strike SOF to conduct missions of high national sensitivity such as counterproliferation or combating terrorism. From the USAF perspective, this capability is consistent with the air expeditionary force concept under

Global Engagement and the core competencies of global mobility and global attack. From the USSOCOM perspective, air mobility using stealth and precision is a critical, strategic element of future SOF.

Rooted in the core competencies of Providing Mobility in Denied Territory (PMDT) and Force Application (FA), this globally aware force must be equipped from the leading edge of technologies to ensure stealth, surprise, and appropriate lethality. This force must retain the flexibility to swing to a CINC-support role and augment forward-postured/forward-presence SOF forces to provide the joint force commander an increased range of options in pursuing theater objectives.

Given the national importance of the missions Commando Strike forces must be prepared to do, the AFSOF component must routinely and frequently conduct training as part of this joint force and be *dedicated* to that capability. This is the only element of AFSOF that needs to remain “inherently joint.”

Regionally-Postured, Contingency-Focused Capability

This element of AFSOF must be forward postured from CONUS in order to complement and integrate with conventional theater forces either independently or as the air component of a joint SOF team.

The basic capabilities should include PMDT and FA in the traditional SOF role. It should also have the ability to swing to a limited AVFID role based on its regional posture and this paper’s earlier note that any AFSOF force has some capability to support the AVFID mission.

For wartime and contingency combat operations, the historical role of regionally postured AFSOF has been to provide PMDT and FA in support of Joint SOF special

reconnaissance and direct action missions. However, as has been discussed from the future USAF perspective, the need for joint SOF to conduct these missions will *decrease* in the future given technological improvements in conventional sensors and weapons. Additionally, the USAF and AFSOC have supported the potential “enormous value”² in unmanned aerial vehicles assuming some PMDT missions in support of resupply and independent force application.³

This paper does not propose that AFSOF abdicate entirely its traditional support to these missions. There may be occasions when a joint force commander may still need to use joint SOF in those roles.

For example, during the Gulf war, it was determined during the air campaign that precision munitions were being used at an exceedingly fast rate and were becoming a premium.⁴ The joint commander needs to retain a SOF direct action capability in the event of scarce precision munitions or in the event targets do emerge in a campaign that can only be effectively attacked by SOF teams.⁵

Additionally, although tremendous improvements in sensor technologies are anticipated, joint commanders may still need to put human eyes on target and should have available SOF reconnaissance capability as well. Per USSOCOM guidance, “similarly, reconnaissance capabilities are increasing rapidly with the acquisition of modern sensors. Yet, there are still targets that only human eyes on the ground can see. SOF must decide which targets no longer require their attention and focus on those that cannot be handled in any other way.”⁶

Because the need for AFSOF support to these traditional missions should decrease, the fourth pillar holds there could be mission areas in which the increased requirement for

PMDT and FA competencies are emerging. AFSOC should consider assuming those capabilities and roles as part of its vision, especially if it requires application of specialized air power.

For example, AFSOF is uniquely suited for, and is in fact required in AFSOC strategic planning, to evolve mission concepts in response to the changing world. *USAF 2025* points out, “superiority...may derive as much from improved thinking about the employment of current capabilities and the rapid integration of existing technologies as from the development of technological breakthroughs.”⁷

For the forward postured AFSOF force, this author believes “improved thinking” employing current capabilities and posturing to take advantage of new technologies should be assumed by AFSOC in the mission areas of Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) and Peace Operations.

Combat Search and Rescue

This paper has given examples of how regional commanders have turned to AFSOF in recent years as their theater CSAR force even though CSAR is not currently a principal SOF mission. The former director of USSOCOM plans and policy has asserted that SOF has been the common “force of choice” for joint commanders in theater CSAR (even though it has doctrinally been a service responsibility) due to unique capabilities of AFSOF for penetration of hostile airspace, precision navigation, and innovative insertion and extraction methods.⁸

It appears to this author that, given the previously discussed anticipated *decrement* in the requirement for AFSOF to provide mobility in denied territory for traditional joint SOF missions, it would be prudent to assume CSAR as an emerging AFSOF mission.

Although theater CSAR has not been part of AFSOF doctrine, it should be now. The fact that AFSOF has been used frequently in this role in contingency operations since and including Desert Storm is indicative of the strategic value to the United States of our ability to quickly recover friendly forces in denied territories.⁹ Given the political and popular aversion to high American casualties and the adverse psychological impact an enemy can have by publicly exploiting our POWs, friendly survivors and evaders behind enemy lines have, in their own right, become strategic “high value assets” worthy of SOF’s special skills to effect safe recovery in a timely fashion. Becoming the joint commander’s CSAR force is an excellent example of where AFSOF can apply its special capabilities (well beyond that of the conventional USAF) and have direct, independent impact in avoiding national embarrassment and achieving theater and national objectives.

Peace Operations

Peace Operations is an area in which the conventional USAF struggles to develop strategic, independent capabilities since it is a mission that has required “asymmetrical” approaches in the application of Airpower. Contradictions exist between the core competencies in *Global Engagement* and the requirement for selective application of air power in peace operations. For example one of the visionary assertions in *Global Engagement* is the USAF must have the ability to “find, fix, track, and target anything that moves on the face of the earth.”¹⁰ But in the context of *Joint Vision 2010*’s “full spectrum dominance,” how does that ability apply to peace operations in which the strategic task may be to use less-than-lethal means to enforce or establish the peace?

To fill this gap in USAF capability, and as part of a vision to support peace operations with specialized air power, the AFSOF tenets for force application should be

modified to include the role of what has been termed “air compellence.” Considered a unique, asymmetrical application of air power, air compellence is “based upon the concept to control the air and the ground from the air and to compel an adversary from the air to comply with a political solution.”¹¹

In the force application competency, given the integrated acquisition, tracking, fire control, and firepower capabilities AFSOF has demonstrated through the use of AC-130s (and the promise of improved future technologies), it would appear air power in peace operations, as an application of air power in a strategic role (i.e. to compel a political solution), would be a visionary alternative for AFSOF to pursue.

It may require development of innovative tactical doctrine and the use of emerging technologies (e.g. variable lethality ordnance), but AFSOF assumption of peace operations as a primary capability reinforces emerging operational doctrine and fills a USAF “gap.” Air Force doctrine posits that air power has a well-suited place in peace operations. Besides providing aerial mobility, air power can support enforcement of sanctions, maritime intercept, show of force, recovery operations, and strikes and raids.¹² Overhead aircraft can be tailored to patrolling difficult and undeveloped terrain, areas heavily mined or containing unexploded ordinance, or monitoring no fly exclusion zones.¹³

Some have noted deficiencies in USAF ability to support peace enforcement operations and assert the nature of peace operations requires refined focus on the air compellence application. Builder describes the need for an “air constabulary force” that would have the following capabilities:¹⁴

- Nailing the smoking gun...ways to immediately engage and suppress heavy weapons fire.
- Effective means for stopping surreptitious flights by low and slow flyers.
- Suppress street disorders and violence.
- Inserting or recovering modest amounts of people at places of choosing.

In amplifying this potential constabulary role, Clarke summarizes the potential innovative combination of less than lethal “disabling systems” with the advantages of air power:

For many, though not all, of these disabling systems technologies, the advantages of Air Power [sic] would be evident since it may provide the most efficient way to deliver such agents, and would provide air power with a genuine and valuable role in the physical constraint of forces on the ground: it would perform a non-coercive but powerful policing function.¹⁵

This section has proposed that, besides CSAR as a subset of the mobility in denied territory competency, AFSOF should pursue the air constabulary/compellence role (as a subset of the force application competency) in its vision as emerging mission areas with direct, strategic and theater importance.

Theater Deployed, Forward Presence

The final key force element for AFSOF must be regionally oriented, culturally attuned, linguistically skilled, and forward deployed to conduct nation assistance operations. These forces would complement the Air Force and *Joint Vision 2010* competencies of “precision engagement” and the *SOF Vision 2020* role of “warrior-diplomats.” This force element characteristic recognizes that that AFSOF can play a direct, strategic role in preventive diplomacy in the conduct of nation assistance operations.

The principle capability of these forward deployed forces would be to perform training assistance operations with allied nation air forces (i.e. AVFID). Essential to the

concepts articulated in the current AFSOC mission area plan on AVFID would be a cadre of airman specialized in training allied air forces on operations, logistics, and the support tasks of running air operations.

This force would need to be skilled on the “lower tech” aircraft of client nations and, accordingly, would require a lower technology supporting force structure. For example, rather than retiring aging SOF transports and helicopters over the next two decades, consideration should be given to de-modifying them of sophisticated avionics packages, extending their service lives, and then using the fleet in support of world-wide AVFID operations. As an alternative, if some or all of this would prove infeasible, Koster has completed a detailed study on the types of commercial, inexpensive, low-tech aircraft that can be procured to augment an AVFID fleet.¹⁶

A forward deployed AVFID force should have the parallel mission of being the USAF’s “first force” when the call comes to conduct humanitarian and relief operations. These type operations don’t normally require high technology aircraft. They would require AFSOF personnel to exercise diplomatic and cultural skills in providing assistance to foreign governments. AFSOF AVFID forces would be well-suited to assume this role given their inherent skills and would already have established personal relationships to help work with other regional air forces in relief and assistance efforts. This dual role concept is also consistent with the historical role (“mine the heritage”) of the “Jungle Jim” operations in Vietnam where AFSOF forces had both a nation assistance and contingency mission.¹⁷

In this author’s view and experience, real air power “presence” is achieved through these types of operations. The sterile USAF *Global Engagement* view of presence

through sensors, information dominance, and the AEF concept may provide the USAF with “global awareness,” but falls short of supporting the national security intent of real presence. Presence is equally determined by a client nations’ ability to observe, perceive, and interact with us which can often better be established by a hand shake and a smile than by overhead satellites.

Finally, AFSOF’s forward presence forces would bring the nation the added strategic value of being able to receive and support follow-on AFSOF or even USAF expeditionary forces. Joint doctrine states that “forward presence forces are normally the first committed to MOOTW.”¹⁸ In this context, forward deployed AFSOF forces could be used to “prime the pump,”¹⁹ leap forward to staging bases, and work with host nation militaries to beddown arriving friendly forces.

Special Air Warfare Center

The final pillar for the proposed vision is meant to ensure the entire force has a doctrinal and experiential outlook that ensures future doctrinal and force structure changes are proactive in anticipation of future needs vice reactive, or simply warmed over concepts with higher technology.

The USAF vision is addressing this issue by establishing “battle labs” throughout its major commands. The purpose of these battle labs is to be “centers of innovation,” to “aggressively pursue a program of experimenting, testing, exercising, and evaluating new operational concepts for air and space power. Together, these battle labs will both institutionally and operationally continue to expand and advance the core competencies of the Air Force.”²⁰

The AFSOC has not been given a “battlelab” under the USAF vision. It needs one. This paper has described in detail the need for AFSOC to use creative thinking to expand its core competencies to meet the visions of its parent organizations. It has articulated the need for AFSOC to place emphasis on its strategic air role as much as its joint SOF role. An AFSOF battle lab, working for the AFSOC commander, is needed to ensure that AFSOF is not boxed in by current doctrine, stovepiped to technological solutions, or over focused on its joint SOF role.

Again, mining the heritage of AFSOC, the command should consider in its vision resurrecting as its “battlelab” something similar in concept to the “Special Air Warfare Center” (SAWC) that was disbanded in the early ‘70’s. The primary mission of the SAWC was to “train the air forces of friendly foreign nations in all aspects of unconventional war and counterinsurgency air operations and techniques [AVFID]²¹.” Additionally, the SAWC was tasked to “develop the doctrine, tactics, techniques, and hardware [for] the crews of the 1st Air Commando Group.”²²

Thus, the SAWC was an early type “battlelab” for AFSOF. Consideration for a SAWC-like battlelab could include elements from today’s USAF Special Operations School; the 16 Special Operations Wing’s Tactics, Test and Evaluation Squadron; elements of the AVFID squadron; and perhaps, the AFSOF aircrew “schoolhouse” currently at Kirtland AFB.

Notes

¹ General Wayne A. Downing, “Challenges in the Future,” in Richard H. Schultz, Jr., et al., eds., *Special Operations Forces: Roles and Missions in the Aftermath of the Cold War* (United States Special Operations Command, 1995), 5.

² Air Force Special Operations Command, Directorate of Plans, Programs, and Acquisition Management, Fall 1996 Corona preparation “Issues” Papers, 1-8 Oct 1996.

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³ USAF 2025, White Paper Summaries, 30-31.

⁴ Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Gulf War Air Power Survey Summary Report*, Washington, DC, 1993), 15.

⁵ National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, *Strategic Assessment 1996*, (Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC), 148-149.

⁶ USSOCOM Pub1, p1-6.

⁷ USAF 2025, Executive Summary, 8.

⁸ Major General William F. Kernan and Lieutenant Colonel Thomas C. Maffey, "The USSOCOM Perspective on Emerging SOF Roles and Missions," in Richard H. Schultz, Jr., et al., eds., *Special Operations Forces: Roles and Missions in the Aftermath of the Cold War* (United States Special Operations Command, 1995), 216

⁹ Major John A. Hill, *Air Force Special Operations Forces: A Unique Application of Aerospace Power*, Research Report No. AU-ARI-92-3 (Maxwell AFB, Ala. Air University Press, April 1993, 11-13

¹⁰ *Global Engagement*, 1.

¹¹ Lt Col Tom H. Knutsen, RNoAF and Lt Col Fred G. Sotthewes, RNLAf, "Air Compellence, the Use of Air Power in Peace Operations," research report in *Air War College Readings, Vol. III, AY 1997*, Department of Strategy, Doctrine, and Air Power (Air University: Maxwell AFB, Ala., Sept 1996), 410.

¹² Col Leslie L. Fuller, *Role of United States Special Operation Forces in Peace Operations*, Strategic Research Paper, 19960528 030 (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Army War College, 26 March 1996), 25-30.

¹³ Air Force Doctrine Document 3, "Peacekeeping Operations," Chap. I, pp. I-1 to I-11, in *Air War College Readings, Vol. III, AY 1997*, Department of Strategy, Doctrine, and Air Power (Air University: Maxwell AFB, Ala., Sept 1996), I-5,6.

¹⁴ Carl H. Builder, "Doctrinal Frontiers," *Airpower Journal*, Vol. IX, No. 4 (Winter 1995): 11-12.

¹⁵ Michael Clarke, "Air Power and Force in Peace Support Operations," in Group Captain Andrew Lambert and Arthur C. Williamson, eds., *The Dynamics of Air Power*, (British Crown Copyright/MOD, 1996), 175.

¹⁶ Major Michael C. Koster, *Foreign Internal Defense: Does Air Force Special Operations Have What It Takes?*, Research Report No. AU-ARI-93-2 (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, December 1993).

¹⁷ Dean, 88.

¹⁸ Joint Pub 3-07, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War*, 16 June 1995, p2-4.

¹⁹ Fall 1996 Corona preparation "Issues" Papers, #19.

²⁰ Briefing, HQ USAF, Global Engagement, 15.

²¹ Dean, 91

²² *Ibid.*, 91

Chapter 7

Conclusions

This paper began by asserting that the Air Force Special Operations Command faces a significant challenge in charting its future course. In meeting that challenge, a key factor will be the ability of AFSOC, as both a United States Special Operations Command component *and* a United States Air Force major command, to develop a vision congruent with that of its parent organizations.

Doing so not only requires a synthesis and comparison of the parent visions, but an application of doctrine, experience, and national strategy that gets the command thinking “outside the box” to meet emerging challenges. That has been the primary intent of this paper. As the current Commander-in-Chief of USSOCOM stated, “As the United States moves into the 21st century, SOF will prepare for the world’s uncertain future while operating in the ever dynamic present. We will actively pursue new and innovative ways to increase the effectiveness of SOF, in peace and war.”¹[emphasis added].

This paper has proposed a construct for the AFSOC vision that builds on the strengths of AFSOF heritage and doctrine while proposing some innovation to make AFSOF more responsive to challenges of the 21st century and relevant as an Air Force institution.

The construct suggests that AFSOC needs to emphasize its independent ability to provide specialized air power in direct support of theater or national objectives as well as to joint SOF objectives. As General Fogleman has stated, “Certainly, specialized expertise is an indispensable part of our overall contribution to the nation, but we cannot become too ‘stovepiped’ and miss the bigger view of how the entire Air Force contributes to the team.”²

Thus, the proposed AFSOC vision expands the future view of AFSOF beyond the “stovepipe” of joint SOF employment to include the independent value of AFSOF to joint commanders, USSOCOM, the USAF, and the nation.

Notes

¹ *SOF Vision 2020*, foreword

² General Ronald R. Fogleman, Chief of Staff, USAF, address to the Air Force Doctrine Seminar, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 30 April 1996.

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